

Nationality Question in India

A Critique of Traditional Indian Marxist Interpretations

H. Srikanth

Introduction:

For long the traditional Indian Marxist parties¹ have been claiming that Marxism alone has a clear solution to the nationality question that threatens the unity and integrity of many non-socialist states. However, in recent years when the uprisings in Punjab, Kashmir and Assam started raising fundamental questions about the very nature of Indian union, these parties have virtually failed to guide the Indian masses. Their failure is, partly, because of their own confusions about the nature of Indian state. Each party claiming itself to be Marxist, has its own understanding and its own prescription to nationality question in India.. It is a pity that even after four decades of independence, they could not arrive at a consensus on such a vital issue. It is obvious that transformation to socialism is impossible without resolving nationality question. The continuing national bickerings in Russia and East Europe make it clear that if nationality issue is not handled properly, even the states claiming to be socialists cannot escape national disintegration. Hence, there is a need for bringing nationality question to the forefront of serious theoretical discourse. Keeping that aim in mind, the present article makes a modest attempt to evaluate the theory and practice of the traditional Indian Marxist parties in the light of classical Marxist writings on nationality question.

Nationality Question and Indian Marxists

Marxist materialist conception of history assigns primacy to the role of classes and class struggles in determining the course of

Dr.H. Srikanth is at School of International Relations, Mahatama Gandhi University Kottayam (Kerala).

social development. In spite of their stress on classes, all the classical Marxist thinkers recognised that the transition to socialism requires, among others, a better understanding of the role of other social structures like nationalities, castes, races and religious groups. Especially in the Third World countries where such structures play very significant roles in influencing the course of history, Marxists cannot afford to ignore their dynamics. It should be admitted that the traditional Marxists have made attempts to comprehend the nature of such social structures in India. But they remained unsuccessful so far as the question of nationality is concerned.

It is well-known that on the eve of independence, the then united Communist Party of India (CPI) insisted on the acceptance of the principle of right to self-determination, including the right to secession, in the case of the so-called Muslim nationalities and indirectly endorsed the two-nation theory propounded by the Muslim communalists.² After independence, differences in perceptions of the dynamics of the post-colonial state in India led to the break up of the united Communist Party. Whereas parties like the CPI and CPI (Marxist) now characterise India as a capitalist nation state and deleted the demand for self-determination from their party manifestoes, the extremist factions of the CPI (Marxist-Leninist) argue that India continues to be a semi-feudal and semi-colonial state³, and hence, the old slogans of self-determination of the nations and right to secession still have their relevance for social revolution in India. In practice, these opposing theoretical formulations on nationality question are leading them to two contradictory roles. Parties like CPI and CPI(M), in the name of upholding the national integrity, began characterising almost all regional movements directed against the Indian state as parochial, secessionist and even antinational. Instead of attacking the moribund capitalist system as a whole, these parties join the bourgeois parties in throwing blame on the so-called precapitalist elements, monopolists and, of course, "the invisible foreign hand working hard to destabilise the unity and integrity of India." Such a stand often makes them ignore or belittle the democratic aspirations of different nationalities and extend support to the reactionary Indian state to arm itself with more and more powers. On the other hand, in utter ignorance of the changes that have taken place in political and economic spheres, the extremist factions of CPI (ML) see pro-

gressive character in almost all regional movements demanding separate state within the Indian union or for complete secession from India or even in movements demanding the expulsion of other nationality people from their land. By supporting regional movements such as the Sikh movement for separate Khalistan, tribal agitation for Jharkhand state and the Assamese demands against the Bengalese,⁴ these groups are unconsciously serving the interests of the regional elites, thereby weakening the unity of the labouring masses of all nationalities.

Such contradictory practices only take the Marxists away from the goal of socialism. Mechanical adherence to what the classical Marxist thinkers had said and done, may prove to be inimical to the unity of masses and counter productive to social revolution. Hence the necessity of concretisation and enrichment of the general Marxist tenets in the light of changes that have taken place in the Indian politics and economy.

Nationality, Nation and Multinationality nation

Confusions regarding the terms "nations" and "nationalities" are to be attributed partly to the classical Marxist literature itself. Though the Marxist authorities could realise the difference between the two, in their literature they often used the term interchangeably. In the context of the European experience where many of the nationalities were tending to develop into nations, distinguishing the two might have been felt unnecessary. But the fact that all nationalities have not been able to develop into full-fledged nation states should compel the contemporary Marxists to comprehend clearly the dialectical relationship between nations and nationalities.

Joseph Stalin defined nation as "a historically evolved stable community of people, based upon the common possession of four principal attributes, namely, common language, a common territory, a common economic life and a common psychological make up manifesting itself in a common specific feature of national culture".⁵ In reality, this definition refers not so much to nations but to nationalities which have the potentialities to become independent nations. Given favourable internal and international conditions, nationalities can develop into nations, here meaning, independent countries with centralised market system, single polit-

ical rule over all its subjects and a common consciousness among the people that they all belong to that country. The classical Marxist thinkers themselves realised that even some of the giant capitalist nation states were formed as a result of merger of many nationalities. Lenin rightly pointed out: "The economic development of capitalist society presents us with examples of immature national movements all over the world, examples of the formation of big nations out of a number of small ones, or to the detriment of some of the small ones, and also assimilation of nations."⁶ In this passage, by 'small nations', Lenin was obviously referring to nationalities, for, there is hardly any example in the world history where independent capitalist nations joined together to form a single nation. In nations formed out of the union of many nationalities there can be more than one language and one culture. In spite of such differences, those countries can be called nations, for, single national consciousness can exist even if the states are composed of different nationalities. It is interesting to note that some of the classical examples of modern capitalist states are in fact multinationality nations. In the U.K. along with the English, there are Scots and Irish nationality people. The American people who included settlers from different countries of the Europe - not just the Great Britain - together fought out the British colonial rule to give birth to the United States of America. Lenin himself spoke high of Switzerland where German, Italian and French speaking nationalities co-exist peacefully as a single nation.⁷

India a Multi-nationality Nation

Indian experience, in many respects, is similar to these multinationality nations. It is true that India was, and is, a land of many nationalities, each having its own culture, language and history. Had there been no colonial rule in India, these nationalities could have emerged as separate nation states. However, the British colonialism united all these nationalities under a single political rule. In the wake of capitalist development that started during that period modern education, communication and transport also developed and all these developments made it possible for the people of different nationalities to interact and communicate to one another. Since all nationalities were equally subjected to alien oppression and exploitation, their common sufferings and common

aspirations gave birth to pan-Indian national consciousness. Nationality languages and nationality identities did not act as impediments to the development of common nationalist front against the British rule. Notwithstanding the fact that all nationalities had increasingly become conscious of their language, culture and history, nationalist movement could mobilise all nationalities against the British rule.⁸ Though all the nationalities of the British Indian union aspired for respectable status within the Indian union, none of them insisted on forming a separate nation. Contrary to what the then united CPI concluded, the movement for Pakistan had nothing to do with the national aspirations of the "muslim nationalities". Religion can never be the basis of any nation. Two-nation theory was only a communal ideology propagated by a handful of vested interests among the muslim community to protect their economic interests from the alleged domination of the Hindus.¹¹ As such, subsequent partition of British India was dictated by the irreconcilable contradictions between the elites among Hindus and Muslims and their verdict cannot be treated as the conscious choice of the so-called muslim nationalities. After partition, the new ruling classes in India immediately initiated a number of structural changes in economy and politics. The princely states were integrated and the whole of India was brought under common political rule. A centralised national army and a well-knit police system came into being dissolving the native armies of the princely states. On the economic front, capitalist development was initiated to bring the whole country under the hold of a single national market, an essential pre-requisite of any modern nation state.⁹

Unity of Nationalities vs. Self-determination of Nationalities

Marxist authorities are not opposed to formation of such multi-nationality nations. As Lenin put it, "The proletariat, however, far from undertaking to uphold the national development of every nation, on the contrary warns the masses against such illusions, stands for the fullest freedom of capitalist intercourse and welcomes every kind of assimilation of nations, except that which is founded on force and privilege."¹⁰ In other words, contrary to what some Marxist extremist groups in India would make us believe, Marxist slogans of right to self-determination and right to secession should not be interpreted to mean that Marxism

the slogan of "national culture" the bourgeoisie of all nations are in fact pursuing the policy of splitting the workers, emasculating democracy and haggling with the feudalists over the sale of the people's rights and people's liberty."¹⁸ Lenin was highly critical of such acts. He rightly pointed out that, "the proletariat cannot support any consecration of nationalism, on the contrary it supports everything that makes the ties between the nationalities closer and closer, or tends to merge nations. To act differently means siding with the reactionary nationalist philistinism."¹⁹ To fight for such demands in capitalist countries is absolutely incompatible with proletarian internationalism which advocates not only closer relations between nationalities but also amalgamation of workers of all nationalities in the united proletarian organisations.

National Integrity, a Means to Revolution

In one sense, preserving the unity and integrity of a multinationality nation is a historic necessity of the Marxists striving to establish socialist society. In view of the constant threats of separatist movements in India, the CPI and CPI (M)'s emphasis on the need for preserving the unity of the nation is justified. While evaluating their attitudes towards nationality question in India, it should be admitted that both of them rightly stand for equality of all nationalities and oppose all forms of national oppression.²⁰ Their limitations, however, lie in the fact that these parties fail to go beyond bourgeois humanist conceptions of national unity. As is pointed out earlier, for Marxists, preserving national unity is a means to an end and not an end in itself. But these communist parties dogmatise the need for national unity to such an extent that in recent years they almost stopped talking of revolution. Since national integration became their main goal, they now spend all their energies in detecting the nationalist elements everywhere, including in the most reactionary bourgeois parties and involve attempts to forge alliances and counter alliances within the parliamentary frame-work to fight out the separatist elements in India. They seem to ignore the fact that proletarian approach to national integration radically differs from bourgeois methods of securing national integrity. In the absence of securing proletarian hegemony over all nationalities, no amount of sincerity on the part of the leftists can save the country from disintegration.

Threats to National Integrity

In multi-nationality nations threats to national integrity arise from two opposite directions. In certain cases the separatist movements are only reactions of the minority nationalities to the domination of a single or a few powerful nationalities. In these countries the ruling classes would be professing the necessity of national integration only to justify national oppression. In the name of bringing unity among the people, dominant nationalities in these states might try to impose their language, culture and religion over the people of other nationalities. At times, this domination might take the form of colonial exploitation within the same country. Exploitation of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) by West Pakistan was notable example of such kind of colonialism. When such attempts meet with resistance from the people of suppressed nationalities, in utter ignorance of the sufferings of the masses, the state mercilessly puts down all dissent through brutal coercion.

Threats to national integrity, however, need not always come from the exploited and suppressed sections alone. Sometimes the dissatisfied and frustrated elements within the ruling classes might take the lead in fomenting struggles against the central authority. As is well-known, uneven development of capitalism and monopolisation of the limited market by the big bourgeoisie adversely affect the interests of the emerging regional capitals and bring them in direct conflict with the big bourgeoisie.²¹ For creating conditions for their uninterrupted development, regional capitals pressurise the state to accede to their demands. In the overall interests of the capitalist system as a whole, the state may appease these sections through compromises. However, when the contradictions between big capitals and regional capitals become irreconcilable, the representatives of the regional capitals might go to the extent of demanding more autonomy or even full independence. Encashing the sufferings of the masses, these sections could even succeed in securing the mass support for their so-called national movements aimed basically to serve their own interests. Such movements, at times, take recourse to vulgar forms such as communalism and hide the real contradictions between the masses and elites leading the movements. To meet the challenge posed by the regional elites, on behalf of the big capital, the state further strengthens its own arms and gives up even its democratic facade, if the situation so demands.

Unity is not for Betrayal of Revolution

Marxists should be able to make out the differences in the two situations mentioned above, in the first, where the people of dominated nationalities are involved in agitation for redressal of their genuine grievances, and in the second, where the frustrated and dissatisfied elements within the ruling class coalition lead such struggles for promoting their own interests. However, it should be admitted that in the concrete cases all these factors might overlap and make it very difficult to distinguish one from the other. In India though there is no strong nationality which also enjoys the support of financially and politically powerful classes, to a limited extent, in their own spheres, certain nationalities attempt to dominate other weaker nationalities. Mention may be made here of attempts to impose Hindi on non-Hindi nationalities, domination of Bengalese in Assam and big brotherly attitude of Tamilians over Andhras in the then united Madras state. In such cases it is natural that dominated nationalities become extremely sensitive to the future of their language, culture and traditions. Their genuine fears, however, get mixed up with the interests of the rising kulaks and industrialists and make the problem more complicated.

Because of such complexities, certain regional movements might appear as anti-national movements directed to threaten the unity and integrity of the nation. If Marxists fail to see the genuine grievances of the people participating in them, in practice, they would only be assisting the bourgeoisie to strengthen the state vis-a-vis the working masses and legitimise national oppression. On the other hand, if they get too much worried about the growing power of the central government, and hence, start finding progressive element in every regional movement, then that might lead the country to a situation where the working masses of different nationalities become victims to the nationalist slogans of respective bourgeoisie.

Summary

Hence the persons and parties claiming themselves to be Marxists, should guard themselves against both the extremes. While it is necessary for the revolutionaries to integrate different nation-

alities, they should avoid lending support - direct or indirect - to the reactionary bourgeois practices of integrating different nationalities by force or deception. Likewise, while they should be able to comprehend the particular grievances of different nationalities, they should never allow the regional elites to take advantage of the sufferings of the masses for promoting their petty interests. Though in exceptional situations Marxists can forge unity with even bourgeois and petty-bourgeois forces for meeting the immediate threats to national integrity, they should realise that in the era of moribund capitalism genuine national integration is not possible within the capitalist frame-work. So long the basic necessities of all people are not met and all types of national oppression and national philistinism cease to exist, national bickerings continue in one form or another. No amount of compromise and appeasement can create basic conditions necessary for national integration. It is not just precapitalist elements, mere monopolists and wicked imperialist powers, but the very capitalist order breeds such threats to national integrity. Hence the primary task of the communists aspiring for national unity is to unite the labouring masses of all nationalities in their fight against the moribund bourgeois system which oppresses and exploits all of them. To talk of national unity without organising and leading the masses against the capitalist system as a whole, would only amount to the betrayal of revolutionary path.

References

1. By traditional Marxist parties we mean the present CPI, CPI(M) and all other factions of the CPI (ML) which own their origin to the united Communist Party of India. Theoretical positions of the parties like Revolutionary Socialist party (RSP) and Socialist Unity Centre of India(SUCI) which also claim to be Marxist Leninist parties are not discussed here.
2. T.G. Jacob (ed.), *Nationality Question in India: CPI Documents 1942-47*, Odyssey, New Delhi, 1988
3. Exceptions being CRC CPI(ML) which characterise India as a neo-colonial state and the Communist League of India (CLI) which recognise the capitalist character of Indian state.
4. A.P.R.S.U., *Nationality Question in India: Seminar Papers*, Hyderabad, 1982.
5. Stalin, *Nationality Question*, Mass Line Publications, Calcutta, 1975, p.1.
6. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 20, Progress, Moscow, pp. 25-30.
7. Lenin, *Ibid.*, p. 173.
8. Kashmir and certain provinces of North East should be analysed separately.

9. Refer, Y.V. Gankovsky and L.R. Gordon Polanskya, *A History of Pakistan*, Moscow, Nauka Publishing House, 1969; Akmal Hussain 'Pakistan: The Crisis of the State' in Mohammad Asghar Khan (ed.), *Islam, Politics and the State: The Pakistan Experience*, New Delhi, Select Books, 1986; Hamza Alavi, 'The Social Origins of Pakistan and Islamic ideology' in Kalim Bahadur (ed.), *South Asia in Transition: Conflicts and Tensions*, Patriot Publishers, New Delhi.
10. H. Srikanth, *Nature of the Indian State: A Political Economy Approach*, (Ph. D. Thesis), University of Hyderabad, 1990, p.201
11. Lenin, *On National Liberation and Social Emancipation*, Progress, Moscow, 1986, p.102
12. Lenin, n.6, p.500.
13. Lenin, *Collected Works Vol. 19*, p. 429.
14. Ian Cummins, *Marx, Engels and National Movements*, Croomhelm, London, 1980.
15. Stalin, *Problems of Leninism*, Foreign Languages Press, Peking, 1976.
16. One exception being CRC CPI(ML) led by Venu. See his forward in n.3., pp. 1-15.
17. See APRSU, n.4., p. 192.
18. Lenin, n.6., pp. 19-20.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 25-30.
20. See E.M.S. Namboodripad, 'The Indian Nationality Question: Need for deeper study' and S.G. Sardesi, 'Focus should be on solution, not on Analysis and Definition' in *Nationality Question in India*, T.D.S.S., Pune, 1987
20. Javed Alam, 'Class, Political and National Dimensions of State Autonomy Movement in India', *Ibid.*, pp. 140-152.