

SOCIALIST PAST-I

Dual Character Of An Emerging Group

By M. R. MASANI

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WHEN we left Nasik prison at the end of 1933, J. P. and I agreed that as soon as we were out, we would go ahead with the formation of our proposed new party on the basis of the programme we had prepared in prison. I lost no time and in the middle of December I took a train to Allahabad to visit Jawaharlal Nehru. Though I had been following his public life since the late twenties and had briefly run into him in a London hotel in 1927, I had never really met him and he had probably forgotten all about me.

SHARED VIEWS

Jawaharlal was kind enough to ask me to stay with him in Anand Bhavan during my short visit of a couple of days. We got on extremely well from the very beginning. We were both modern and westernized men, though he was considerably older. We were both socialists and he was therefore naturally responsive and sympathetic to what I had to say. Jawaharlal looked at the plan we had drafted and was willing to give us the support we needed.

Before we parted, I handed over to Jawaharlal a letter dated December 19.

Dear Pandit Jawaharlal,

Some of us Congressmen in Bombay who are socialists are attempting to form a Congress Socialist Group or Party.

We feel that the lead you have given to the Congress and to the country by emphasizing the necessity of taking up a consciously socialist and anti-imperialist position should be followed by the organization of socialists within the Congress.

The Group it is proposed to form would carry out the purpose you have in view by placing before the Congressmen and the public of our province (or, may be presidency) a programme that would be socialist in action and objective.

The Group would do socialist propaganda among rank and file Congressmen with a view to converting the Congress to an acceptance of socialism. We would also carry on propaganda among the workers (and peasants) at the same time participating in their day to day economic struggles.

It would hearten us to know that in the formation of such a Group we shall have your approval and support.

Yours Fraternally,
M. R. Masani

On the same day, Jawaharlal gave me a letter in the course of which he welcomed "the formation of socialist group in the Congress to influence the ideology of the Congress and the country".

I was to receive Jawaharlal's hospitality on several occasions from then on till my first retirement from politics in 1939. I came to develop considerable affection and admiration for him, though it was never uncritical.

I found him a man of moods, and changeable from time to time. One day he would be warm and friendly and put his arm around you. The next day he would walk past you with hardly a glance of recognition. When J. P. and I compared notes about Jawaharlal, we agreed he had something of the fickleness of a woman.

Another feminine trait I found in Jawaharlal was his coyness in responding to any request. He was inclined to start by saying "No." I clearly recall one such incident. I was staying with him at Anand Bhavan, and the Congress Socialist Party

Spain Day". "Civil Liberties Day" or what have you. I asked Jawaharlal, who was then the Congress President, whether he would issue a statement approving of what we were doing so that Congressmen in general might either participate in the function on that day or at least not be obstructive. Almost instinctively, Jawaharlal said he would not issue such an appeal and despite my arguments he was adamant. I took a train overnight to Lucknow, which was my next port of call. Imagine my surprise at receiving a telegram there that he was issuing a statement of the kind I had asked for! That was typical of his response.

I must soon have become one of Jawaharlal's "pet young men" and I shared that distinction with J. P., Ram Manohar Lohia and Achyut Patwardhan.

I also took to Kamala, Jawaharlal's wife. She was a sweet and gentle soul, and very dedicated politically to the national cause. Her sincerity made her extremely popular with Congress workers in Allahabad. Among these workers was Feroze Gandhi, who was a young man in his teens. I gathered he was devoted to Kamala—a case of calf-love as some people thought.

A LOVELY WOMAN

One morning at breakfast at Anand Bhavan, Jawaharlal, sitting at the head of the table, with Kamala on his left and me on his right, Feroze Gandhi's name came up in conversation. Jawaharlal turned to me playfully and asked: "Minoo, can you imagine anyone falling in love with my wife?" I had no hesitation in saying: "Yes. In fact, I could fall in love with her myself." The reply elicited a pout from Jawaharlal and a lovely smile from Kamala. She was not beautiful but, when her face lit up with a smile she could look quite lovely. Jawaharlal was very kind and gentle with Kamala who was already ailing with what I discovered was a bad case of tuberculosis. I did not then know that she was to die of that scourge within a couple of years.

Armed with Jawaharlal's letter of support for the formation of a Congress Socialist Group, I called a meeting of socialists in Bombay Presidency as it was then called. On that day, February 25, 1934, the Bombay Presidency Congress Socialist Group was formed.

We decided not to have any President or Chairman of our group but agreed that the Chairman of each meeting, who would be different, would be elected at that meeting. There were to be two Secretaries, Purshottam Trikamdas and myself. Later Yusuf Meherally replaced Purshottam and he and I worked together closely as Secretaries for many years.

The next move came with the formation of the Bihar Socialist Party. The dropping of the word "Congress" from the name was by no means an accident. Purshottam Meherally and I did not like it, but we accepted the deviation, unfortunately the first of many to follow. In May 1934, it was decided to convene the First All India Congress Socialist Conference in Patna.

A parallel development was the formation of the Swaraj Party which the constitutional and parliamentary minded people among Congressmen were bringing into existence in order to cut the losses of the defeat which the Congress had sustained in the Civil Disobedience movement of 1932-33 and to swing Congress members to a policy of fighting Assembly elections and functioning in the legislatures. A new constitution, which was later to become the Government of India Act of 1935

May 2 and 3, 1934, and I accepted an invitation to attend.

A resolution for the revival of the Swaraj Party, which had already existed in the twenties in the Indian Legislative Assembly, was moved by Choudhary Khaliquzzaman, who was later to become a leader of the Muslim League. This of course was carried, Dr B. C. Roy, later, to become the Chief Minister of West Bengal then moved another resolution embodying the programme of the Party.

To this resolution, I moved an amendment urging the Swaraj Party to undertake "the organization of the peasants and workers for the purpose of participating in the struggle against imperialism and Indian vested interests allied to them." I took as a good augury for the future of the Congress Socialist Party the fact that it got as many as twenty-six votes against forty.

The speech I delivered on the occasion was perhaps significant as striking for the first time various chords in the developing socialist symphony. I started by appealing to the Swarajist leaders not to take any final decision without giving the rank and file of Congressmen, who had borne the brunt of governmental repression during the last two years, a chance to have their say.

This opening gambit reflected clearly the dual character of the emerging Congress Socialist group. On the one hand, it was a socialist development; on the other, it was a group of radical and militant nationalists who felt they were giving expression to the aspirations of Congressmen who till then had been prepared to follow unquestioningly the leadership provided by Mahatma Gandhi.

NATIONALISM

This second characteristic of the Congress Socialist Party was, when one looks back, as fundamental as the other. Indeed it would be fair to say that the support we young men gathered about us almost immediately and the influence we came to exercise by the mid-thirties was perhaps due more to our militant nationalism than to our socialist programme. This was by no means a cold-blooded manoeuvre such as the Communists might have resorted to. The fact is that J. P., Yusuf Meherally, Purshottam Trikamdas and I, among others, were ardent nationalists.

"What," I asked those present, "is the work in the country, what is the mass activity which the Swaraj Party is going to reflect in the Assembly?" In spite of all the vague talk of constructive work, the winning of elections seems to be the be-all and the end-all of their aspirations. What I ask you, are you offering to the thousands upon thousands of young Congressmen who have returned from jail? Are you going to ask them to canvass votes for your candidates once every three or five years? Is that a programme that is likely to enthuse ardent patriots?"

I then went on to tell them of the programme of the Congress Socialist Party which relied for its attainment on the participation by the Congress in the day-to-day economic struggles of peasants and workers.

My speech must have sounded somewhat impertinent to the liberal gentlemen present each of whom had a long and fine record of public service. Nonetheless, it was received very kindly.

From Ranchi we all trekked down, after the meeting, to Patna—I for the Socialist conference that was in the offing on May 17, and the others to attend a meeting of the AICC in the same city a couple of days later. At our conference it was decided that an All-India Socialist Party should be formed.