

## Role of the Left-Intellectuals : A Survey of British Reaction, 1936-37

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In every society, the educated community plays an important role in remoulding the social order. The Indian intelligentsia ; too, did serve the masses by striving for regenerating the society through their efforts of social reforms. This tradition of service has paved a longway from Raja Rammohun Roy to Rabindranath Tagore. Throughout 19th Century, the Indian literature cherished the ideal of patriotism. These were realistic in style but reformist in content. The major changes in the Indian literature started with the publication of *Nildarpan* in 1860 by Dinabandhu Mitra, who had, with unprecedented courage exposed the barbarous exploitation of the Indigo planters. The anti-imperialist spirit of *Nildarpan* was further strengthened by the depiction of revolutionary terrorism by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee in his novels *Anandamath* and *Devi Choudhurani*.<sup>1</sup> Rabindranath Tagore went ahead by identifying himself with the anti-fascist and anti-imperialist rally. In an article published in the *The Star* (dated 5 August, 1925, London) Tagore wrote - "The moment I realise that the blind inclination to the imperialism and Nationalism is the only ultimate goal of Fascism, I withdraw my all sympathy from it".<sup>2</sup> Tagore reiterated his stand more clearly in a letter written to C. F. Andrews (published in the *Manchester Garden*, dated 5 August, 1926). He wrote - "While the whole humanity is concerned with the methods and policy of Fascism, it is an absurd dream that I could ever support such movement which curbs freedom of expression inhumanly".<sup>3</sup>

It is deplorable to note that inspite of this glorious tradition of intellectual's service, the majority of the Indian intelligentsia were rather academicians than revolutionary. It is perhaps because of the fact that the Indian educated intelligentsia were though a '*microscopic minority*' enjoyed most privileged importance in the society in comparison to its size.<sup>4</sup> The elite groups were nothing but '*bhadraloks*' emerged out of upper caste origin.<sup>5</sup> Most of these emergent intelligentsia were either commercial elites like in Madras or feudal elites in Bengal and Andhra.<sup>6</sup>

A person of knowledge is not supposed to be an intellectual unless the former posses "priestly functions including political activity and applied their knowledge for societies' use"<sup>7</sup> Taken this criteria to be an intellectual, the examination of the role of the Indian intelligentsia reveals their incompetency to provide effective leadership to the masses. Despite their patriotism, the Indian intelligentsia in general till the 19th century, lacked insights to examine the impact and consequences of the Alien Rule. Consequently, one can hardly find any proper understanding of the stages of Indian revolution and the role of the different classes, being portrayed in Indian literature. It is a moral duty of an intellectual to answer 'the most urgent questions engaging the contemporary mind. To him, the Supreme aim of creative work is truth, which he interprets as man's faith in the triumph of justice',<sup>8</sup> of reality, which in turn harms more than serve less. This is what actually happened with the Indian intelligentsia in general till the 19th century. It was basically due to the feudal roots of their classes and corresponding bankrupt bourgeoisie feudal ideology.

#### **Formation of the All India Progressive Writers Association**

Significant to note, under this background, the All India Progressive Writers' Association (AIPWA) came into being. The initiative to form this Association was originally taken in 1935 in London under the guidance of the English members of the international union of revolutionary writers. A manifesto was published declaring its aims and objects. In its manifesto, in 1935, the Association proclaimed its objective to bring the arts into the closest touch with the people, to deal with the problems of hunger, poverty, social backwardness and political subjugation<sup>9</sup>. The manifesto also expressed its concern with the organisation of journalists, writers, and the promotion of interest in literature of progressive nature.<sup>10</sup> S. S. Zaheer, the Secretary of the AIPWA in India was also one of the signatories to the original manifesto.<sup>11</sup>

The first conference of the AIPWA was held in Lucknow in April, 1936, simultaneously with the annual session of the INC and was presided over by Munshi Premchand, the great writer of Modern India and the founder of a new trend in Hindi fiction. In his presidential address, Premchand expressed his honest objective of projecting life, He said :-

*I prefer the one that describes it as a criticism of life, whether in the form of an essay or a poem or a short story, literature's chief function is to present an honest critical view of life.*

The Conference was a grand success and it left an inspirable impact upon the thinkers, artists, writers, academicians, students and youth of the country. Result was that within a short period, after the Conference, local branches of the Association were immediately formed in Aligarh, Allahabad, Andhra, Calcutta, Delhi, Gujrat, Hyderabad, Poona and Punjab. It also succeeded to make contact with the number of others educational centres including Universities.<sup>12</sup> The Association also achieved to have a leading control over the Delhi-Simla Broadcasting establishment.<sup>13</sup>

### Growth of Leftism in Literature

The broad canvas of Indian literature had been more and more portrayed with the suffering, tragedy and struggle of the depressed classes including an attack on the exploiting system with a tone of revolutionary change. Premchand had exposed the character of the dominant feudal classes, the money lending groups, the official hypocrisy. He depicted with a deep understanding, the tragedy and pathos of their (peasant masses) dark lives, their rare smiles and unceasing sorrows, their frustrations and hopes.<sup>14</sup> In his famous novel *godan* Premchand portrays one of such case so vividly.<sup>15</sup> In his last article *Mahajani Sabhayata*, Premchand strongly opposed Capitalism and its culture. He also advocated for its destruction through the establishment of Socialism.<sup>16</sup> Rabindranath Tagore in his travelogue *Rushiar Chithi* (1931) highly appreciated Socialist construction and subsequent emancipation of humanity in Russia from the onslaught of age-long subjugation and bondage. In reaction, the British Government banned the publication of English translation of it, "*Letters from Russia*" in *Modern Review* in 1934.<sup>17</sup> In Andhra, Punjab, Maharashtra, influence of leftism in literature was effectively increasing.<sup>18</sup>

The waves of progressive ideas of the country were also reflected in the literature of Assam. Journalism of the Late 19th and 20th Century played the key role in spreading these ideas. The impact of the October Revolution of Russia was remarkably significant. Under its influence, the Assamese writers and thinkers started taking initiative atleast in ideological struggle against social backwardness, injustices and spreading the achievements of the October Revolution.

The news of the October Revolution was first published in the local newspaper named *Assam Bandhav*, edited by Taranath Kavya Binodan; the great Sanskrit Scholar; published originally from Tezpur and later on from Dibrugarh. In an article entitled

'Rush-Rajya' published in 1917 in *Assam Bandhav*, Gopal Chandra Dey, the Chief Librarian of Curzon Hall Library, Gauhati, the author of the article, described the October Revolution as historically significant as the revolution put an end of the Russian Empire for ever. Dey also stressed that the revolution has opened the 'rise of peoples' power.'

In *Bahni*, Lakshminath Bezbaruah, the founder editor, started writing on Russia and the October Revolution. Bezbaruah pointed out that the October Revolution is the revolution of the lower caste communities (*Sudras*); which had ended the rule of the business-empire (*Baherua-Baperua Samrajya*); literal meaning of which is capitalism and imperialism. He also pointed out that sooner or later there will be the rule of the labourers (*Sudras*); coming of the labour empire is inevitable, he stressed.

Major changes on the growth of leftism in literature came with the publication of *Awahan*. In an article entitled '*Ruch-Deshat Tintmah*' published in *Awahan*; Vol. 7, No. 1. Lakshminath Bezbaruah tracing the Indo-Russian relations since *Mahabharata* times, stressed on the recent impact of the October Revolution. He also discussed about the condition and the social position of Soviet women. He wrote "Russia is the land of Lenin and Stalin. Czars have no room there now; new ideas, new society are emerging."

'*Chetna*, under the editorship of Ambika Giri Ray Choudhury and Chandranath Sarmah became a forum of progressive ideas. Roy Choudhury in an article entitled *Ruchiar Rastra biplav*, published in its Vol. I, No. 19, 24, wrote "the results of the October Revolution do not confine to Russia only. The influence of Bolshevism spread all over. The establishment of the proletarian state is an inevitable". In another article published in Vol -5, No. 6, entitled *Sargiya Lenin*, Ray Choudhury expressed deep grief on Lenin's death.

Munin Barkataki was another scholar who started writing regularly in *Chetna* with progressive tone. In *Bahni*, Vol. 21. No. 6, he wrote two articles namely *Russia Aru Bolsheviso* and *Soviet Union Aru Romand Rolland*. In the former article Roy Choudhury wrote 'Bolshevism is the most scientific political method as well as revolution among all the revolutions, so far the human civilization have witnessed.'

*Bahni* under the editorship of Amiya Kumar Das had a 'women section' where most of the articles were written on Soviet Women, particularly about their struggle and achievements of democratic

right and social prestige. Das, for the first time used the word 'Comrade', which is supposed to be used only with the revolutionary workers. Lakshmidhar Sarmah was another progressive writer who devoted his writings for the sufferings of the masses, boldly criticised communalism. He for the first time depicted workers' strike in his short stories in Assamese.

### **Influence of the Left Movement**

The growth of leftism in literature was an outcome of the spread of socialist ideology. The formation of the All India Congress Socialist Party in 1934, the All India Kisan Congress in 1936, and the All India Students Federation in 1936 was a landmark in Indian history so far the left movement was concerned. The formation of these organisations was highly welcome by the revolutionary and the progressive masses as the Communist Party of India was declared unlawful on June 23rd 1934 under the provisions of Special (Emergency) Powers Act by the Government of India. The Communists found an access to work under the AICSP camouflage. Side by side, the AICSP and the AITUC both proclaimed similar programmes akin to Communist ideology. The AITUC in its session at Cawnpore had formulated the following basic principles of the constitution of Free-India.<sup>19</sup>

1. Transfer of all power to the oppressed and exploited masses.
2. Abolition of Native States and Landlordism.
3. Freedom of peasants from all exploitation and exaction.
4. Nationalisation of land, public utility services, mineral resources, banks etc.
5. Unconditional repudiation of all debts contracted by the foreign Government.
6. Abolition of all indirect taxation and introduction of free primary education.
7. Freedom of Press, speech, association, expression and assembly
8. Abolition of all other charges on the peasants except unitary tax.

In his presidential address of the Andhra Provincial Ryots Conference held at Nidubrola on 22nd June 1936, Prof N. G. Ranga, declared that "our peasants aim at the complete capture of power of the state, of course in alliance and partnership of the workers. But unlike many congressmen, our peasants know, as a fact, that British imperialism with all its variegated facets cannot be fully overcome unless its most important Indian allies, the Mahajans and Zamindars are completely prevented from carrying on their ceaseless class-warfare against our masses. They realise that as

long as they are kept down in their present abysmal position in the class. war thrust and imposed upon them, there cannot be any real independence for them.....That movement which seeks to end the suicidal class war is Socialism".<sup>20</sup>

The INC, too, in its Lucknow session in April, 1936, adopted resolution on agrarian programmes.<sup>21</sup> But most of the orthodox Congressmen hesitated to comply with the resolution as the Kisan movements in the hands of socialist and communists with 'drastic programme for debt repudiation and expropriation' were being militant. Prof N. G. Ranga, president of the AIKS and Andhra Peasants' League declined to accord with the reformist agrarian policy of the INC.<sup>22</sup> Though the Congressmen made little organised efforts to implement the Lucknow and Faizpur resolutions on agrarian problems, the issue of the peasants was however upheld. After the Lucknow Congress resolution on land tenure and revenue system, the Delhi police seized ninety five copies of posters entitled 'Kranti-Ki-Gunz' (Echo of Revolution) in 1936 from the Delhi Congress office together with original stencil-cut and cyclostyle machine which the police authority in Delhi considered as 'highly objectionable'. The Delhi Congress Committee had prepared a report on land tenure and revenue system in accordance with the Lucknow Congress resolution. Besides its demand of 'changes in the system of irrigation', the report called upon the peasantry not to pay 'a single pie of land revenue to the tyrannical Government'. According to the Chief Commissioner, Delhi, 'it was a good discovery and seizure'.<sup>23</sup> The clerk of the Delhi Congress office was arrested on charge of writing the posters. The discovery and the seizure appeared to the government authority as powerful evidences to discredit Delhi Congress Committee. In a letter to M. G. Hallett, Secy to the Govt of India, Mr. Johnson noted enthusiastically, 'Whatever the result of the case against the individual Congress worker, nothing can alter the fact that seizure was made in the Delhi Congress office'<sup>24</sup>. Earlier on 24th August 1936, in a letter to Mr. Johnson, Mr. M.G. Hallett referring the case of the 'seizure of 95 copies' suggested to 'give as much publicity to this discovery as possible'.<sup>25</sup> The accused clerk was found guilty under Section 18 of the Indian Press (Emergency Powers) Act of 1931 for 'preparation, exhibition and distribution' of the posters. He was sentenced for three months rigorous imprisonment by the Additional District Magistrate, E. S. Lewis on 28.9.36.<sup>26</sup>

It is apparently clear that leftism was getting more and more

strong foothold in all spheres of Indian Society. Despite repeated conspiracy (Cawnpore Bolshevik Conspiracy case of 1924 ; Meerut Conspiracy case of 1929) and ban on it, the CPI was emerging as a political force capable of providing revolutionary leadership. The statistics of the number of registered Trade Unions show a marked growth of working class consciousness. By the year 1935-36, there were 236 registered Trade Unions in India with membership numbering 268326,<sup>27</sup> resulting rise of working class strikes from 145 in 1935 to 157 in 1936.<sup>28</sup> In a letter dated 16 Feb. 1937, to the Secretary to the Government, United Provinces, Industrial department, H. W. Morgan, Secretary ; Upper Indian Chambers of Commerce noted his apprehensions regarding the growth of Communist led Industrial strikes. He wrote :<sup>29</sup>

*The labour situation in Cawnpore during the past few months has caused great anxiety to the Industrialist of the important manufacturing centre. It is understood that one of the causes of the trouble is the presence in Cawnpore of certain persons who make a practice of visiting factory areas and preaching Communism and class-warfare.*

The Cawnpore police authority had taken rigorous measures to arrest the Communist agitations but failed to arrest Ajoy Kumar Ghose, the main organiser. According to the note by Mr. Cowgill dated 19 Jan. 1937, Ghose was 'avoiding arrest and directing Communist activities in Bombay, the Punjab and Bengal'.<sup>30</sup> To sum up it can be said that since 1934, the period was of growth of all round left movement and spread of Socialist ideology. In accordance with the Comintern policy of United Front tactics, the Communist activists in India, made sincere attempts to co-ordinate all sorts of anti-Imperialist movements and to provide effective leadership.

#### **Anti-Imperialist Activities of the AIPWA**

Besides its activities in India, the AIPWA sided with the anti-Imperialist rally of the International writers. In response to Romand Rolland and Arich Barbusse's call to protect humanity from the fascist attack, which had already been launched in Spain by General Franco backed by Adolf Hitler of Germany and Mussolini of Italy, the AIPWA organised public opinion all over the country by anti-fascist league, holding meetings, rallies, signature campaign and distributing leaflets. Rolland sent a circular along with a letter to the delegates of Faizpur Session of the AIPWA. Just before the session, the Communist, Socialist and the progres-

ssive intellectuals of Bengal had formed an organising committee to popularise anti-fascist public opinion. Later on, this committee took initiative to organise All India Committee of the League against Fascism and War after the Faizpur Session, with Rabindranath Tagore as President and Prof. K. T. Saha and Soumendranath Tagor as Vice Presidents. The other distinguished members were Aecharya Prafulla Chandra, Sarojini Naidu, S. Brelvi (Editor, *Bombay Chronicle*), K. Shantanam (Editor, *Madras Daily Express*), R. S. Ruikar (Vice-President, AITUC), Tushar Kant Ghose (Editor, *Amrita Bazar Patrika*), Dhiren Sen (Editor, *Advance*), Surendra Goswami, (Secy. Bengal Progressive Writers Union), Sajjad Jahir (Secy, AIPWA), Indulal Yugnik and Swami Sahajananda (Secretary, AIKS), S. A. Dange, P. Y. Dashpande, Sumanta Metta, Mia IftiKharwddn, Jai Prakash Narain, Kamala Devi, Deven Sen, Navakrishna Choudhury and Suresh Bondopadhyay.<sup>31</sup>

The AIPWA also sent delegates to the convention held in London in October 1937 on the question of Civil Liberties in India which was presided over by the great philosopher Lord Listwell and attended by renowned literateur Harold Lasky. Mulkraj Anand represented the Convention on behalf of the AIPWA and expressed his deep concern on the plight of civil liberties in India.<sup>32</sup>

#### **Reaction of the British Government in India**

The British Government in India, which had been considering Communist growth as a menace, immediately took effective curbing measures. The Home Ministry surprisingly noticed that a considerable number of Professors in Indian Universities and of Editors of Indian Newspapers were involved with the AIPWA. They also found that 'the membership is drawn largely from persons' such as S. S. Zaheer, the Secretary of the AIPWA (son of an ex-chief Judge of the Oudh Chief Court), Zainul Abedin Ahmed (the son of a D. I. G. of Police in Sind) or Promode Sengupta (son of the Public Prosecutor, Krishnanagar, Bengal). J. M. Ewart of the Central Intelligence Branch, considered such involvement without knowing the Communist ideology behind its declared objectives. Ewart in his note dated 13 July, 1936 suggested the Home Ministry to issue a friendly warning to University authorities all over the country and also to the D. P. I. about the Association to 'discredit it in a journalistic circle'.<sup>3</sup>

In response to the draft prepared by Mr. Cowgill in accordance with the suggestion made by Ewart, M. G. Hullatt, the Secretary to the Government of India in his report dated 1 August, 1936,

considered it inadvisable. Hallett considered that the draft will not impress the University Authority rather the latter fight take as an act of suppression of a 'perfectly bonafide movement for the cultural uplift of India'.<sup>34</sup>

In reply to M. G. Hallett, Sir John Ewart reiterated his stand and cautioned the Home Ministry in his report dated 13 August, 1936. His report goes,<sup>35</sup>

*The Association is a typical example of the methods of infiltration now being pursued by Communists in all countries in accordance with the current policy of the Comintern. The method is from a few convinced and trained Communists to establish contacts with all sorts of organisations, Societies, having interests in intellectual, cultural and social subjects with the object of spreading through the medium and under the cloak of such organisations, Communistic ideas and of eventually after gaining sufficient converts securing control.*

In view of this argument, the Home Ministry decided to issue a friendly warning. Accordingly, a draft circular was sent from the Home Ministry to all the local governments on 28th August, 1936. The circular stated,

*Though it is not suggested that IPWA as a body is necessarily a subversive or revolutionary organisation, it is desirable for the reasons given that its developments should be watched with some suspicion, along with friendly warnings about the association to journalists, educationists and others who might be attracted by its ostensible programme.*

#### **Sum-up**

The above study reveals the historic emergence and role of the left intellectuals in India. The Communist movement which paved the way for the development of left literature was not an Utopia but it emerged from the very roots of Indian Society. The limitation of the ideal politics as formulated and executed by Gandhiji and other forms of struggle both militant nationalism of Tilak brand and revolutionary terrorism of the extremists formed the background of Communist emergence.

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