

Communists and the Muslim League

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It is now almost accepted that the Communist Party of India [CPI (undivided)] blindly followed the Soviet line of anti-imperialism and the dictates of its counterpart in Britain (CPGB) and played a rather dubious role particularly in the 1940s. Now-a-days, most of the veteran Communists also admit that they made a historic blunder by opposing the Quit India Movement of 1942 (practically supporting the British), maligning Subhas Chandra Bose and his INA, lending support to the British war-efforts (thanks to the 'People's War' theory) and taking an almost pro-British stance during the great Bengal Famine of 1943. All these have been widely documented. It is also well-known that the CPI supported the Pakistan demand of the Muslim League (ML) in accordance with the Soviet concept of Nationality theory and, curiously enough, found an ally in the ML during 1945-47.

The redeeming feature of this book* under review is its focus on the CPI's relationship (hobnobbing, one may say) with the League in the run up to the horrible communal violence followed by partition. This chapter has also been touched on in several articles by the late Prof Amitabha Chandra. His works have unfortunately escaped the attention of the authors of this book. However, its strength lies in the facts culled from original, sometimes archival, sources. Soumya Basu did the spade-work while Sunanda Sanyal supervised the research and helped marshal the facts.

None of the authors is a historian by discipline. But the book deserves to attract the attention of scholars concerned with this crucial part of India's colonial history or a writer like the present reviewer who had written extensively on the communal riots of 1946 and partition some twenty years ago. Incidentally, some of the articles in English appeared in FRONTIER in 1991-92.

The authors have tried to maintain a more-or-less objective stance. There is no deliberate attempt to vilify the CPI or brand it as a rank "traitor" (as the Hindutva groups usually do). Bare facts have been presented in order and as Sunanda Sanyal said at the recent Calcutta Book Fair, it is for the readers 'to interpret those facts and draw conclusions'. Their attempt is indeed welcome.

The book naturally lays emphasis on the much-debated Adhikari thesis which supported the League's two-nation theory and thus 'buttressed' the demand for Pakistan. P C Joshi, the-then Secretary of the CPI 'even advised the Muslim Party workers to join the League' (PP 36, 62). Though the above thesis has already been widely criticised, the authors have spent a lot of space on this issue and the CPI's tacit alliance with the ML during this period. In the process, they have made some wrong observations.

The Rashid Ali Day (Feb, 1946)-wrongly described as Rashid Day-was a historic youth upsurge in Calcutta (Kolkata) in which the members of the Congress, Forward Bloc, RSP, CPI and the ML participated. One may question the sincerity of the League's sudden anti-imperialist fervour; but the programme was not at all 'League-sponsored' (p127). It is a rash and senseless statement to say that Jyoti Basu's speech on the eve of the ML's Direct Action 'ended up helping the League leadership in unleashing a reign of terror' (p130). Soumya Basu has done a commendable job but his too much reliance on the newspapers and police records has sometimes led him to a confused understanding.

According to the labour-leader Gopal Acharya, as recorded in this writer's book, the CPI's support to Direct Action was not *unanimous*. Similarly, it is wrong to say that the CPI wholeheartedly stood by the Basu-Hashim scheme of United Bengal (pp 165-67). What the Communists called for was: 'a United and Free Bengal within a Free India'. The League, as a party, also didn't support the said scheme. The authors should have consulted Amalendu Dey's book on this issue. Moreover, they should have noted that there was division within the ML itself. The Muslim business magnets virulently opposed the United Bengal move. Besides, there are some serious omissions. Along with P C Joshi, Somenath Lahiri and Ranen Sen also played a leading role in reconstructing the CPI in the 1930s. 'Mahila Atmaraksha Samity' has been described as only an 'ancillary' unit of the CPI. Mention should have been made of its exemplary role in relief work during the Bengal Famine.

Meticulously planned and well-researched, the book however offers no fresh insight. The epilogue is highly disappointing. It has failed to situate the role of the Communists in the present-day context. A careful reading of the book however may lead one to the impression that since the 1940s to this day, the history of the Communist Party in India is the history of blunders. And of late, the blunders have assumed criminal proportions. □□□

*THE SICKLE & THE CRESCENT; COMMUNISTS, MUSLIM LEAGUE AND INDIA'S PARTITION
by Sunanda Sanyal, Soumya Basu; *Frontpage*, 2011