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# The Role of the Congress Socialist Party in the Transfer of Power-1937-47 A Study

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The Congress Socialist Party was formed in 1934 through the culmination of a series of events between the period 1931-34[1]. It came into being as a result of the feelings of grave resentment among such Congress Socialists[2] and other radicals who were impatient of the slow moving Gandhian tacts and programme of the Indian National Congress. The failure of the Civil Disobedience Movements of 1930 and 1932, coupled with the failure of the two Round Table Conference, had created an atmosphere of dejection and depression of dejection and depression through the country and, particularly among the younger group of Congressmen[3]. These leftist congressmen, who had formed the Congress Socialist Party within the Indian National Congress, felt the need for giving a new orientation to the nationalist movement alongwith a redefinition of its objectives and revision of its methods[4]. They set before them a four-fold task for the success of the national movement leading to the ultimate transfer of power in Indian hands.

The first of these tasks was to help in building a powerful national front against the British Imperialists; the second was to link the programme of the Congress with the economic struggle of the exploited classes of people. The third was to check all drifts towards constitutionalism which, in their estimation, was weakening the national liberation movement, while the fourth was to redefine Swaraj in terms of full sovereign power in Indian hands[5].

With regard to the Congress Socialist Party's role within the Indian National Congress, the Party's thesis, adopted at Meerut, had advocated the theory of an 'alternative left-leadership of the Indian National Congress so as to develop the national movement into a powerful anti-imperialist movement which could overthrow the British within the shortest possible time[6]. The CSP leaders were fully convinced that the Imperialists would not leave their vast colony on their own unless they were forced to do so[6A]. Hence, they were critical of the Congress involvement in the constitutional activities and parliamentary parleys, which, according to them, were imperialist devices to hoodwink the national leadership and side-track the main goal of the national movement, the complete emancipation of the country[6B].

True to their conviction, the Socialists vehemently opposed the new constitutional Act of 1935 and the office acceptance under it. They were also against the country a participation in any imperialist war[7].

By 1942, the European war theatre had moved to India's door-step with the full of Singapore in February and Rangoon in March 1942) in Japanese hands. This promoted the then British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, to send in March 1942, Sir Stafford Cripps, a Cabinet Minister, with fresh proposals to settle the Indian Political deadlock. The Cripps Mission soon proved to be disappointing to the Congress and the CSP bitterly opposed it[8]. The Cripps Mission, however, further stimulated the Muslim League. Gandhiji is reported to have remarked on the Cripps proposals; 'why accept a post-dated cheque on a bank that is obviously falling'[9].

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The failure of the Cripps Mission further augmented the Congress disgust and distrust towards the British, who now felt fully convinced that the British Government had no intention to grant independence to India. The CSP ever-since its birth, had been harping on the thesis that the imperialists would not leave India unless they were compelled to do so. The Party had also been stressing on the need for direct, mass militant action programmes for ending the Imperialist hold on India. In fact, the Congress Socialist Party at the very first Conference held in Bombay in 1934 had called for "active opposition to all imperialist wars and the utilization of such other crises for the intensification of the national struggle"[10]. The socialists firmly held that British would not .relinquish their power as a reward for Indian Co-operationin the war[11]. They regarded Britain's war against Germany as an imperialist war and British war-effort through every conceivable method including defiance of the ordinances and Defence of India Act and clamored for the organization of peasant agitations, general strike etc.[12].

However, the party was not prepared to force the issue and waited till August 8, 1942, when the Congress passed the "Quit India" resolution at its Bombay AICC season. Gandhiji declared, " I have pledged the Congress and the Congress will do or die"[13]. In arriving at such a hold decision, undoubtedly the Congress High Command had been largely influenced by the CSP and other left-wing parties. On August 9, 1942, Mahatma Gandhi and other top Congress leaders were put behind bars under the Defence of India Rules[14]. Thus eight years after CSP's birth, an opportunity came which placed the party at the helm of the national struggle. It gave the CSP a chance to prove the effectiveness of its theory of direction militant struggle against the British. It was both a challenge and an opportunity for the CSP leadership which had all along been condemning the Gandhian technique of non-violence non-co-operation as the tactics of national struggle[15]. Even the passing of the 'Quit India' Resolution by the Indian National Congress during the difficult war times was a sort of compromise with the tactics and programmes of the Congress Socialist Party. Thus, by force of circumstances, the CSP was called upon the perform the historic task of leading the August Movement. On November 9, 1942 Jayaprakash Narayan who had been in jail since 1940, managed to escape from Hazaribagh Central prison, and he, along with other Socialists leaders –Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia, Mr. Achyut Patvardhan, took up the task of organization and directing the 'Quit India' movement[16]. For this purpose, they set up a Central Directorate in Bombay and a parallel guerilla organization known as Azad Dasta, with its branches all over India, for carrying sabotage operations and other violent activities[17].

Jayaprakash Narayan organized and led the movement in Bihar, Bengal and Nepal, Mrs. Aruna Asaf Ali in other parts of northern India and Achyut Patwardhan in Bombay[18]. By the heroic part played by the socialists and other revolutionaries, the 'Quit India' movement soon spread thick and fast throughout the country. A secret radio station was set up at Bombay which was operated by Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia. British authorities were challenged at several places. Parallel Governments were met up at Satara in Bombay Presidency, Midnapore in Bengal, Ballia in U.P., and many other places[19]. The success of the movement soon brought a shiver of disquietude in the bosom of the Imperialist Government which tried to crush it by all possible means and regarding the CSP as its worst enemy[20].

Jayaprakash Narayan, the chief architect of the 'August Movement', saw in it the possibility of a complete overthrow of British power. His two secret letters entitled: "To all Fighters of Freedom" clearly indicated the direction which he wanted the movement to take[21]. He was averse to any talk of compromise either with the Britain or with the Muslim League[22]. "Pay the oppression in his own coin", was the dictum of his movement. Jayaprakash Narayan had categorically told all the fighters for freedom.

"We have declared ourselves independent and also named Britain as an aggressive power. We are, therefore, justified within the terms of the Bombay resolution itself, to fight with arms"[23].

The 'Quit India' movement at least, for a time, swayed and shock the British Government, while, it gave the national movement a now thrill of life, hope and activity. The movement clearly demonstrated before the national leadership the futility of clinging to the backneyed tactics of non-violence struggle and called upon them to keep pace with the time-spirit. Indeed, the credit for it goes to the CSP and its leadership. The Party, by the glorious and hernia role, became the most prominent in the country. Even during the years of its banishment, when it was outlawed by the Government[23] the CSP remained very popular and its leader, Jayaprakash Narayn, almost a legendary figure. Undoubtedly, by its role I the 'quit

India' Movement the CSP had left an indelible mark in the annals of national struggle for freedom.

Meanwhile, outside India, the world pressure had been mounting on such a diehard conservative as Churchill to take steps for bringing about a solution of the Indian dead-look. In 1944, he was compelled to order the release of Mahatma Gandhi[24] and by the middle of June 1915, Lord Wavell, the Viceroy, released all the members of the Congress Working Committee. The Viceroy called a conference of Indian political leaders at Simla for ending therein the Indian political impasse. The Simla Conference proved a total failure as it could not arrive it a workable solution[25]. In fact, it could satisfy none. However, the outcome of the Conference further confirmed the suspicious of Nehru and CST leaders of the intentions of the British Government as Lord Wavell had acted as a total partisan of the Muslim League[26].

In August 1945, World War II came to an end and the British Government (even when the Labour Government was in power under Article) decided for 'nothing doing' till the elections were over in early 1946[27]. In the meantime, the trial of I.N.A. leaders and mutiny which broke out in the Indian Navy created a lot of national enthusiasm within the country. In this the Socialists and other left-wingers played an important role by spreading anti-British feelings in the country[27A]. All this further compelled the British Government to announce, in February 1946, that a cabinet Mission consisting of three Cabinet Ministers would proceed to India in order to negotiate with the leaders of Indian opinion, in association with the Viceroy, and for the framing of a constitution for India[28]. Great hopes were roused in the Congress circles when the British Prime Minister, Attlee, assured the Congress leaders that "a minority this time, shall not be allowed to obstruct the advance of majority towards freedom"[29].

……..:" The Cabinet Mission, comprising or Sir Stafford Cripps, Lord Pathick Lawrence and A.V. Alexander arrived in India on March 24, 1946[30]. The Congress socialist Party at that time was still suffering from illegally and it front-ranking leaders like Jayaprakash Narayan, Ram Manohar Lohia, et., were till behind bars. Mrs. Aruna Asaf Ali was the only CSP leader who had been openly working among the people. Though bitterly opposed to the policy of constitutionalism, the CSP decided not to put obstacles in the Cabinet Mission's negotiations with the Congress leaders[31]. On May 5, a Tripartite conference between the leaders of Indian National Congress, the Muslim League and the Cabinet Mission, along with the Viceroy, bean at Simla. The Conference came to an end on May 12, 1946, followed by the announcement by the Secretary of State for India on May 16 of the proposed plan to resolve the Indian political dead-lock. It contained proposals for the future constitution of India and also envisaged the setting up of an Interim Government[32].

These proposals were welcomed by M.A. Jinnah on behalf of the Muslim League as they 'concealed the substance of Pakistan' n the form of compulsory grouping of provinces. The CSP rejected the Cabinet Mission proposals as quite inadequate for granting complete independence to the country. The Party considered them to be a British device to perpetuate communal division of India[33]. The Congress also expressed its resentment, but was not prepared to follow the CSP's hard line of outright rejection of the proposals. On May 20, 1946 Jayaprakash Narayan, the General Secretary of the CSP expression his party's reaction to the proposals in the course of a public meeting at Bombay, in the following words:

> "A bitter struggle is the ahead, the interim Government contemplated under the Cabinet Mission proposals should make a declaration or independence for India, the Viceroy should no more have a voice in the affairs of the country and the interim, Government should demand an immediate withdrawal of the British troops from India"[34].

He also met the members of the British Cabinet Mission, and apprised them of his Party's view-point on the matter. The stand of J.P. was fully ratified by the CSP when a joint statement was issued by Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia, J.P., Achyut Patwardhan and Mrs. Aruna Asaf Ali from Bombay on June 18, 1946, for further clarifying the Party's stand *vis-à-vis* the Cabinet proposals. The Socialists were against the bolding of a Constituent Assembly prior to the departure of British troops. They held that such an Assembly would not have full sovereign power. With this conviction, the Socialists decided to boycott the elections for the Constituent Assembly. The Socialists further demanded that the powers exercised by the Viceroy, both as the Governor General and as the Crown Representative, must and within the interim period itself[35].

Attempts were made by the Congress Hig Command to win over the Socialists. Jawaharlal Nehru, as the Congress President, offered Jayaprakash Narayan a seat

in the Congress Working Committee[36]. But it did not make any impact on the CSP stuck to its ground firmly[37]. In the AICC meeting held at Bombay on July 6, 1946, the CSP opposed the officials Congress Resolution which called for the acceptance of the Constituent Assembly. On behalf of CSP, J.P. argued that the Constituent Assembly proposed by the Cabinet Mission could never bring complete freedom for the people of India. He held that the Cabinet Mission had come only to exploit the differences that existed between the Congress and the Muslim league. In his opinion the Muslim League was the creation of the British policy 'divide and rule'. J.P. advised his party-man (Congressmen) to work among the muslims instead of negotiating with the League, as the re-partymen to utilize the new forces that had been generated as a result of the 'Quit India' Movement, to drive the Imperialists out of India[38]. He wondered how the C.W.C. had accepted such a defective proposal and requested the AICC not to accept it[39].

However, in the midst of vehement opposition of the Socialists and other left-wing parties, the All India Congress Committee endorsed the decision of the Congress Working committee[40]. Here, it is interesting to note that, when in the AICC meeting the socialists amendment was ruled out of order by Nehru as Congress President and the original resolution seeking the Congress participation both in the Constituent Assembly and the Interim Government was put to vote, the CSP decided to abstain from voting[41]. Thus despite its disapproval of the entire scheme of the Cabinet Mission, the CSP leadership was not prepared to go to the length of discrediting their parent organization and, it was here that it differed with other left-wing parties. Jayaparkash Naryan described his party's stand as a policy of positive neutrality. Justifying the stand taken by the party, J.P. held that, if they had voted against the resolution, it would have struck a severe blow to the Congress prestige as the Party had already joined the Interim Government. Conversely, the Socialist vote for the resolution would have meant the party's support for the forces that stood for communalism and constitutionalism[42]. Hence, they decided to remain neutral. Thus, whenever their party's stand came on the verge of splitting the Congress or seriously discrediting it, the CSP decided to adopt a policy which can be termed as a policy of splendid neutrality; that which can be termed as a policy of splendid neutrality; that is, allowing the Congress to have its way without seriously impairing the party's (CSP's) own principles, tactics and programme.

The first national Interim Government led by Jawaharlal Nehru was formed in August 1946. At first, the leaders of Muslim League refused to join it. Later, when they did join it, they put all sorts of obstacles in the successful working of the Government[43] in order to prove to the British Government that any practical cooperation and working between the Congress and the League was not possible. Hence, the need for the partitioning of the country and the creation of a separate muslim state of Pakistan. In consonance with the League's strategy, the representatives of the Muslim League withdrew from the Interim Government of Nehru as well as from the Constituent Assembly. The League's obstructing policy soon had the desired result when on June 3, 1947, the British Government announced the Mountbatten Plan which provided for the Transfer of Power in Indian hands and for the vivisection of the country[44].

On behalf of his Party, J.P. expressed deep shock at the attitude of the Muslim League and accused it for stabbing at the back. He did not spare the Congress leaders either and charged them for their compromising policy. According to him, the Congress, by sacrificing the revolutionary goals of the national struggle, was falling step by step into the trap of Imperialist-communalist combination. The Socialists were so much disappointed and disillusioned with the Congress attitude that, at their party's 5th Conference at Kanpur in March 1947, they decided to drop the prefix Congress' from the name of the Party which thenceforth became merely the 'Socialist Party[45].

In those momentous days events followed quickly. The failure of the Cabinet Mission and the wide-spread communal riots were followed by Prime Minister Attlee's announcement in Parliament on February 20, 1947. That the British authority of Idea would be withdrawn not later than June 1948. The climax was the Mountbatten Plan of June 3, 1947, by which the power was to be finally transferred to responsible Indian hands or August 15, 1947. The price was to be the partition of India.

As on many previous occasions, when the 'Mountbatten Plan' or June 3, 1947, already approved by the Congress Working Committee, came up before the AICC, the socialists, though tooth and nail, opposed to it, could not decide what course to adopt. The National Executive of their party, at its meeting held on June 10, 1947, had expressed in uncertain in terms, its disapproval and grief at the proposed division of the country[46], Yet,

the Socialists remained wavering in the AICC and finally decided to abstain from voting. It was thus that the 'Mountbatten Plan' got the approval of the AICC on June 14, 1947[47].

Regarding the CSP'S Policy of neutrality, it can be argued, and not without good reason that had the Socialists rallied around themselves all those elements who were against the division of the country, vigorously pursued their policy, and strengthened the hands of Mahatma Gandhi, the partition of India could have been averted. Mahatma Gandhi, who was against any vivisection of the country, was seemingly willing to support the socialists and other left wingers, had they been prepared to launch a nation-wide campaign against the acceptance of 'Mountbatten Plan'. He had clearly told the left-wing parties: "The Congress have signed on your behalf. You can disown them, but you should do so only if you can start a big revolution"[48]. However, he was not hopeful that the leftists would launch such an agitation. "I do not think you can do it"[49] he desperately remarked.

Thus, the policy of neutrality, which the CSP adopted twice during the last two years preceding the Independence, when there were critical moments to act, could hardly be said to be beyond reproach or criticism. As such, the Party could not be fully absolved from the share of responsibility for the partition of the country.

Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the CSP, in just over a decade of the existence, played a vital role in the struggle for national liberation. It was largely owing to the efforts made by the Party that the Congress base was broadened. It became a mass party of workers, peasants and other revolutionary classes, with a progressive ideology, which enabled it to win the 1937 general elections to the Provincial assemblies with a thumping majority. Gain, it was largely owing to the heroic part played by the leaders of the CSP that the congress had successfully launched the 'Quit India' Movement on a country-wide scale, and with such a militant tone and character that t rocked the Imperialist British power in India and compelled it to be think in terms of early transference of power to Indian hands.

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