

CONTINUING REVOLUTION

RED STAR OVER INDIA

[Impressions, discussions and documentation as the Wretched of the Earth are Rising]

JAN MYRDAL

"If an indigenous government took the place of the foreign government and kept all the vested interests intact, this would not even be the shadow of freedom..."

—Jawaharlal Nehru, "Whither India?", 1933

Officially independent India is engaged in a war against poverty. The phrase in itself is doubtful as it was coined by Lyndon B Johnson in 1964 to gain popular support among the underprivileged in the United States as he was stepping up his war of aggression in Vietnam. But the phrase still sounds good as when Simon Denyer reported for Reuters 2009 :

"India marks 60th anniversary urging war on poverty.

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, speaking on the 60th anniversary of independence from British rule, said the country needed to work harder to fight poverty, ignorance and disease despite fast economic growth.

India cannot become a nation with islands of high growth and vast areas untouched by development, where the benefits of growth accrue only to a few, he said on Wednesday from the ramparts of New Delhi's historic Red Fort behind a bullet-proof glass screen.

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Sharpshooters were stationed on nearby buildings as Singh spoke, while troops and armed police guarded roads and key buildings around the country on a day traditionally marked by violent attacks by separatist militants or Maoist rebels."

....

"The problem of malnutrition is a national shame," he added. "I appeal to the nation to resolve and work hard to eradicate malnutrition within five years."

Manmohan Singh was not the first prime minister of India talking about waging this war. Despite other political differences the ruling elite, prime ministers and editorial writers they all have said so ever since India became formally independent in 1947. In fact they have with different phrases been restating the resolution of the All India Congress Committee in Bombay, 1929 :

"In the opinion of this Committee, the great poverty and misery of the Indian People are due not only to foreign exploitation in India, but also to the economic structure of society, which the alien rulers support so that their exploitation may continue. In order therefore to remove this poverty and misery and to ameliorate the conditions of the Indian masses, it is essential to make revolutionary changes in the present economic and social structure of society and to remove the gross inequalities."

But despite this avalanche of good intentions from the ruling elite and despite the different official development schemes employing lakhs of Indian officials and despite the locust swarms of both more or less idealistic and purely profiteering Non-Governmental Organisation's settling on India and despite the new growth rates nothing very much has changed down there at the bottom of Indian society where the dalits and adivasis live in a poverty deeper than that of the so-called underprivileged in sub-Saharan Africa. In fact for very many of them the official war on poverty has been a war on the poor as they have been hounded from their forests and driven of the land in the name of progress.

The explanation for this is not that the elite politicians of India are exceptionally evil. Some of them have been, that everybody knows, but in general they have had good intentions. But, as has been pointed out in European culture by moralists and theologians from St Bernhard of Clairvaux onwards : *The road to Hell is paved with good intentions.*

Take Jawaharlal Nehru as an example. As he politically and intellectually was of the same generation as my parents and they too were influenced by Anglo-Saxon liberal and socialist thought and moved in similar international circles - anti-imperialist and anti-fascist - in the late nineteen-twenties and early nineteen-thirties, I had of course heard about him and read him ever since I was growing out of childhood.

Kali Ghosh in my early twenties when we became relatives then came to give me a deeper understanding of India. He said that as an Indian he had as a boy been deeply affected by Bankim Chandra Chatterji's *Ananda Math*.

—That was not a measly non-violent sermon. By reading it I began to see Krishna of the Bhagavat Gita in a new light. There are many paths that lead to social and political consciousness. For me as a young boy in the Bengal of those days this was the road that led to awakening!

Like many of his friends Kali as a student became a member of "Anushilan" to defend the unity of Bengal. Later on he worked both in the student organisation close to the terrorist organisation and was active in the Congress. In December 1928 the Indian National Congress met in Calcutta. Gandhi was against the independence resolution. Jawaharlal Nehru had promised to speak for it. Then just hours before he should hold his speech he suddenly refused. It had taken Kali and two other party activists who were active in Congress two hours to convince Subhas Chandra Bose that he had to stand up and speak out against Motilal and Jawaharlal. But Bose lost. Kali then began writing in "Swadhinata". Bhupendra Kumar Dutt and Aron Gupta wrote the leading articles and Kali shared the editorial work with Jotish Bhowmik.

In April 1930 the nationalists occupied the Chittagong armoury. That was the deepest British defeat since 1857. The British immediately began mass arrests. "Swadhinata" decided to publish the leading article "Bravo Chittagong". As the paper anyway was going to be suppressed it was better to go underground with an article advocating violent armed uprising.

Kali now also worked with sabotaging the Bengal telegraph lines. Motilal Nehru whom they had got to help finance the operation leaked, did not keep quiet; did not understand the need for absolute silence in a conspiracy. Some revolutionaries were arrested.

Though Monoranjan Gupta, Rashik Das and Kali managed to see to it that nearly all the Bengal telegraph lines were cut at the same time.

Together with Dr Narayan Roy Kali worked with bombs. The effects were good but the bombs were difficult to hide in the clothes.

He was not a communist then. Kali said as did as most of his terrorist friends at that time that the communists just talked about revolution when it was necessary to live revolution. But when the communists in the Meerut Conspiracy Case showed that they really were revolutionaries he began to change his opinion.

Kali and his co-workers now planned to liberate a quarter of central Calcutta and raise the flag of Independent India. The British would have to use air bombardment and artillery. That would show the world that their Empire was built on sand. But the 25th of August Ania Sen and Dinesh Mazumdar failed when they threw two bombs at the car of the chief of police in Calcutta. Ania Sen was caught and then killed as the Police used—and use—to do. Encountered we would say.

On August 31 1930 Kali was taken by agents of the Special Branch Intelligence Department in Calcutta. The police had rounded up 3,000 Bengal terrorists. But India was marked by semi-feudal ideas then as now. The real head of the Intelligence Bureau was a relative to Kali, a cousin. The cousin said :

—*You are a shame for the family.*

He then said that Kali would be in prison for seven years. Or at least five years. That would be shameful. To spare the family this shame Kali could accept being deported to England. In the spring of 1931 he was conducted to the ship that would take him to London.

In England Kali both became a communist—though I don't know if he like his wife became a real card-carrying Communist—and worked as a journalist with left wing Congress and later the new independent India government and as such more and more changed to become an admirer of Jawaharlal Nehru.

I myself found that Nehru was affable in a diffused way when we met at different functions in New Delhi in the nineteen-fifties. Then during the All-India Writers' Conference in Bhubaneswar my wife Gun Kessle and I had a long breakfast with him and the then vice-president of India, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan on January first 1959. In the beginning it was rather pleasant. I talked at length about Artur Lundkvist who in 1958 had been among those awarded "The Lenin Prize for Strengthening Peace among Peoples".

After travelling in India and meeting Indian writers in 1952 he presented Indian novels such as "*Kuli*" by Mulk Raj Anand and "*So Many Hungers*" by Bhabani Bhattacharya to a mass audience in Sweden.

Through novels like those the Swedish readers can get a better understanding of Indian realities, Nehru said.

Artur Lundkvist like Jawaharlal Nehru was part of my earliest life. He was a boy from a poor peasant background who had gone to Stockholm and outside all academic life had become a leading critic, poet, novelist and the organiser of the modernist movement

in art and literature. He was active in the same literary/political groups as my parents. Freudian, somewhat marxian and very modernistic. At home we had all his books. I had learnt how to read in his early vitalistic poems.

He wrote books on his travels in Africa, Latin America, China and India. Now they are getting dated, he wrote from a Freudian perspective and thus saw the sexual repression in India as important as the economic.

Though as a critic introducing new literature from the United States, Europe, Africa, Latin America and India he had for a couple of generations had a determining influence. Artur and I knew each other. We appeared together at different political and literary meetings. He at that time thought that I was promising as a writer.

At the conference in Bhuba-neshwar I had spoken of the need to do like him and work together with the trade unions to organise the spread of a literature making the world easier to grasp. A people's Literature was a literary and a political necessity. Artur Lundkvist had used his own position as a critic to get the rather stolid Swedish Social Democratic trade union establishment to finance the publication of writers such as Bhabani Bhattacharya in 65,000 to 70,000 copies.

Later on in Sweden we were rather close for some years. At the 4th of July in 1967 we appeared together as speakers in a large mass meeting in front of the United States Embassy in Stockholm. The ambassador and the crowd collected in the Embassy betrayed their Revolution. The people of South East Asia in armed struggle for their freedom against the invading armies from Washington defended even that revolution. Artur Lundkvist came with a strongly worded support for the public burning of the star spangled banner. It was effective as the United States government for psychological reasons reacted violently against it. Burn the rag! Whatever the police said and did.

Then our ways parted. Politically and culturally. He became vice president of the World Peace Council as I was condemned as a tiermondist. He also entered the Swedish Academy and began to handle the Nobel prizes. ("Helped the King to shake hands", as we said.) But we both had to write our very different texts in the same conservative Stockholm paper—I because the Social Democratic Aftonbladet had found me to be too critical of the Soviet Union and he because the liberal Dagens Nyheter found him reactionary. But when his hundredth anniversary was to be officially celebrated I came to the function to speak because he was a great figure and a great Swedish writer—but the new conservative colleagues from the Academy did not come. They now treat him as a dead dog.

I also thanked Dr Radhakrishnan. As representative of India in UNESCO 1953 he had defended my rights when the United States officially declared that as they "were investigating Jan Myrdal" they detained my mother—at that time director of the UNESCO Department of Social Sciences—as she came from Paris to the Idlewild airport.

That the United States declared that it was "investigating" me in Sweden was in itself strange. I did not live in the United States. I had not applied for a visa to the United States. According to the then valid Swedish criminal code participating in such an "investigation" for a foreign government against a citizen or resident of Sweden was a crime; carrying a sentence of two years in jail.

The “crime” that got the United States authorities in Sweden to employ agents for breaking the Swedish law and then in Idlewild to apply what the German nazis called “Sippenhaft”, “kin liability”, to my mother was that I worked for preparing the Third World Festival of Youth and Students 2-14 August 1953 in Bucharest.

(A younger generation should know that we then during the coldest year of the “Cold War” got more than 30,000 young people from 111 countries to take part. Our motto was: “No! our generation will not serve Death and Destruction!” This was a conscious struggle of solidarity against specifically the United States war against the Korean people and the French colonizers in Vietnam and Algeria.)

Then suddenly the atmosphere at the breakfast table changed. Nehru began talking to Dr Radhakrishnan about the Chinese. A Chinese delegate at the Afro-Asian Writers Conference in Tashkent who had been speaking about the importance of the ideological struggle against imperialism and colonialism and racism in literature had also mentioned the necessary struggle against casteism. The more Nehru dwelt on that the Chinese had talked about caste the more coldly furious he became.

‘These Chinese, they are always nagging at us! They are deliberately anti-Indian!’

It surprised me. Not that I really had believed in the political reality of the post-Bandung slogan “Hindi-Chini bhai-bhai” but this was the first time I heard about the then growing conflict at the highest level between India and China. Three months later came the Tibetan uprising and then the open border conflict.

Gun Kessle and I discussed why Nehru had reacted so violently to a discussion on the necessity of combating casteism. Caste and the horrors of caste discrimination in India was something we then living in India witnessed and reacted against daily. But there was nothing really strange about caste. The caste in India was not so exceptionally Indian. If you looked closely at the caste conflicts and analysed them you always landed in class. In fact that was how the intellectuals and communists we at that time met in India discussed it.

When I at an evening late in the fifties mentioned how ethnicisms like anti-Semitism had been instrumen-talised as a tool by the Tsarist power in old Russia—divide and rule! —then Sarada Mitra, whom I had known and worked with since 1953 and who was very typical of the Indian Communist intellectuals of that time, first talked about how the communal killings had been organised in Calcutta 1947 and then began discussing the Marwari money lenders and the Deccan riots of 1875.

—The social history and role of the Marwaris in India and the Jews in eastern Europe were similar as was the way these conflicts were used.

Gun Kessle then pointed out that it was Nehru who had explained the real situation of the dalits in 1936 during his presidential address at the Lucknow session of the National Indian Congress that she just had read:

“The problem of untouchability and the Harijans again can be approached in different ways. For a socialist it presents no difficulty for under socialism there can be no such differentiation or victimization. Economically speaking the Harijans have constituted the landless proletariat and an economic solution removes the social barriers that custom and tradition have raised.”

We could discuss and explain them but the examples of caste conflict and caste oppression we saw around us in India in 1959 were as disgusting and destructive as those we could read about from 1936 when Nehru had talked about them. The difference was that the Nehru we met no longer seemed to see them as they really were in his India; it was as if he believed, or wanted to believe, that they in principle had been solved by some legal strokes of a pen.

India was now in a formal way politically independent but as Nehru himself had written in *"Whither India"* 1933 :

"If a government took the place of the foreign government and kept all the vested interests intact, this would not even be the shadow of freedom..."

He was right of course. History proves it. Could the dalits in today's formally independent India be called free? One needs only to look around in India. Freedom is for the privileged few, not for the majority of the Indian people. For them India is still unfree. This is not so strange, it is a question of class and class rule and is explained by the history of Indian independence.

How had India achieved her formal independence from Britain?

The whole history of the British rule in India had been a history of revolt and rebellion from the Indian people. From the side of the rulers it had been a tradition of fine words on the rule of law coupled with an extreme extra-legal ruthless and murderous repression. Jawaharlal Nehru knew it well. Among the books he had read as a prisoner in Ahmednagar was the subversive booklet *"India Ravaged"* published, by *"Free India"* in January 1943. It wanted to give:

"...an unvarnished objective picture of the frightfulness practiced by the British Government in India under the guise of crushing the uprising which followed the arrest of Indian leaders on the 9th of August 1942.

(...)

But suffice to say that there is no form of atrocity ascribed generally to 'other' civilized Governments which the British have not practiced by way of reprisals in India, whether in 1857 or 1919 or August-December 1942, and are not practicing currently. As against 70 lives lost on the Government side, the estimated number killed on the people's side either in course of encounters or wanton stray shooting at unwary or harmless individuals is 25,000."

But that reads as if it was a text issued 2010 by naxalites about the present government policies in India!

How come that a liberation movement which had such tremendous popular support and was politically led by people as intelligent and in many ways as integer as Jawaharlal Nehru ended up like this? That liberation movement has created a Republic of India where the government now more than sixty years after Independence prides itself of an economic growth of some eight percent for the few in a sea of poverty? An independent India where the government violently and with armed force defends policies that are keeping the majority of the people poor and for its own profit is pressing around a quarter of the population down in a utter poverty close to the level of cattle?

Jawaharlal Nehru himself had in reality explained this when he described the growth of the Congress in his Autobiography :

“Our national movement had originally begun because of the desire of our upper middle classes to find means of self-expression and self-growth, and behind it there was the political and economic urge. It spread to the lower middle classes and became a power in the land; and then it began to stir the rural masses who were finding it more and more difficult to keep up, as a whole even their miserable rock-bottom standard of living.”

Jawaharlal Nehru was in that way an exceptional figure as he early on was clear-sighted enough to see and describe the dichotomy of the class that was to inherit India from the British. The class that then would keep the reins of power in independent India until today. Intellectually he knew that he had been formed by his class and his upbringing. The study in England had formalized his ideas. But he was unable to jump over his own shadow :

‘My politics had been those of my class, the bourgeoisie. Indeed all vocal politics then (and to a great extent even now) were those of the middle classes, and Moderate and Extremist alike represented them and, in different keys, sought their betterment.’ □□□