

# **the Indian Revolutionary Potential**

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# **THE INDIAN REVOLUTIONARY POTENTIAL**

**BY KATHLEEN GOUGH**

Peasant revolts in India have been historically less significant than in China, but during British rule they occurred more frequently than the Western literature suggests. Here I shall explore the character of peasant resistance in relation to political parties in Southern India, especially in Malabar, a region in the north of Kerala, and Tanjore, a district of southeast Madras.\*<sup>1</sup>

Peasant resistance in the nineteenth century included spontaneous killings of landlords or higher officials, organized strikes, and armed movements to seize the land and establish peasant self-government. The biggest revolts were the Mappilla rebellions in Malabar of 1836-1898. Muslim tenants revolted twenty-five times, killing many Hindu landlords, British officials, and soldiers.

Such uprisings stemmed from the increasing exactions of the colonial economy. During the first two thirds of the 19th century the British instituted capitalist agrarian relations throughout most of India. Land became the personal, marketable property of former land-managers and revenue collectors. Landlords acquired the power to raise rents or evict tenants freely. Serfs and slaves became landless laborers. Cash crops were produced for foreign and Indian markets in response to the government's extraction of heavy cash revenues. In Tan-

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\* Footnotes will be found at the end of the article.

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jore's deltaic rice area, landlords began to sell grain to other regions, retaining just enough for their families and bond-servants. In Kerala the 19th century saw a great increase in population and a vast expansion of export crops—pepper, coconuts, lumber, cardamom, tea, and cashew nuts. Landlords forced more and more produce from their too numerous tenants, evicting them if they failed to pay their rents. Widespread evictions and severe famines preceded each of the Mappilla revolts. Tenancy Acts passed after 1887 gave increasing security to rich and middle peasants and non-cultivating middle tenants, but did little for poor peasants and landless laborers.

The first modern, politically sponsored revolt stemmed from the Khilafat movement of 1920-1921. Guided by the largely Hindu Indian National Congress and the Muslim League, Malabar's new middle class of students, rich peasants, and professionals encouraged cultivators and hand-mill workers to strike and to boycott British goods. The goals were support for Turkey's independence struggle and home-rule for India. When the British responded violently, Muslim poor peasants, heirs of the 18th-century rebels, seized knives, spears, clubs, and home-made firearms and drove out or killed six hundred Hindu and Muslim landlords, British officials, and police. Popular Muslim leaders assumed the government of 220 villages for several months. Congress leaders under Gandhi denounced the revolt and the British defeated it. About 10,000 died.

During the 1930's a gulf widened between right-wing Congressmen who wanted home rule with minimal internal changes, and left-wingers, often of Marxist persuasion. The latter formed unions of hand-mill, industrial and transport workers, peasants and plantation hands. In 1934 the left-wing Congressmen formed a Socialist Party inside the Congress, which dominated the Kerala Provincial Congress Committee until 1940.

These years saw intense political activity among middle and poor peasants. Under Marxist leadership, peasant strikes, demonstrations, and armed self-defense forced landlords to lower rents and abolish special levies. Many peasants came to believe that class struggle would culminate in management of the land by its cultivators, and of the country by the Marxists.

By 1940 many Kerala socialists had become secret members of the Communist Party. The latter now tried to force independence from Britain's wartime administration through strikes, sabotage, and boycott of rents and taxes. They attempted to isolate the national bourgeoisie, encouraged the industrial proletariat to lead the struggle, and sought supporting actions from peasants, a number of whom died in armed clashes with the police. Opposed as always to violent uprising, the Congress and Socialist national leaderships expelled the Kerala socialists from their party. All of them then joined the Communist Party. Those Communists who escaped prison went underground, and the "proletarian struggle" petered out early in 1941.

Shortly after the Soviet Union entered the war, Indian Communists opted to support the war effort. Until the end of the war they refrained from militant struggles. Nonetheless, with Congressmen imprisoned, Communists expanded their influence and at war's end emerged in control of most of the unions.

In 1946-1947 revolts broke out in the Indian navy, many cities, and among the peasants of Bengal, Telangana, Tanjore, and Kerala. The Communist Central Committee did not support these revolts, its official policy now being to cooperate with the Congress in the transition to independence. District and village Communist leaders were, however, active in the revolts. In Telangana in the princely state of Hyderabad (now part of Andhra State), armed peasants seized 3,000 villages and administered them for six months. Communist-organized peasants similarly seized a block of villages in eastern Tanjore in early 1948. Over other large areas of Tanjore and Kerala, Communist and independent unions struck at harvest time, compelling landlords to halve rents and double wages. Landless laborers were formed into unions which allied themselves with those of poor and middle peasants. Communists attacked black-market profiteering by seizing grain and distributing it to the landless. In Hyderabad the revolutionary institutions were crushed by the Indian army, which invaded the state and an-



nexed it to the Union in late 1948. Police put down the Tanjore and Kerala revolts and several dozen peasants were shot.

The South Indian Communists who guided the revolts of 1947-1948 were influenced by Chinese revolutionary theories, although their national leadership adhered to the Russian line of constitutional opposition. In 1948, the Communist Party's main line changed again to revolutionary upsurge led by the urban proletariat. The Party's theory still neglected the peasants: B. T. Ranadive, the Party's General Secretary, called Mao's ideas "horrifying," "reactionary," and "counter-revolutionary."<sup>2</sup> But in actual practice, Communist revolutionary action was more successful in the countryside than in the cities. Consequently, in mid-1950 a reconstituted Central Committee adopted the Maoist approach of revolution based on rural guerrilla warfare. By this time, however, the main revolts were crushed. The Nehru government was entrenched and the people were encouraged by the prospect of universal suffrage under a new, republican constitution. In 1951 the Communists switched to parliamentary opposition. They renewed their attempts to unite the workers, peasants, and "patriotic" bourgeoisie to develop an independent, mixed economy under electoral democracy.

Communists came to power in the state government of Kerala in 1957 with 41 percent of the vote. They were ousted by the Center in 1959 after right-wing Catholic and high-caste Hindu attacks had disrupted law and order over questions of land reform and education. Through its policies of land-ceilings, minimum wages, and welfare provisions the Party increased its support in all the propertyless classes. Throughout their seventeen years of parliamentary struggle the Communists have filed suits on behalf of tenants and laborers, led strikes and boycotts within the constitutional framework, and counselled peasants on their rights under the various land reform laws.

In 1964 Left and Right Communists split on the question of approaches to the Congress Party. The Right Communists support the Soviet Union, which gives aid to the Congress government and hopes for peaceful transition to socialism. The Left Communists in theory oppose Soviet revisionism and any compromise with the Congress Party, and give critical support to

China. They foresee the possibility of armed revolution if the Indian government succumbs to American penetration and closes all avenues to constitutional and parliamentary struggle. Meanwhile, the Left Party continues to run in elections. In South India the Right Communists have weak support in the urban lower middle classes and in industrial unions; the Left Communists have much greater strength based on peasants and plantation and hand-mill workers. While bitterly opposing each other's ideologies, the two parties have formed electoral alliances in several states.

Communist-led United Front governments came to power in Kerala and West Bengal in the elections of early 1967. In Kerala the seven-party front experiences deepening trouble because of disputes between the parties and persisting food shortages. With 40 percent of its land under export crops, Kerala must import half its food, but the Congress Central Government has failed to maintain supplies. Kerala villagers consider twelve to seventeen ounces of rice an adequate daily diet. At present they receive only three ounces in ration shops and must buy whatever additional food they can at exorbitant market prices. Plantation and urban strikes, seizures of grain by bands of poor people, *ghereo* (mass encirclement) of cabinet ministers, government servants, and plantation and factory managers, and armed fights between political factions in villages have become common.

Meanwhile, serious divisions have arisen among Left Communists. In May, 1967, share-croppers and landless laborers revolted in the mountainous district of Naxalbari in West Bengal near the Sikkim and Chinese borders. Landlords refused to give up lands as they were required to do under the land reform laws, and sent armed bands against cultivators who tried to occupy the lands. Many of the cultivators were Santal tribes people, who fought back with bows and arrows. Workers on nearby tea plantations struck in sympathy. The resistance was led by local Left Communists. One policeman and ten peasants died. The Left Communist Minister of Land and Land Revenue tried to effect a compromise but was foiled by continuing battles between police and peasants. The revolt affected 42,000 people in



70 villages, over an area of 80 square miles. The United Front government condemned it as adventurist and the Left Communist Party expelled the rebels. The police subdued the peasants, but a revolutionary framework has been maintained. The United Front government was itself ousted by the Center in November, 1967.

The rebel philosophy has since triumphed in the Left Communist Party plenum in Delhi, and spread to a number of Left Communist village and district committees in Andhra, Bengal, Orissa, Bihar, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Mysore, Madras, and Kerala. Revolutionary coordinating committees have been formed in some of these states. Left rebels are aiding peasant resistance movements in Andhra and Bihar, and give ideological support to the independence wars of the Naga and Mizo tribes on the Burma border. Numerous revolutionary Marxists have seceded from the Left Communist Party; others, including four prominent Andhra leaders, have recently (June, 1968) been expelled.

The rebel approach includes: (1) peasant-based guerrilla warfare as the main path to revolution in India, with the assistance of the urban working class; (2) rejection of parliamentary participation as revisionist; and (3) an analysis of Indian society which sees the Congress government as the captive of American imperialism and India as already a neo-colonial state. This contrasts with the orthodox Left Communist view of India as under the class rule of the landlords and the bourgeoisie, led by the big bourgeoisie which, so far, is only "increasingly collaborating" with imperialism. The rebels' foreign and domestic policies are consciously derived from Mao Tse-tung. They reject the official Left Communist Party statement of August, 1967, which criticized Chinese condemnation of Indian Communist revisionism.<sup>3</sup>

It seems probable to me that much of the rebel Left Communist analysis will appeal to poor peasants and landless laborers in Kerala and Tanjore. In 1964 I found that support for the Left Communists had become virtually universal among landless laborers in Kerala and had increased among poor and middle peasants. This resulted from recent deterioration of food

supplies and real wages and from the Communists' record of 1957-1959. On the other hand, there was a growing impatience in these rural classes and a wish to return to the militant actions of the late 1930's and 1940's. The same was true of Tanjore in 1951-1953, where I found that thousands of Untouchable landless laborers—about a third of the population—saw the revolts of 1948 as their high point and wished the Communists to organize them for further militant struggles. My field notes from both areas abound in statements by poor peasants and landless laborers that nothing will solve their problems except armed revolt against the landlords and sharing of the land among its cultivators. On British plantations, workers insisted that struggles for improved wages and working conditions were temporary. Eventually, they held, a Communist government must expropriate the planters and either divide the land among the plantation workers or run it cooperatively for their benefit. In 1964, many Communist Party members shared these views. Some complained about what one Left Communist called "this confusing, treacherous period of bourgeois democracy." Many admitted uneasiness over opportunistic electoral alliances and thought that eventually the Left Communists would be forced by repression to abandon the constitutional road and arm and organize the peasants. With this background, I was not surprised to read (in January, 1968) that a majority in four out of nine district committees in Kerala favor the rebel path.<sup>4</sup> The January, 1968, Party-plenums re-endorsed E. M. Sankaran Nambudiripad's Left Communist-led United Front government, but this unity is precarious. The all-India Left Communist Peasant Union President, A. K. Gopalan of North Kerala, has called for intensive organizing among the peasants, recruitment of peasant and worker volunteer forces, and psychological preparation of the peasants for a prolonged struggle against the landlords and the imperialists. With Indonesia as an object lesson, these measures may not be premature.

Having outlined events, let us attempt some conclusions.

First, there is plenty of potential and actual revolt among Indian peasants. The celebrated fatalism and resignation to the caste system are, in my experience, characteristics of the high-



caste landlords and their retainers, not of the vast masses of poor peasants and landless laborers in modern times.

Second, when the Communists have coordinated the peasants without constricting them, peasants have followed 19th-century patterns by overthrowing the landlords, seizing the land, forming village committees, and removing or neutralizing local officials. The difference has been that the Communists have occasionally been able to link these revolts over wider areas and to infuse them with a revolutionary ideology and a new conception of the state.

Over the past 17 years, the Communists' pursuit of the parliamentary path has allowed them to attract more supporters in several states, notably Bengal and Kerala. It has, however, impeded the organization of peasants and workers for militant action. Canvassing for elections takes the village Communist away from day-to-day work among the poor. It causes even village Communists, let alone national leaders, to focus on budgetary problems, short-term reforms, and the arithmetic of seats and votes. As a result they neglect socialist education and the deeper ethical and political problems of class struggle. The policy of unity-from-above through electoral adjustments and alliances with non-revolutionary social democratic parties or non-socialist ethnic parties damages the potential for class unity, with clear ideological direction, from below. It makes peasants wonder about the sincerity of Communist analyses of the class struggle, and suspicious that the Communists, after all, are interested less in revolution than in power. When Communists have attained power at the state level their efforts to redistribute benefits have brought them the gratitude of the poor. But these efforts are too meager to make a substantial difference. Within the present constitution, Communist state governments cannot nationalize plantations, seize the estates of big landlords without compensation, or plan agricultural or industrial production. This means that they can compensate the propertyless only at the expense of the rich and middle peasants and the petty bourgeoisie, without increasing production. With the continuing stagnation of the Indian economy and the hopeless inability of many states to feed their people adequately, parliamentarism seems doomed

to failure, and the rebel Communists' path the only hopeful alternative.

In many villages, peasants have ready-made bases for organization in their caste assemblies. These are groups of heads of households within one village, each confined to a single caste of related families, which have traditionally met to settle internal disputes. Traditionally, the different castes of Hindu peasants tended to hold different kinds of land-tenures deriving from the pre-British period, which kept their interests mutually opposed. Landlords came mainly from the highest castes, rich and middle peasants from upper-ranking peasant castes, poor peasants from lower, "backward" castes, and landless laborers from the lowest, highly segregated castes of "Untouchables" who were formerly serfs or slaves. Muslims and Christians preserved caste divisions similar to those of the Hindus. Increasingly in this century, however, the majority of peasants have sunk to the level of poor peasants or landless laborers. Thus, already during the late 1940's, the Communists were in some regions able to coordinate the caste assemblies of middle and low ranking castes in groups of villages to form unions for strikes and other militant actions. Similarly, on foreign-owned export-crop plantations, workers of the same street or barracks, in spite of religious and caste diversity, form assemblies for internal self-organization which can be used as bases for union organizing and militant resistance.

Traditionally, however, Communist Party members have tended to come from upper and middle castes and from the classes of small landlords, rich or middle peasants, and petty bourgeoisie, not from the lowest castes or from poor peasants or landless laborers. Some Communists hail from old landed families forced to the wall by modern capitalist farmers and merchants. Some, especially Brahmans, are literati who eagerly sought modern scientific education against the opposition of orthodox parents. Others—middle peasants, village merchants, or schoolteachers—saw no hope of advancement under the existing order with its backward-looking beliefs, elaborate caste ranking, and subservience to the wealthy who prospered from imperial rule. In the 1930's and 1940's, Communists in the countryside were best able to mobilize middle peasants as their



closest followers, and have hitherto relied on the local leadership of this class. This, too, was natural: middle peasants were literate and knew about the wider society. They enjoyed greater autonomy than the poorest share-croppers and landless laborers, but experienced uncertainty and new kinds of exploitation in the market economy. From about 1947, as I have noted, the Communists did draw landless laborers into their struggles, but I would argue that they have never placed enough reliance on the potential leadership of poor peasants and landless laborers for fear of alienating the rich and middle peasants. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that the Communists (since 1964, the Left Communists) have drawn their greatest electoral support from areas where landless laborers predominate (Bengal, Kerala, Andhra, and Tanjore). In Tanjore and Kerala it is, to my knowledge, the lowest castes of landless laborers who, once aroused, most completely and consistently support the Communists.

Meanwhile the proportion of landless laborers and casual workers is rapidly increasing. Population expansion, slow industrialization, and the indirect effects of modern land reform laws combine to enhance this trend. In Kerala landless farm laborers and their families increased from 12.5 percent of the population in 1931 to 21.6 percent in 1951. The figure is much higher today, even excluding the hundreds of thousands of workers on foreign export-crop plantations. In Malabar, the proportion of landless farm workers to the total agriculturally dependent population increased from 38 percent in 1931 to 44 percent in 1951 and 47 percent in 1961. In one North Malabar village I found that the percentage of landlords and rich peasants in the total village population had dropped from 4.3 percent in 1948 to 2.6 percent in 1964. (One high-caste joint family had increased its ownership of village lands from 31.5 percent of the total in 1948 to 44.6 percent in 1964; the total estate of this family is now about 30 square miles.) The proportion of middle peasants, plus persons of middle-peasant rank who retained a little land and ran some other occupation, had fallen from 23.6 percent in 1948 to 9.2 percent in 1964. Poor peasants, who own or lease one garden but are obliged to hire themselves out for half of each day when they can,

formed 36.7 percent of the villagers in 1964, as against 41.7 percent in 1948. At the bottom, by contrast, completely landless farm workers, casual laborers, and unemployed had increased from 29.3 percent in 1948 to 51.5 percent in 1964.

This startling increase of landless laborers has been noted by both rebel and orthodox Left Communists and may force changes in Communist policies. In a speech in February, 1968, to the all-India Left Communist Peasant Association, the President, A. K. Gopalan, stated that agricultural laborers now form 25 to 40 percent of the population in most states of India. Gopalan's conclusion seems warranted: "We have to make them [the landless laborers] the hub of our activity. Reluctance to take up their specific demands, fearing that this will drive the rich and middle peasant away from us, will have to be given up."<sup>5</sup> To be effective, however, this course will require Communists to turn their attention from the cities to the countryside, from electioneering to grass-roots organization, and from the literate and relatively mobile middle peasant to the often illiterate landless laborer and the specifics of his village situation.

In my view, the theories of the Left Communists are not presently conducive to a revolutionary perspective. Although they have broken from the Right Communists in order to fight the Congress Party, the Left Communists still see the Indian economy as a combination of imperial, feudal, and national capitalist elements. This approach, deriving from the Stalinist period, apparently sees each separate nation as necessarily evolving from feudalism (with or without imperial domination) through independent national capitalism to socialism. In this approach the "imperial" sector is seen to be composed of foreign companies and their Indian comprador associates; the "feudal" sector, of rent-collecting landlords and their tenants; and the "national capitalist" sector, of Indian industrial firms and those landlords and rich peasants who farm with hired labor. The immediate goal is seen as the expropriation of the foreign companies and the Indian monopolies, the removal of land from the big landlords and former princes, and the bringing into existence of a democracy of small peasant proprietors and small and medium industrialists.<sup>6</sup> Such a society would be governed by



a party which represented the interests of the industrial workers and poor peasants and which would develop an increasingly broad state sector in heavy industry and trade.

I would argue, as A. G. Frank does for Latin America,<sup>7</sup> that such a dual (or triple) economy thesis is incorrect whether presented by Communist or liberal theorists.<sup>8</sup> There is no network of feudal relations in Indian agriculture, nor has there been since the British established private landownership within the framework of an international market economy during the 19th century. India is a country of capitalist relations and must be seen as part of the exploited, underdeveloped portion of world capitalist imperialism, locked through foreign investments and trade into expropriative relations with Britain, the United States, and other industrial capitalist nations. In spite of the sporadic retention of certain "feudal"-seeming customs such as debt-labor or special levies, modern tenant relations in the countryside are just as capitalist as wage-labor relations, for both place the cultivator at the mercy of forces operating in the interconnected markets for land, labor, and commodities. Further, although a class of Indian industrialists developed between the two World Wars, I am doubtful whether there is any truly independent national bourgeoisie in India today. It seems to me that American technological dominance, and the increasing dependence of India on United States private capital and government "aid," preclude such a development.

The most hopeful way forward for India is not therefore a "national democratic revolution" but a movement straight to socialism, a revolutionary movement that would root itself in the countryside where the bulk of India's wage earners and poor tenants—the main proletariat of the world economy—are to be found. Such a movement would base itself firmly on these rural classes, on urban workers in hand-mills, semi-processing industries, services and transport, and on the millions of unemployed. The social force and numerical strength of such a movement would be so great that it could afford to let the rich and middle peasants, the petty bourgeoisie, and the small industrialists relate themselves to it at will, without being obliged to make weakening concessions to their interests.

The rebel Left Communists, under Chinese influence, seem to be moving in this direction. The rebels continue to base their analysis on a trichotomy of imperial, feudal, and capitalist elements; but they stress the neo-colonial character of India's economy, assign the big Indian industrialists (as well as the big merchants) to the "imperial" sector as comprador capitalists, stress the revolutionary potential of landless labor, oppose parliamentarism, and argue for armed struggles moving inwards to the cities from rural bases. Their approach therefore seems the most hopeful, provided they can avoid too mechanical a dependence on Chinese experience, and get on with the work of organizing and liberating the Indian countryside.

## NOTES

1. There is a considerable literature for both regions. Useful books on Kerala are E.M.S. Namboodiripad: *Kerala Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*, National Book Agency Private, Ltd., Calcutta 12, 1967; A. K. Gopalan: *Kerala, Past and Present*, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1959; and A. S. Menon: *Kerala District Gazetteers*, Government Press, Trivandrum, 1962. For Tanjore see D. Sivertsen: *When Caste Barriers Fall*, George Allen and Unwin, 1963; A. Béteille: *Caste, Class and Power*, University of California, 1965; and J. F. Muehl: *Interview with India*, John Day Company, New York, 1950.

2. "Struggle for People's Democracy and Socialism," *Communist II*, June-July, 1949, p. 71.

3. For the rebel approach see *Liberation*, a monthly journal edited by Sushital Ray Chaudhuri, 60A, Keshab Chandra Sen Street, Calcutta 9, and for the official Left Communist approach, *People's Democracy*, the weekly organ of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), 33, Alimuddim Street, Calcutta 16.

4. *Link, New Delhi*, January 14, 1968, p. 13.

5. *People's Democracy*, Vol. IV, No. 6, February 11, 1968, p. 5.

6. E.M.S. Namboodiripad, *India Under Congress Rule*, National Book Agency, Calcutta, 1967, pp. 82-83: "The edge of this program is directed against monopoly capitalists . . . and big landlords. . . . The planned industrial development of the country will give vast opportunities to the non-monopoly industrialists to develop themselves. . . . This is not a program of building socialism straightaway. It is a program of full and radical democracy, complete elimination of all forms of pre-capitalist and monopoly capitalist institutions."



7. A. G. Frank, "The Myth of Feudalism in Brazilian Agriculture," *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America: Historical Studies of Chile and Brazil*, Monthly Review Press, 1967.

8. Hamza Alavi uses a similar trichotomy in his interesting article, "Peasants and Revolution," *The Socialist Register*, edited by Ralph Miliband and John Saville, Monthly Review Press, 1965, in which he analyzes the Bengal and Telangana movements of 1946-48. Alavi also argues for a strategic role for the middle peasant. I am unable to accept these parts of his analysis, at least for Tanjore and Kerala, where middle peasants are disappearing as a significant social category and where it is impossible to separate empirically the "landlord-tenant" and the "rich peasant-hired laborer" sectors of the economy, or to separate either from relationships in which the middle peasant is involved.

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