

Bhowani Sen and Somnath Lahiri:

A Centennial Look Back

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Bhowani Sen (26.01.1909- 10.07.1972) and Somnath Lahiri (01.09.1909-19.10.1984), two veterans of the Communist movement in India, were born in the same year as was Ajay Ghosh, another veteran CPI leader (See *Frontier*, March 1-7, 2009, pp 10-12) and EMS Namboodiripad. Ghosh died before the actual split that gave birth to a truncated CPI and CPI (M), both claiming to inherit the tradition of the undivided party. Sen and Lahiri opted to remain in CPI, advocating the National Democratic Front line as opposed to that of the People's Democratic Front adopted by CPI(M).

Sen and Lahiri had been strong supporters of the Ranadive line during and after the Second Party Congress (1948). They led the Party in Bengal from the underground and promoted adventurism on all fronts. After the transfer of power on 15 August 1947, a section of the CPI leadership (but not the majority of members) felt that revolution was just round the corner, the freedom was fake (*ye azadi jhuta hai*), the newly appointed Congress Governments at the Centre and the states were but doormats of imperialism, serving the vested Anglo-American interest. The people of India, they thought, were ready to overthrow this regime. All that was needed was a violent push (*ek dhakka aur do*) and a mass insurrection could very easily do so, following an all-India strike of railways workers and establishment of "liberated areas" in the countryside. Such wishful thinking was regularly fostered through Party letters and Party journals.

The railways strike on 9.03.1949 ended in a fiasco. The rank-and-file was thoroughly frustrated; many grassroots workers and leaders dropped their membership. Bitter IPS (inner party struggle) ensued; Sen, Lahiri, Nripen Chakrabarty and other leaders of the so-called "Ranadive Period" fell from grace. They were placed in the dock by a new set of leaders, both at all-India and state levels. That is when Jyoti Basu and Pramode Dasgupta came to the forefront of the State Party and the old leadership was ordered to disperse.

After the debacle and subsequent reorganisation of the Party both Sen and Lahiri were considered *persona non grata*, undesirable elements in the Party. The new leadership decided to discontinue the Party wages of Sen and Lahiri and asked them to fend for themselves. There is a story current among old Party hands about an informal meeting that took place in the West Bengal Party headquarters in 1951 (or 1952). Muzaffar Ahmed, the doyen of the Party leaders, advised Bhowani Sen to take up the job of a schoolmaster and leave politics. Sen pondered for a while and finally said, "no, that can't be."

Then followed a period of extreme trial and tribulations. Both Sen and Lahiri were isolated in the Party. They had to rely on their personal friends and well-wishers for survival. Yet neither Sen nor Lahiri gave up their Party works. Sen was active in the Kisan Sabha and Lahiri worked in the trade union front, specially in the Calcutta Tramways Workers' Union. Their political line had by that time taken a diametrically opposite turn, almost 180°. Both now promoted

alliance with the Congress almost with a vengeance, perhaps to atone for the sectarian line they had so enthusiastically promoted before. After the Party split in 1964 Sen again became the Secretary of the West Bengal Unit in 1968 to work in the Central Secretariat of the Party in New Delhi.

Lahiri was the sole Communist member of the Constituent Assembly. He continued to remain so even after the split. In the 1967 elections, with CPI and CPI(M) fighting against each other, Lahiri came out victorious in a triangular contest. Subsequently he became a minister in the two United Front Governments (1967, 1969).

All this may not sound very exciting and may appear as a deplorable finale in the careers of two bright revolutionaries who had staked all their life and talents for a noble cause—emancipation of the toiling masses—espoused in their early youth. Sen was originally connected with a semi-secret national revolutionary outfit called *Anusilan Samiti* in his home district Khulna. After going through an ordeal in the trade union movement with some dubious people, he turned to studying Marxism-Leninism. When he was imprisoned in the Delhi Detention Camp in 1934 with his fellow national- revolutionaries, he finally parted ways with them. His old friends and acquaintances, still suspicious of any foreign ideology, once beat him black and blue inside the camp. But Sen remained firm in his convictions and continued to convert his jailmates, urging them to give up the line of individual killing and turn to mass movement instead. After the release of the detainees in 1938, a large chunk of them joined CPI (another chunk opted for the Indian National Congress or the Hindu Mahasabha).

Sen's role in bringing national revolutionaries to the Communist fold should never be forgotten. He was elected Secretary of the Bengal Party in 1943, when he was only thirtyfour. Throughout the "People's War" period (during the second world war) and after the transfer of Power, he remained the leading light of the Party, next only to Ranadive, and became the State Party Secretary, whether *de jure* or *de facto*, till 1951. (After the Second Party Congress Mohammed Ismail, a bonafide worker, was formally appointed Secretary but everyone knew that it was Rabi ("tech- name" of Sen) who was pulling the strings from behind.

Unlike Sen, Lahiri had no national revolutionary past. In fact, having been a nationalist since his adolescence, he had always been unsympathetic to the secret societies with their profound devotion to goddess Kali. He began his revolutionary career as an independent trade unionist and publicist. He brought out the first Bangla and Hindi journals, *Abhijan* and *Jangi Mazdur*, of and for the working class. He was one of the first communists who dared to set up a trade union at Jamshedpur in the face of severe opposition of both the Tatas and their stooge labour leaders. He was elected CPI councillor of the Calcutta Municipal Corporation along with Muhammad Ismail from the Labour Constituency in 1944.

Unlike Sen again, Lahiri was basically urban by temperament. He would feel at home more with the Jute mill workers rather than the peasants. Once he was made the General Secretary of the All India Party in 1935 and moved for a short while to Bombay. However, he left the post as soon other leaders were released from jail, and came back to his own city, Kolkata.

Sen's metamorphosis, from an ultra-left adventurist to a more than moderate pro-Congress leader of a CPI faction, was not unexpected. There was an extremist streak in him which compelled him to go the whole hog for any political line he sincerely embraced, whether 'left' or 'right'. (The same applies to Lahiri too). Yet Sen was a highly cultured person, quite well-conversant with economics (particularly land economy), literature and philosophy. In 1948, assuming the pseudonym Rabindra Gupta, he started a bangla periodical called *Marxbadi*. Two sensational articles, one on the nineteenth century Bengal Awakening and the other on ancient Indian Philosophy, provoked the Marxists of Bengal to an open controversy with the party intellectuals sharply divided into two warring camps. Sen never lost his interest in philosophy as is evident from his occasional articles and reviews published in *Parichay*, *Swadhinata*, *New Age* and other journals. In 1961, he revised his old stand of dismissing Rabindranath Tagore as an out- and-out reactionary and re- assessed Tagore's position in Bengal. His critique of Sri Aurobindo's philosophy, published in *New Age* (monthly) in 1955 (later published as a booklet in 1969) bears testimony to his acumen.

He wrote all this while he was engaged in bitter factional feuds inside the undivided party and even later when he was the secretary of the state unit and chairperson of the editorial board of *Kalantar*, the newly founded CPI daily.

Both Sen and Lahiri were accomplished polemicists, unsparing in sharpest possible criticism fraught with pungent irony and satire. At the same time they could be polished, suave and witty, as much adept in handling the stiletto as the club. Some of their writings collected in their respective selected works exhibit their mastery over both *Sadhu* (chaste) and *Chalit* (familiar) Bangla prose. In their English works too, both journalistic and otherwise, they proved themselves to be stylists of rare merit. Both had contributed to the growth of a new kind of left- wing journalism in Bengal and offered a model of pamphleteering.

Lahiri in particular was a stickler in matters of style. Subhas Mukhopadhyay has gratefully acknowledged how he learnt to write reportage in *Janayuddha* under the able guidance of Lahiri. Already an established poet, he had to submit to the ever- vigilant criticism of Lahiri grudgingly but obediently, writing the same piece over and over again till it got Lahiri's approval.

It is no wonder that Lahiri would not allow anything written in a slipshod manner, for he was a litterateur on his own merit. He has only one collection of short stories to his credit, *Kaliyuger Galpa*, which is worth in platinum. Day-to-day politics and fruitless politicking did not permit him to pursue his natural gift as a short-story writer. However, one feels that he had all the potential of a remarkable novelist in him.

Both Sen and Lahiri were renowned as speakers, be it in addressing group-meetings or mass meetings attended by thousands of workers and peasants. They used to enliven their speeches by biting sarcasm and parable-like tales. They could make people laugh and at the same time help them get into the crux of the matter in a persuasive way.

In these degenerate days when statesmen have been supplanted by clowns, oratory superseded by sheer demagoguery, party literature replaced by senseless babbling, and polemics by mud-slinging, such personalities as Sen and Lahiri appear to be specimens of a hoary past. There are thousands of cadres still alive

in every nook and corner of undivided Bengal who can fondly recall what they had learnt from them. They had nurtured two generations of activity in various fields. Even in their most dogmatic days they could judge who was fit for which kind of work and used to guide them accordingly. To take an example : finding a young man collecting *heto bai* (popular booklets in verse containing comments on current socio-political events, mostly sold in village markets) Sen urged him to continue the collection and give it priority over everything else.

Sen and Lahiri had no mentors to speak of, excepting Dr Bhupendra-nath Dutta from whom they had their early initiation in Marxism-Leninism. Otherwise both of them were self-taught, graduating, so to say, from their experience in political movements. The two in their turn fostered many poets and scholars, journalists and publicists. It was Sen who advised Debiprasad Chattopadhyay to devote himself to the study of Indian philosophy, thereby giving a radical turn to his life (as Chattopadhyaya himself admitted after Sen's demise). Lahiri, as has been already mentioned, taught Subhas Mukhopadhyay how to write prose for a Communist journal. Both of them could draw people, intellectuals and commoners alike, and always had a considerable personal following, cutting across ideological barriers. Thousands of such men and women walked in mourning in their funeral processions. Even though the political lines of Sen and Lahiri took an anticlimactic course in later days, it should be viewed more as a sad commentary on the ups and downs in the Communist movement in India, not as personal deficiency. □□□

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