

"TO SPLIT OR NOT TO SPLIT"

Left Wing Indian Communists Ponder Course of Action

By S.R.Singh

NEW DELHI -- "To split or not to split" -- that was the question facing the left wing of the Communist party of India [CPI] at an important secret meeting of the faction in the third week of December.

Some of the leftist and centrist leaders wanted an immediate, open, formal split. They argued that they had had enough of "caution and patience." Their co-thinkers in Ceylon and Australia, they said, had already shown the "correct way" by forming rival Communist parties and they were eager to follow their example in India.

Others -- the centrists more timid in spirit and given to looking before leaping -- wanted to postpone the "fatal" decision until they had at least measured their strength against the rightist "Dangeites" at the next party congress.

Against the Australian and Ceylon examples, the centrists cited what has become known as the "Indonesian line." In accordance with this prescription, Communist parties whose leaderships have gone completely "revisionist" should be split forthwith, while those that have a fair number of "revolutionaries," even at the top, should be captured through a dogged inner-party struggle. The Communist party of India, they contended, clearly belonged to the latter category.

Heated Debate

The "pro-Peking" leftists tended to dismiss this line of argument as an unrealistic overestimate of the faction's strength. The "rightists," in their opinion, were in command of the party machine and were making it increasingly difficult for them to carry the revolutionary message to the people.

The "go-slow" centrist group, on the other hand, felt that their comrades were giving way to adventurism out of unnecessary fear. The left faction, they pointed out, was already functioning as a party within the party.

It had as many as four weeklies at its disposal -- Desh Hitaishi in Bengal, Spark in Madras, Janasnakti in Andhra and Chinta in Kerala and plans were completed to start a daily in Calcutta, a Hindi weekly in Lucknow and a Punjabi weekly in Julundur.

Above all, almost all the top leaders of the left wing, except a few in Bombay, were now out of prison.

Leftist strength was increasing every day, they argued, and it would be foolish to lose the goodwill of the rank and file of the party by announcing a premature split.

If their estimate proved to be wrong and the faction lost the fight at the party congress, they said, nothing would be lost; they would all leave the CPI and form a new party of "true Marxist-Leninists."

Centrist Snag

The debate was heated but inconclusive. No final decision, it was felt, could be taken without consulting E.M.S.Namboodiripad, former general secretary of the CPI, who had unfortunately decided to make yet another experiment in "centrism" and refused to attend the meeting in Delhi. His support was essential for the success of either of the two alternative courses of action under discussion. The problem was how to convince this influential figure that he could not play the role of Ajoy Ghosh (late general secretary of the CPI who acted as a mediator among party groupings until his death in 1962) when the differences between the two main trends in the CPI had become unbridgeable.

Yet another difficulty in coming to a decision was the attitude of Jyoti Basu, the West Bengal leader, who was present at the meeting but not ready for a clean break with the "rightists" even in Bengal. He was known to have advanced a strange formula for the future organizational set up in the state, envisaging an all-trend united preparatory committee under his own leadership to hold a state conference.

With Jyoti Basu as eager to play a "centrist" role as E.M.S. Namboodiripad, a firm decision by the leftists was clearly out of the question. The anti-Dange faction is meeting once again on January 9 to continue its debate.

Stinging Setbacks for Congress

In the meantime the double defeat of the Congress party in Burdwan (West Bengal) in both parliamentary and state assembly by-elections has had an impact throughout India. Coming in the wake of electoral defeats for the Congress party in Rajkot, Amroha and Farrukhabad in mid-1963, the new defeat appalled Congressmen in West Bengal. The general opinion in the state, particularly in Burdwan, is that the Congress itself is responsible for the setback.

Narayan Chourhry, the Congress parliamentary candidate, who comes from a rich "jotedal" landlord family, known to be opposed to even the milk-and-water (capitalist) socialism of the Congress party was defeated by N.C.Chatterjee, an independent who was supported by the CPI and other leftists.

Another "surprise" was the decisive victory of the Communist candidate (allegedly pro-Peking) Benoy Krishna Choudhury in the by-election to the West Bengal state legislative assembly. He defeated Mrs. Aruna Mukherji (Congress) from the Burdwan constituency.

In the 1962 elections, the Burdwan parliamentary as well as assembly seat were held by the Congress party, and the fact that a

leftist Communist could win this time despite the jingoistic propaganda launched by the Congress members against the Bengal Communists as "agents of Peking" shows the growing popular discontent with the Nehru government.

In the contest for parliament, N.C.Chatterjee secured 109,877 votes as against 98,734 for the Congress candidate; while the CPI candidate for Assembly won 17,853 votes against 14,505 for the Congress nominee. The victory at the polls is a clear indication of the growing radicalization. West Bengal has witnessed some sporadic mass action in recent months, mainly in protest against food grain dealers profiteering at the expense of consumers.