

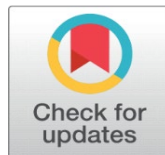
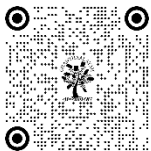
# THE BIRTH OF RED IDEALS: COMMUNISM TOOK ROOT IN INDIA

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## ABSTRACT

The formation of the Communist Party of India (CPI) in 1925 marked a pivotal moment in Indian politics, as it sought to align with the global Communist Movement while addressing local issues of class struggle. Key figures like M.N.Roy were instrumental in introducing Marxist ideology which resonated with a segment of the Indian society grappling with exploitation, suppression and oppression. The CPI's early activities focused on labour and peasant movements, aiming to mobilise the working class against colonial rule. These efforts were often met with repression, as the British authorities viewed the communists as a significant threat to their imperialistic reign. In post-independent India, the Communist Movement experienced both progression and fragmentation. Initially supportive of the Indian National Congress under Jawaharlal Nehru, the CPI was on the verge of facing ideological rifts, leading to a split in 1964 that gave birth to the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI-M). The CPI-M (CPI (M)) gained notable success in State politics, particularly in Kerala and West Bengal, where it implemented significant land reforms and social welfare policies. Despite the many challenges encountered, the Left Movement continues to advocate for workers' rights and social justice, emphasising its enduring relevance in contemporary Indian politics.

**Keywords:** Communist Movement, Indian Communism, CPI, CPI (M), Anti-Imperialism, Agrarian Reforms, Land Redistribution, Labour Movements, Labour Rights, Social Justice, Secularism, Electoral Politics, Naxalite Movement, etc



## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Communist Movement in India emerged during a period marked by colonial exploitation and economic distress in the country. It drew significant influence from the global socialist movement, exclusively following the 1917 Russian Revolution which had the potential for Marxist ideology to inspire revolutionary changes. These circumstances galvanised the Indian intellectuals and revolutionaries who began advocating for socialist principles as a means of achieving independence and social justice.

The dedicated efforts and endeavours of these revolutionaries was pivotal in shaping the early phases of Communism in India, which sought to address the socio-economic inequalities perpetuated by colonial rule and. The ideas disseminated by these early communists inspired many subsequent movements and parties in India, eventually promoting the vision of a socialistic society and contributing to a stunning exertion of leftist politics in the country.

## 1.1. FORMATION OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF INDIA (CPI)

The Communist Party of India (CPI) was formally established on December 26, 1925, at a clandestine meeting held in Kanpur. The founding of the CPI was influenced by several interconnected global and local movements. The Bolshevik Revolution in Russia (1917) had a profound impact on this movement, inspiring anti-colonial leaders and intellectuals worldwide, as well as in India, towards a drive to adopt Marxist ideologies. M.N.Roy, an Indian revolutionary who attended the Communist International Congress in Moscow in 1920, played a pioneering role in spreading communist ideas. Through his involvement with the Communist International (Comintern), Roy introduced a Marxist perspective to India's freedom struggle, laying the intellectual foundation for the CPI's formation.

At the time of its formation, the CPI aimed to address the exploitation under British colonial rule and also the deep-rooted social inequalities within the Indian society. The CPI's objective was not only to gain independence from the British rule but also to dismantle the feudal structures operating in India and create an egalitarian society. S.A.Dange, Muzaffar Ahmed and P.C.Joshi were the other important CPI activists who were deeply committed to the cause of workers' and peasants' rights. These leaders actively organised labour strikes and peasant uprisings to combat landlord exploitation, and in addition worked for the cause of India's independence. The CPI's vision combined national liberation with a revolutionary agenda to fight economic and social injustices affecting the working class.

The CPI had to face significant challenges in its early years. The then British Government in India closely monitored its activities, viewing the party as a threat to colonial stability. The party's clandestine operations and its alignment with the Comintern attracted intense scrutiny, leading to several arrests of key members of the CPI under the notorious Kanpur Conspiracy Case in 1924. Despite these setbacks, the CPI continued to organise strikes and protests, appealing particularly to the working-class population in urban centres and rural communities who were toiling under oppressive landholding practices. The party's underground activities were instrumental in spreading Marxist ideals in the country and establishing a support base that would later prove critical.

The formation of the CPI marked the beginning of a distinct political trajectory within India's Independence Movement, setting it apart from the Indian National Congress's more moderate and reform-oriented approach. The CPI's advocacy for labour rights, agrarian reform, and social justice established it as a powerful voice for the marginalised communities. Its commitment to a Marxist-Leninist framework provided a foundation for future communist movements in India, including the later formation of the CPI-M and Maoist movements. The CPI's influence remained significant, especially in States like Kerala and West Bengal, where it contributed to progressive social policies, land reforms and labour rights.

## 1.2. COMMUNISM IN THE PRE-INDEPENDENCE PERIOD IN INDIA

In the 1930s and 1940s, the Communist Party of India (CPI) strengthened its presence through extensive involvement in labour and peasant movements, challenging both colonial authorities and local landlords. These efforts brought CPI leaders into direct conflict with the British Government, which viewed the party's Marxist ideology and mobilisation efforts as a destabilizing force in India.

While the CPI was committed to the independence movement, its strategy and vision diverged from that of the Indian National Congress (INC), the main body leading the anti-colonial struggle. While the Congress represented the interests of the Indian bourgeoisie, rather than those of the working class, the CPI promoted a class-based revolution focused on dismantling economic hierarchies and addressing systemic inequalities. This ideological divergence created a rift between the CPI and INC, with the CPI aiming to transform society through a socialist model post-independence.

The CPI's pre-independence activities established it as a force advocating for the oppressed classes, aligning itself with global socialist movements. The CPI's organisation of labour strikes and peasant revolts laid the groundwork for post-independence social reforms, particularly in land distribution and workers' rights. These efforts also foreshadowed future communist movements that would gain influence in States like West Bengal and Kerala, where the CPI would continue to pursue social and economic justice in the decades that followed.

### **1.3. COLONIAL REPRESSION AND EARLY ORGANISATIONAL HURDLES**

The CPI's early activities were heavily restricted under British colonial rule; as communist ideologies were viewed as a threat to the British Empire's imperialistic ideals. As early as the 1920s, British authorities targeted CPI leaders, leading to frequent arrests, detentions and bans on literature, in an effort to curtail the party's ability to establish a strong organisational base. This repression created a culture of underground activity and secrecy within the CPI which was both strength as well as limitation, as it constrained the party's ability to build a robust and extensive network that could openly mobilise a mass following.

### **1.4. POST-INDEPENDENCE DEVELOPMENTS AND SPLITS IN INDIAN COMMUNISM**

After India gained independence in 1947, the Communist Party of India (CPI) initially supported the Congress-led government under Jawaharlal Nehru, who advocated for socialist economic reforms, related to industrialisation and centralised planning. The CPI believed that Nehru's policies aligned closely with socialist principles and hoped that the Congress Government would lead India towards a socialistic transformation. However, as India's foreign policy began to reflect an independent, non-aligned stance rather than a firm alignment with the socialist bloc, tensions grew between the CPI and the Congress. Furthermore, the Congress's focus on gradual, democratic reforms was at odds with the CPI's vision for a more immediate, revolutionary transformation, leading to mounting ideological differences.

By the early 1960s, global events further fuelled tension within the CPI. The Sino-Soviet split created a rift in international communist circles, dividing support between the Soviet Union and Maoist China. Within the CPI, members were similarly divided; one faction remained loyal to Soviet influence, advocating for a moderate, parliamentary approach, while another faction, influenced by Maoist ideas, supported a more radical, revolutionary strategy. This ideological conflict, combined with differing strategies for achieving socialism in India, eventually led to a split in 1964, resulting in the formation of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPI (M). The CPI (M), led by more radical leaders, took a harder stance on issues related to class struggle and rural insurgency, particularly inspired by China's agrarian revolutionary tactics.

The CPI and CPI (M) pursued different paths after the split. This division allowed each faction to focus on different aspects of socialist transformation, ultimately contributing to a nuanced approach to communism in India's democratic framework. While the CPI continued to engage with parliamentary democracy, participating in electoral politics and aligning with the Congress when strategic or practical, the CPI (M) sought to build its influence through a more grassroots, revolutionary approach, focusing on labour strikes, peasant uprisings, and the eventual creation of communist strongholds in States like West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura.

## **2. IDEOLOGICAL SPLITS AND STRATEGIC DIFFERENCES**

During the post-independence period, the CPI faced ideological fragmentation that was rooted in diverging interpretations of Marxist-Leninist doctrines and differences over political strategies. In 1964, a major split occurred within the CPI, leading to the formation of the Communist Party of India (Marxist - CPI (M)), which differed from the CPI on key issues, including its stance toward the Indian National Congress. While the CPI sought alliances with the Congress to counter the right wing forces, the CPI (M) adopted a more radical approach, creating two competing communist entities. This fragmentation significantly weakened the Communist Movement by dividing resources, cadres and ideological unity, leaving both factions less effective in advancing a consolidated agenda.

### **2.1. ELECTORAL POLITICS AND COMMUNIST SUCCESS IN INDIA**

Despite internal ideological differences, the Communist Movement achieved notable success within India's democratic framework, particularly at the State level. In 1957, Kerala made history by electing the world's first democratically chosen Communist Government under E.M.S.Namboodiripad, a leader from the CPI. The government embarked on transformative reforms, particularly in land redistribution and labour upliftment cause, which sought to address the State's socio-economic inequalities. However, these changes brought forth opposition from both local elite groups and the Central Government. In 1959, the Central Government dismissed the Kerala Legislative Assembly, citing law and order issues, which was widely regarded as politically motivated.

The CPI (M) achieved further success in West Bengal, where the Left Front, a coalition led by the CPI (M), won control in 1977 and governed the State continuously until 2011, making it one of the longest-serving elected Communist Governments worldwide. During its tenure, the Left Front implemented extensive land reforms, granting land rights to sharecroppers and promoting a system of decentralised governance through panchayats (village councils). These policies significantly improved rural living standards and strengthened the CPI (M)'s support base among the peasantry.

#### The Naxalite Movement and Maoist Insurgency in India

In the late 1960s, a radical communist faction emerged in India, leading to the formation of the Naxalite Movement, named after the village of Naxalbari in West Bengal where a peasant uprising took place in 1967. This revolt was driven by poor peasants demanding land rights and resisting local landlords. Under the leadership of Charu Majumdar and Kanu Sanyal, the Naxalite Movement sought to mobilise the rural poor in an armed struggle inspired by Maoist principles. Their goal was to overthrow the State and establish a "People's Government" through guerrilla warfare. The Naxalite Movement initially gained momentum across various rural areas, particularly among the marginalised tribal and lower caste communities.

Since its inception, the movement has transformed into a broader Maoist insurgency, often referred to as the "Red Corridor", spanning central and eastern India. The insurgency is centered on issues like land rights, displacement due to development projects and socio-economic marginalisation. Maoists or "Naxalites" remain a significant security concern for the Indian Government, with the conflict often resulting in violent encounters between insurgents and State forces. Over the decades, the Indian Government has launched multiple operations to contain the insurgency, while also attempting to address underlying issues through development initiatives and tribal welfare programmes.

The Naxalite-Maoist insurgency continues to reflect deep-rooted structural inequalities in rural India. The movement, though smaller than in its peak years, still gathers support in certain tribal and economically disadvantaged areas, highlighting unresolved grievances related to land rights, economic marginalisation and regional underdevelopment.

### 3. CONTEMPORARY INFLUENCE OF THE LEFT IN INDIA

In contemporary India, the influence of the communist movement, particularly the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist - CPI(M)), has seen significant fluctuations, especially in light of the economic liberalisation that began in the 1990s. While the CPI and CPI (M) have experienced electoral successes in States such as Kerala, West Bengal and Tripura, their influence at the national level has diminished. This decline can be attributed to several factors, including the rise of neoliberal economic policies and the increasing prominence of right wing politics, especially the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

In Kerala, the Left Front coalition remains a significant political force, with the CPI (M) currently governing the State. The government has implemented progressive policies in key areas like education, healthcare, and social welfare, focusing on improving living standards and ensuring access to basic services for all citizens. Kerala's model of development, characterized by high human development indices and an emphasis on social equity, serves as a testament to the enduring relevance of leftist policies in addressing contemporary challenges.

While the Left's national influence may have waned, its regional presence, especially in Kerala, continues to showcase the importance of leftist ideology in shaping progressive policies and advocating for the marginalised communities. The contemporary landscape reflects an ongoing struggle between leftist and right-wing ideologies, highlighting the dynamic nature of Indian politics.

Despite these conflicts, both CPI and CPI (M) continue to advocate for critical issues such as workers' rights, agrarian reforms, and resistance to neoliberal policies that they argue exacerbate inequality and socio-economic disparities. They emphasize the need for social justice and equitable development in an era increasingly dominated by privatization and globalization. The Left's commitment to labour rights and welfare initiatives resonates particularly in states where they have historically maintained strong grassroots support.



### 3.1. CHALLENGES FACING THE COMMUNIST MOVEMENT IN INDIA

The Communist Party of India (CPI) faced a range of challenges in India that hampered its growth and impact across different periods. From the colonial era through the post-independence years, these obstacles were shaped by both internal and external factors, including political repression, ideological rifts and shifting social dynamics.

#### **Rural-Urban Divide and Limited Mass Appeal:**

A key challenge for the CPI was its focus on urban working-class issues, which did not fully resonate with the predominantly rural population of India. Although CPI was successful in organizing urban trade unions and worker movements, it struggled to appeal to the rural masses, who were primarily concerned with agrarian issues like land reform and rural wages. The party's centralized, ideologically rigid approach sometimes failed to adapt to the nuances of India's socio-economic landscape, limiting its ability to build a mass base in rural areas where the majority of Indians lived.

#### **Changing Political Landscape and State Repression:**

As Indian democracy evolved, the CPI found it puzzling to maintain its ideological footing amidst a rapidly changing political environment. Regional and caste-based parties started to gain prominence, further fragmenting the political landscape and drawing potential supporters away from the CPI. Additionally, instances of State repression, especially during times of perceived unrest or insurgency, often targeted communist activists. For instance, during the Emergency (1975-1977), the CPI initially supported Indira Gandhi's government, which alienated some of its supporters and raised questions about its ideological consistency.

Internal ideological rift is one of the most significant issues faced by the Communist parties which weakened the unity and coherence of the movement. The division between the CPI and CPI (M) created a fragmented left, making it difficult to present a united front against rising political ideologies, especially right wing nationalism led by parties like the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

Identity-based politics is another critical challenge is the movement's struggle to adapt to its rigid ideological stance to the evolving socio-economic landscape of India. The traditional focus on class struggle has not resonated as strongly in contemporary society, where issues of caste, religion, and regional identity have become increasingly salient in political discourse. This shift has resulted in declining support for communist parties among various demographics that may prioritize these identity-based politics over class issues.

Despite these challenges, the Communist Movement continues to hold relevance in labour organisation, trade unions and agrarian struggles, particularly among marginalised communities. For instance, the CPI and CPI (M) remain active in advocating for workers' rights and addressing the grievances of farmers. Their ongoing involvement in these grassroots movements demonstrates their commitment to social justice, even as they navigate the complexities of modern Indian politics.

While the Communist Movement in India has encountered significant hurdles, its enduring presence in labour and agrarian struggles suggests that it still plays a vital role in addressing issues of inequality and advocating for the rights of marginalised populations. The electoral success of the Communist governments in Kerala and West Bengal demonstrated the adaptability of communist ideology within India's democratic system. These governments were able to introduce pro-poor reforms and mobilise grassroots support through democratic means, illustrating the unique course of Indian communism within a pluralistic, electoral framework.

#### **Contributions and Changes wrought by Communism in India**

The Communist Party of India (CPI) has made significant contributions and changes in India across various domains, from labour rights and agrarian reform to the broader landscape of social justice and secularism. Despite facing numerous challenges, the CPI has remained a strong political force, particularly in influencing policies geared toward improving the lives of India's working class, marginalized communities, and oppressed groups.

#### **Labour Rights and Trade Union Movements**

One of the CPI's most significant contributions has been its role in organizing and empowering the labour force in India. Since its early days, the CPI has actively mobilized trade unions and helped establish some of the most influential labour organizations, including the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC). Through these platforms, the CPI advocated for workers' rights, fighting for fair wages, better working conditions, and social security benefits for both industrial and agricultural labourers. The party's efforts in this area not only strengthened the bargaining power of workers but also

brought labour rights to the forefront of national policy discussions, influencing labour laws and policies at the state and national levels.

### **Agrarian Reforms and Land Redistribution**

The CPI has also been a key force in advocating for agrarian reforms, particularly in states like Kerala and West Bengal. Recognizing the economic challenges faced by India's rural population, the CPI pushed for measures aimed at land redistribution, securing land rights for tenant farmers, and promoting cooperative farming. These reforms became models for other states and underscored the CPI's role in addressing the systemic issues that perpetuated rural poverty and inequality.

### **Social Justice and Anti-Caste Initiatives**

Beyond economic reforms, the CPI has been a strong advocate for social justice, focusing on issues of caste, gender, and religious discrimination. The CPI's ideological foundation emphasized equality, secularism, and anti-feudalism, which resonated with marginalized communities, including Dalits, tribal populations, and women. Additionally, the party actively opposed caste-based discrimination and communalism, fostering a secular and inclusive political approach that has been critical in maintaining social harmony in various parts of India.

### **Promoting Secularism and Anti-Imperialism**

The CPI has consistently advocated for secularism as a foundational principle of Indian democracy. During periods of communal tensions, the CPI has promoted harmony among religious communities, resisting divisive politics that threaten social cohesion. Additionally, the CPI has taken a strong stance against imperialism, particularly in the post-colonial period, aligning with global movements that resisted Western dominance and promoting solidarity with other socialist and communist states.

Through these initiatives, the CPI has significantly influenced India's political and social landscape, advocating for an egalitarian society and working toward structural changes that benefit the working class and marginalized communities. Despite fluctuations in political power, the CPI's legacy remains visible in the progressive policies and grassroots activism it has fostered across the country.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

Emerging in the early 20th century, the Communist Movement addressed critical issues of inequality and exploitation, aligning itself with the struggles of marginalised communities, including peasants and industrial workers. The legacy of leaders and movements within this framework has left a lasting impact on India's socio-economic policies and political discourse. Despite facing electoral decline and the rise of competing ideologies, notably right wing nationalism, the movement continues to shape debates around economic inequality, labour rights and agrarian distress. Organisations affiliated with the CPI and CPI (M) remain active in labour unions and agrarian movements, championing the rights of workers and farmers.

The determination and steadfastness of the Communist Movement serve as a counterpoint to neoliberal policies that often aggravate social disparities. By engaging in grassroots activism and labour rights advocacy, the Communist Movement continues today to uphold its remarkable commitment to creating a more egalitarian society.

## **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

None.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

None.

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