

The Socialist Movement in Bengal, 1934-1976

Dr. Palash Mondal

Associate Professor of History, Sidho-Kanho-Birsha University, West Bengal

Abstract: *The socialist movement in India emerged in the context of a political vacuum. By 1929 there emerged within the Congress a ginger group whose members gradually veered towards Socialism. In 1933, a group of members imprisoned in the Nasik jail came to the concert decision to create a Socialist Party. As the official Marxist-Leninist Communist Party of India did not join the nationalist movement the other socialist workers decided to work within the banner of the Indian National Congress. It was decided to name the party as the Congress Socialist Party. The Socialist Party and the K.M.P.P, after their electoral failure in 1952, decided to merge and after several rounds of deliberations formed the Praja Socialist Party (P.S.P). Compared to this all-India context, the situation in West Bengal was even more complex. The Socialist Party in the West Bengal Assembly elections, in 1952 contested about one hundred seats but drew a blank and all of them even lost their deposits except two candidates. The result of the K.M.P.P group was comparatively much better. They turned out to be the second largest opposition party close to the C.P.I (Communist Party of India). Dr Lohia with his Socialist Party rejoined the P.S.P and the new party was named the Samyukta Socialist Party (S.S.P). They failed miserably to attract the constituencies not matured by the Communists in West Bengal. So, in spite of the presence of some dedicated workers a few orators skilled parliamentarians and gifted intellectuals, the Socialists always remained marginalised and finally disappeared almost unsung and unhonoured from West Bengal.*

Keywords: Socialist Party, Congress Socialist Party, Kishan Mazdoor Praja Party, Praja Socialist Party, Samyukta Socialist Party

Two factors jointly played a vital role in the development of Socialism in India. One was the inspiration, guidance and support provided by the Internationalist Communist movement all over the World since the days of the October Revolution in erstwhile Russia (1917). The other was the growth of the nationalist movement dominated by the charismatic leadership provided by Mahatma Gandhi since his arrival in Indian politics around

1919. While the Communist movement in India has been guided and controlled by the Moscow-based Comintern and made many U-Turns under its dictates, necessities were increasingly felt for a non-Marxist Socialist Party in India free from any outside control. The socialist movement in India emerged in the context of a political vacuum. By 1929 there emerged within the Congress a ginger group whose members gradually veered towards Socialism. Eventually, in the background of the abortive civil disobedience movement, the growing enthusiasm in the peasant and labour movement all over India since the late 1920's which was lacking proper leadership, unity and direction among the Communists was increasingly felt for the creation of a new Socialist Party.¹

In 1933, a group of members imprisoned in the Nasik jail came to the concert decision to create a Socialist Party. In October 1934 at the annual conference of the Indian National Congress held in Bombay, the Congress Socialist Party was born. As the official Marxist-Leninist Communist Party of India did not join the nationalist movement the other socialist workers decided to work within the banner of the Indian National Congress. It was decided to name the party as the Congress Socialist Party. However, the noted socialist and trade union leader of Bengal Sibnath Banerjee mentioned that an all-India Socialist Party had already been formed in 1933 at the time of the Kanpur conference of the All-India Trade Union Congress with Dr. Charu Banerjee as its president and R.S Ruikar as its secretary. After the emergence of the Congress Socialist Party, the Socialist Party merged with it.²

From the very beginning, the C.S.P was a heterogeneous group comprising the non-conformist Marxists, radical socialists, Fabians, Democratic Socialists, Populists and so on all of whom had combined under the Congress Socialist Party to pursue the twin common goals - complete independence and establishment of socialism which meant eradication of all differences. By 1938-39 the Congress Socialist Party emerged as the largest leftist bloc within the Congress all over India. In the meantime, by the decision of the 7th Congress of the Comintern, the Communists decided to join hands with the mainstream of the nationalist movement and came back to the Congress. The Congress Socialist Party leadership also agreed to accept the Communists in its fold. The Communists then a small but disciplined organised and dedicated group within a short line came to capture the C.S.P organisation in many provinces. Through C.S.P, they also became members of the Congress Committees and became its office bearers in many places.

In Bengal, the first branch of C.S.P was formed with Atul Krishna Bose as its secretary. He was replaced soon by Gunada Majumder who continued for a long time.³ In the first assembly election of 1937, held under the New Government of India Act of 1935, out of eight labour constituencies in Bengal the noted socialist leader Sibnath Banerjee became elected from the Howrah Factory Labour Constituency under the banner of the Trade Union Constituency. Several Socialists were elected in the assemblies of other

provinces all however under the banner of the congress. In Bengal, the success of the socialists, however, was not so spectacular as few of them could get the election ticket from the Congress. Still, we get a picture of the popularity and public appeal of the C.S.P in Bengal when during the All India Congress Committee (A.I.C.C) session in Calcutta (1937) in a two-day lecture series addressed by Acharya Narendra Deo, Jayprakash Narayan, Achyuta Pattavardhan, Minoo Masani, Rammanahar Lohia and Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay, all-India socialist stalwarts in the Albert Hall were well attended even though the entry was restricted to only paid ticket holders.⁴

Still, in pre-independence Bengal, the C.S.P remained a small insignificant force to reckon with for a number of reasons. It remained a curious platform for unstable factions which included the Bengal Labour Association formed by a group of orthodox Gandhites connected with Abhay Ashrama, the Royists (followers of M.N Roy), the Bengal Labour Party Communists and Anushilan Samiti (who later formed the Revolutionary Socialist Party in 1940) etc, leaving only a tiny group of original socialists.⁵ All of them wanted to use the platform of C.S.P an all-India only as a leader to gain some hold over the Congress. That the C.S.P could never become a significant force was due also to some other reasons.⁶ Firstly almost all of the front-ranking leaders of the all-India C.S.P like Narendra Deo, Jayprakash Narayan, Rammanohar Lohia, and Yusuf Meherally were from other Provinces while there was no one from Bengal. Secondly, there was the greater attraction of the Bengalis was for the Communists and other leftist groups like the Forward Bloc, Royists, R.S.P etc. most of whom led the Bengalis at their holm. Thirdly, most of the Bengali political workers came from so-called revolutionary groups who had their primary affiliation to their respective original groups. Fourthly the original members attracted to socialism of all India variety were few. All these led to intense group rivalry within the Bengal branch of the C.S.P. After the outbreak of the Second World War (September 1939) the community of the Royists, the Boseitcs (followers of Subhash Bose) left or dissociated themselves with the C.S.P mostly on ideological issues one by one and formed their separate political organisations leaving only the small orthodox socialist group in Bengal.

On the eve of independence, the Congress High Command decided (January 1947) not to allow any other organised group to work from inside the Congress although this was not an uncommon practice in the pre-independence era. Perhaps the Congress leadership was planning to have a tight-knit organisation to take over the administration in the post-independence period. So, the C.S.P had to go outside the Congress and took the name of the Socialist Party of India (1947). In the first general election in-independent India held in 1952 the Socialists, contrary to force in power politics their expeditions of capturing power or at least becoming an important force a crushing defeat. This led to intense bickering within the party. In the Panchmari Conference session (1952) two issues came to the

fore. One, the party failed to clear before the public their alternate aims and programmes.⁷ Two, whether the party was ready to oppose simultaneously the Congress and the Communists based on the policy of democratic socialism and to provide a viable opposition on this line.

The 1952 election results proved to be a debacle for not only the Socialists but also many other left democratic anti-Congress groups. This naturally caused self-introspection among these left-of-centre parties and necessity was increasingly felt for creating a bloc of their non-Congress Non-Communist parties. In his presidential address at Panchmari Dr. Rammanohar Lohia emphasised his theory of equidistance from both the Congress and the Communists.⁸ Almost a year after independence the orthodox Gandhians from various provinces walked out of the Congress partly on their ideological differences with the Nehruvian government and partly due to factional squabbling at the local level. These splint groups, from various provinces joined together and formed the Kishan Mazdoor Praja Party (K.M.P.P). But in the 1952 elections, they also could not dislodge the Congress. The Socialist Party and the K.M.P.P, after their electoral failure in 1952, decided to merge and after several rounds of deliberations formed the Proja Socialist Party (P.S.P). But expecting the staunch anti-Nehruism and anti-Communism these two groups had little in common in their political convictions. During the period of freedom struggles these Patelites (or the orthodoxy Gandhians believed to be close to Sardar Patel in the Indra-party power struggle with Nehru) and the Socialists (most of whom were regarded as close to Nehru) often came at loggerheads over ideological issues. So, from the very beginning, the P.S.P. was in an ideological flux in spite of all their high-sounding hyperboles.⁹ Compared to this all-India context, the situation in West Bengal was even more complex. The Socialist Party in the West Bengal Assembly elections, in 1952 contested about one hundred seats but drew a blank and all of them even lost their deposits except two candidates. The result of the K.M.P.P group was comparatively much better. They turned out to be the second largest opposition party close to the C.P.I (Communist Party of India).¹⁰

In the assembly, they could send known and experienced forces like Dr Suresh Banerjee, Annada Chowdhury, Deben Sen, Charuchandra Bhandari and lord bases in almost all districts of West Bengal. The situation became more complex in West Bengal when the Forward Bloc founded by Subhas Chandra Bose became divided into an anti-Marxist section known as the Subhasist Forward Bloc, led by Leela Roy of erstwhile Sri Sangha group and her associates contested the election of 1952. and got a single seat (that also with the indirect support of the C.P.I out of 41 seats while the other section known as Forward Bloc (Marxist) as a partner of the C.P.I front contested 41 seats and won 12 seats. The disillusioned Forward Bloc (Subhasist) finally decided to merge with the newly formed Proja Socialist Party (June 1953). Though numerically small and Sri Sangha being Dacca based organisation had little massbase in West Bengal but besides Leela Roy, this group had a

number of dedicated and well-respected leaders and so had an appeal to the Bengal middle class. Even after the inclusion of all these groups in the Proja Socialist Party (P.S.P) each of the true factions kept their own identities.¹¹

Thus, from the very beginning, the P.S.P remained an amalgam of diverse, if not opposite political elements having little ideological or organisational cohesion. Even after the formation of the P.S.P the newly formed party fared no better in the assembly bye-election. In spite of an intense election campaign, the P.S.P candidate ranked a poor third in the Nabadwip Parliamentary bye-election (1953) in the state assembly bye-election from Entally (1955) and Bijpur and Jalpaiguri constituency (1954) the P.S.P candidates lost their security deposit.¹²

The continuous electoral failures led to a serious rethinking among the P.S.P leaders of West Bengal and after some initial hesitation, they decided to come to terms with the C.P.I-led Front based on seat adjustments. In the assembly election of 1957, the P.S.P got 21 seats which was numerically the best in its electoral history.¹³ But again within a short time, their anti-Communist stance became intense and they decided to snap all ties with the Communists and their allies.¹⁴ Contesting single-handedly, they again fared badly in the 1962 elections. A police report from 1963 mentioned the P.S.P is almost a dead organisation. It has practically no activity and no funds depending on meagre membership subscriptions and occasional donations with no regular financier.¹⁵ Already in 1955, the hard-core socialists all over India led by Dr. Lohia parted with the P.S.P and revived the Socialist Party. After the failure in the 1962 election, one of the most senior P.S.P leaders, Asoka Mehta began to preach his thesis of cooperation with the Congress and ultimately in 1964 with a large chunk of his followers Mehta rejoined the Congress and was properly rehabilitated by the Congress leadership. In the West Bengal, however, Mehta had little followers. On the other hand, in the same year (1964) Dr. Lohia with his Socialist Party rejoined the P.S.P and the new party was named the Samyukta Socialist Party (S.S.P). But within no time, a majority of the P.S.P leaders, due to ideological differences and group rivalries, left the S.S.P and rebuilt the old P.S.P.¹⁶ Thus, two socialist parties continued in West Bengal as in the all-India plane. The Communist Party also became divided into two parties - the Right C.P.I (Pro-Moscow) and the Left C.P.I or C.P.I(M) (pro-China). Since the election of 1967, while the policy of the S.S.P was to have a broader anti-Congress alliance of the parties from the left to the right, the P.S.P generally followed the line of going it alone. In the 1967 election, Bengal witnessed two anti-Congress left fronts - the U.L.F (United Left Front) led by the C.P.I (M) and the P.U.L.F (Peoples United Left Front) of C.P.I, Forward Bloc and Bangla Congress. The S.S.P from the beginning was a partner of the U.L.F. The P.S.P officially joined with neither of the Fronts, but a significant section of the Bengal P.S.P in spite of the opposition of the Central P.S.P, came to a tacit understanding with the P.U.L.F. After the election, both the Fronts came to an understanding to the 'United Front' which formed the first non-Congress

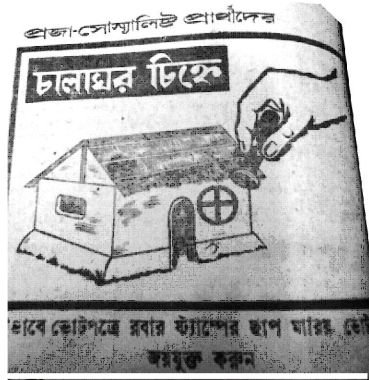
coalition ministry of West Bengal. Both the P.S.P and S.S.P joined U.F and one representative from each party became ministers in the U.F government. But the first U.F government had a short tenure and ultimately state assembly was dissolved. In the 1969 interimelection, the United Front came to power with a landslide victory. The S.S.P though remained a partner of the U.F. did not join the Ministry. The P.S.P did not align with the Front but the rebel Contai group with the support of the U.F. contested four seats and won all of them. One of them even became a minister. But the Second United Front government also did not last for more than one year and was followed by unprecedented violence, inter-party quarrels and political confusion. West Bengal was under the President's rule for most of the time. Finally, after the massive victory in the Bangladesh Liberation War under Indra Gandhi's leadership, the Congress had a sweeping majority in spite of many allegations of malpractices in the West Bengal assembly election of 1972. The Socialist forces, always a confused lot and a house divided naturally now were in complete disarray.

The situation for the Socialists in the all-India plane was hardly better. After the Congress split in 1969, the S.S.P in collaboration with the Congress (organisation), Swatantra Party and Jan Sangha formed a grand alliance or Mahajot to contest the 1971 parliamentary election against Indira Gandhi's Congress Party. Since the Congress split, the P.S.P leaders in general went on to support Mrs Gandhi and her policies. Many of the P.S.P. leaders in many provinces joined Congress (I). But the election result of 1972 made both of the Socialist Parties almost redundant in Indian Politics.¹⁷ So after prolonged negotiations both parties decided to merge to form the Socialist Party (1973).

The Indian political scenario became volatile in 1974 eventually leading to the promulgation of a national emergency (June 1975) curbing strong injunctions on normal political activities and imprisonment of leaders of all non-Congress anti-Indira Gandhi parties. The Socialist Workers were hard hit everywhere. Even in West Bengal where the socialist organisation was immensely weak, the handful of socialist workers were most prominent in the anti-emergency activities and had to face police repression. The emergency was lifted in early 1977 and the election was declared. Events followed in quick succession Congress (O), Jan Sangha, Lok Dal and the socialist Party merged to form the Janata Dal. The election results showed spectacular victory for the Janata Dal which formed the government in which the socialists played an important role.¹⁸ But the Janata orpiment proved to be short-lived with the re-emergence of the Congress rule. With the submerging of the Socialist Party in the greater sphere of Janata conglomerate the socialist party had a natural death. But it did not mean the end of socialism in India. In the north Indian states particularly in Bihar and U.P, the lineages of the socialist family, although in the form of regional outfits continued to be very strong contenders for political power.

Symbol of the Socialist Parties

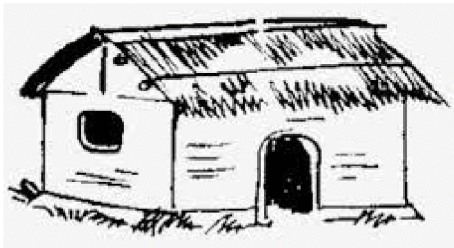
Symbol of Proja Socialist Party



Symbol of Socialist Party



Symbol of Kishan Mazdoor Praja Party



Symbol of Samyukta Socialist Party



In West Bengal, with the uninterrupted rule of the C.P.I (M) dominated Left Front for the next three and a half decades from 1977, the socialists always a weak force in Bengal, almost disappeared from the political scene with a few local socialist groups becoming small partners in the Left Front continued to show their existence, perhaps only in signboard form.

The predicament of the Socialists in West Bengal is not difficult to explain with the basic weakness of the socialists in West Bengal, the causes of which are already discussed, one may add that the inability of the socialists to function as a cohesive group, continuous in fighting among the provincial leaders and their dependence on their mentors mostly from North India and vice versa and the failure to take part in the mass movements steadily and consistently with other leftist carve out solid niches either in terms of class or in region (except some pockets among Asansol

coalmines and Jalpaiguri tea labourers) made the marginalisation of the socialists inevitable in West Bengal. From the very beginning within the West Bengal P.S.P, the original socialists had been overwhelmed by the K.M.P.P group and after their gradual retirement from the scene, the Sri Sangha group came to the force.¹⁹ The original socialists, being divided between S.S.P and P.S.P, were further weakened. The history of the socialist movement remained only a sickening history of splits and mergers²⁰ they completely failed to implement the caste-class theory of Dr. Lohia which the socialists did seriously in other parts of India which could have provided an alternative to the typical Marxist pedagogy.²¹

They failed miserably to attract the constituencies not matured by the Communists in West Bengal. So, in spite of the presence of some dedicated workers a few orators skilled parliamentarians and gifted intellectuals, the Socialists always remained marginalised and finally disappeared almost unsung and unhonoured from West Bengal.

Notes and References (Endnotes)

- 1 Sajal Basu, *Socialis Andoloner Itikotha* (in Bengali), (Kolkata, 2012), p. 30
- 2 Gunada Majumdar, *Socialist Netritver Baisistya* (article in Gunada Majumdar centenary Commemorative Volume), (Kolkata, 2009), p. 22
- 3 Sajal Basu, op.cit, p. 33
- 4 Ibid, p. 33
- 5 Asim Kumar Chaudhuri, *Socialist Movement in India: The Congress Socialist Party 1934-1947*, (Calcutta, 1980), pp. 22-23
- 6 Ibid, pp. 23-24
- 7 Naren Das, 'Bharater Socialist Andoloner Dhara' article in Yuger Dak - Dr. Rammanohar Lohia centenary special issue, (in Bengali) (Kolkata, 2012), pp. 30-31
- 8 Hari Kishore Singh, *A Short History of the Proja Socialist Party 1934-59*, (Lucknow 1959), pp. 170
- 9 Ibid, p. 172; also Naren Das, 'Bharater Socialist Andoloner Dhara' article in Yuger Dak - Dr. Rammanohar Lohia centenary special issue, (in Bengali), (Kolkata, 2012), p. 31 also Weiner Myron, 'Party Politics in India: The Development of a Multi Party System, (Princeton, 1957), Part - II, pp. 25-116
- 10 Dilip Banerjee, *Election Recorder an Analytical References- Bengal-West Bengal, 1862-2012*, (Kolkata 2012), pp. 335
- 11 Palash Mondal, *From Revolutionary Nationalism to Democratic Socialism - Revolutionary group of Bengal Sri Sangha 1922-1970*, (in Bengali), (Kolkata, 2019), p.207 Kolkata, also Calcutta Police, Special Branch File No. 1170/53 (V), Kolkata Police Museum.
- 12 West Bengal State Archives, West Bengal Police, Intelligence Branch, File No. 518B-26, Lord Sinha Road.
- 13 Dilip Banerjee, op.cit, p.362; The 3rd Annual Conference of the P.S.P, West

- Bengal Branch - The Report of the Secretary (1955) and the Presidential Address, Calcutta, January, 1957 (Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi).
- 14 Special Branch (S.B) File No. 1170/53 (V), Kolkata Police Museum, Kolkata.
 - 15 Intelligence Branch (I.B), File No. 1814/1963, Lord Sinha Road, Kolkata.
 - 16 Benjamin M Schoenfeld, "The Birth of Indian Samjukta Socialist Party", article in *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 38, Nos. 3-4
 - 17 Lewis Ficket, "The Proja Socialist Party of India, 1952-1971: A final Assessment" article in *Asian Survey* Vol. 13, September, 1973, also Mondal Palash, op.cit.
 - 18 Sajal Basu, *Jaruri Abastha: Andolan O Atmaparichiyer Rajniti*, Kolkata, 2022.
 - 19 Sonal Shah, *Indian Socialists: Search for Identity*, Bombay, 1999, pp. 38-39
 - 20 Sajal Basu, *Socialis Andoloner Itikotha*, op.cit, also Palash Mondal, Op.Cit, pp 229-231 1419, pp. 85-88
 - 21 Nirban Basu, 'Banglar Samajtantri Andoloner Atit O Bartoman', *Sharadiya Juger Dak*, Kolkata, pp. 37-40