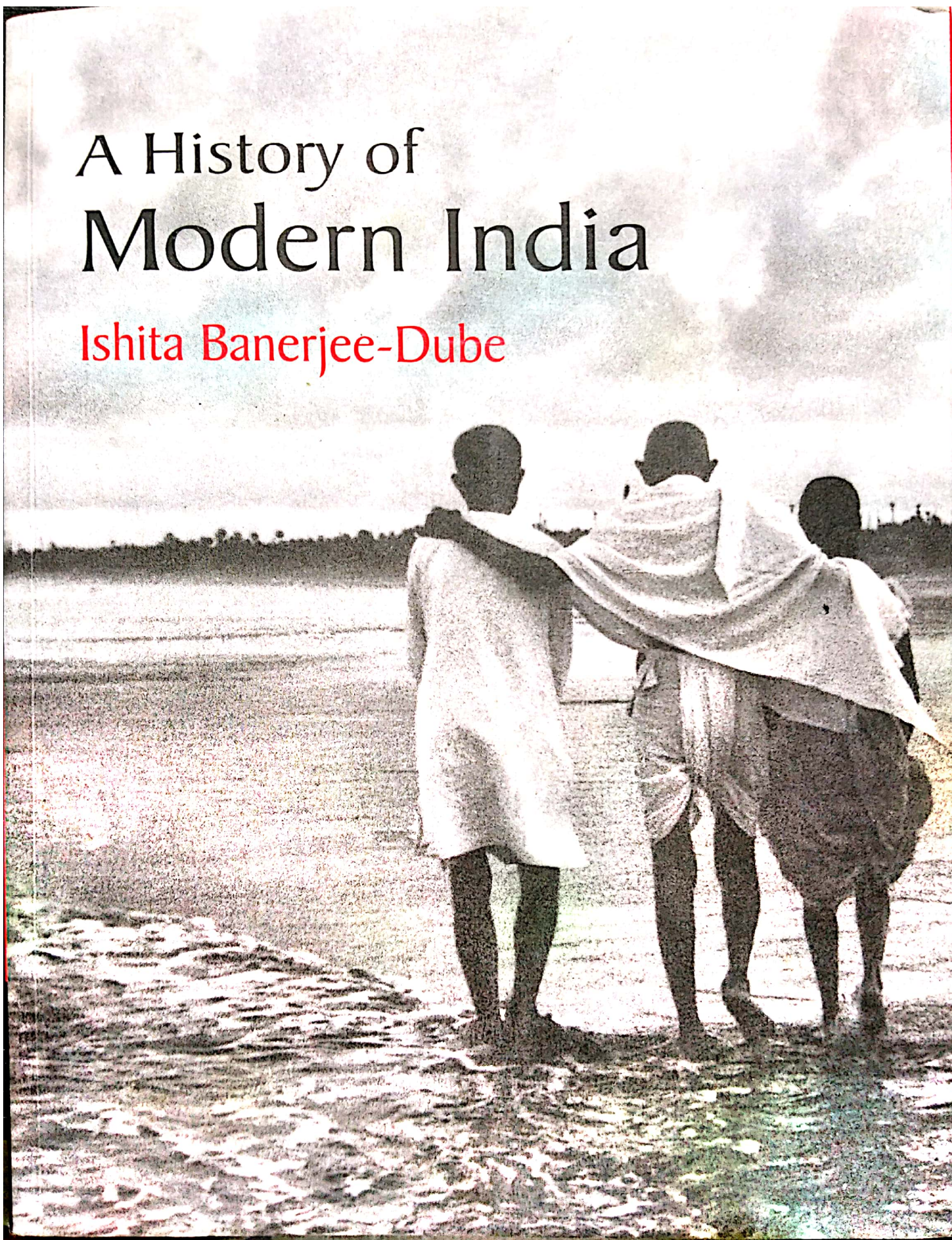


A History of Modern India

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1939, in protest against the unilateral decision of the Raj to draw India into the Second World War, Jinnah decided to celebrate it as 'Deliverance Day'. By December 1939, the membership of the Muslim League had touched 3 million, and Jinnah had emerged as 'the sole spokesman' of the Muslims (*ibid.*).

On the other hand, the term in office helped Congress politicians, trained so far in agitational and oppositional politics, to gain valuable experience in running governments. By the time the ministries resigned in 1939, 28 months of rule had prepared Congress leaders to take over the reins of governing India.

THE LEFT AND LABOUR

The huge and diverse groups of working classes became organized in the decade of the 1920s, through the formation of several trade unions. A convergence of various 'socio-economic' and 'ideological-cultural forces' led to the formation of the All India Trade Union Conference (AITUC) in 1920: it intended to coordinate the activities of the existing trade unions and the ones that were to emerge subsequently (Bose 1979a: 31). A section of the Congress had supported the establishing of AITUC although Gandhi had remained opposed to the idea of introducing 'politics' among the working class. He also felt that all trade unions had to first orient themselves to the model of 'trusteeship' represented by the Ahmedabad union, before coming together in a central body (*ibid.*: 32).

The Congress, of course, was not homogeneous in its political thinking; nor were its leaders the only organizers of trade unions. The workers showed great initiative, and they were aided by different groups of Communists and revolutionaries in different parts of the country. The early phase of trade unionism (1919–23), writes Sanat Bose, was characterized by 'Gandhian, nationalist, and moderate' trends. By the middle of the 1920s, the trade union movement had gathered force and momentum, and all-India bodies, such as the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and the National Federation of Trade Unions (NFTU) had come into being to coordinate the activities of the numerous trade unions (Bose 1979b: 3). As we have seen in Chapter 8, workers' struggle had intimate links with the nationalist movement, but workers did not necessarily abide by the dictates of the Congress or of moderate trade union leaders.

The Communists had a clear sense of divergence of interest between the struggle of labourers and the nationalists. At the second Congress of the Communist International (Comintern), M. N. Roy had separated the 'nationalist anti-imperialist' movement of the bourgeoisie from the 'real revolutionary movement' of the class-conscious (Indian) proletariat and landless peasantry (Roy 1964: 499). 'The bourgeois national democrats in the colonies strive for the establishment of a free national state', he had argued, 'whereas the masses of workers and poor peasants are revolting, even though in many cases unconsciously, against the system which permits such brutal exploitation' (Bose 1979a: 26). Most of Roy's famous debates with Lenin had centred on the interface of anti-imperialist struggles in the colonies and proletarian revolutions in the metropolis, as well as the attitude of the Comintern towards nationalist struggles in the colonies (Bose 1979a: 26; Ray 1987; Roy 1964: 499–500).

The Communists or the Left, however, were not united in their appraisal of the nationalist struggle

or on the strategy to be adopted by workers in colonies. Their attitude to the Congress and the workers varied, as did the workers' own understanding of the nationalist struggle. Small groups of Communists, who did not form a part of the Communist Party of India, had become very active in the trade unions from the mid-1920s. They were instrumental in bringing a definite concept of class and class-struggle into trade unions and labour-capital relations (Bose 1979b: 6). The Congress, in turn, made a consistent and concerted attempt to rally the workers, in spite of fissures among the Right, the Moderate and the Left within the Congress. All this made for periods of convergence and divergence of distinct trends, as noted in the last chapter.

The withdrawal of the Civil Disobedience movement in 1933–34 saw a resurgence of Communist activities. In the summer of 1935, the Communist International decided to adopt the strategy of a 'united front' and the Congress Socialists and Communists worked together for a time (Bandyopadhyay 2004: 380). In 1930, the Comintern had directed the Indian Communists to start activities among Indian workers, and the Communist Party of Great Britain had urged its Indian members to return to India in order to help Indian Communists (Mitra 1981: 1843).

The Communist Party of India and the Red Flag Trade Union Federation were banned by the British government in 1934. Consequently, the Communists who were released from prison after the end of the Meerut trials were left with no choice but to renew their membership of AITUC in order to continue with their work (Chandra et al. [1972] 1975: 195). Increased enthusiasm and militancy on the part of the working classes were bolstered by the formation of popular ministries in the provinces. AITUC and moderate NFTU also came together and held a joint meeting in Nagpur in April 1938.

All this led to a 50 per cent increase in the membership of trade unions between 1937 and 1938. These years were marked by strikes all over the country—a general strike in the Bengal Jute Mills (March–May 1937), recurrent *hartals* in Kanpur cotton mills, textile strikes in Amritsar, Ahmedabad and Madras, strike in Martin Burn's Iron and Steel Works located at Kulti and Hirapur in 1938 and a prolonged and bitter struggle in the Digboi oil works in Assam (April–October 1939).

Prior to the provincial elections in 1937, leaders of the Congress Left had made serious efforts to enlist the support of workers. Jawaharlal Nehru toured Tamil Nadu in November 1936, where the Congress Socialist Party had been established in 1934 by Jayaprakash Narayan and Acharya Narendra Dev. Nehru, the Congress President at the time, had aroused great expectations by declaring in rallies that if people voted for the Congress, independence would be achieved, and after independence the problems of poverty and unemployment would be solved through the introduction of socialism (Krishna 1992: 1497). Pandit Nehru's appeal and the thorough work of Satyamurty, Rajagopalachari and others created an accord between the AITUC and the Indian National Congress. AITUC did not even contest all the labour seats in order to make way for the Congress.

The Congress tried to retain labour support for a short while after taking office. Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhas Bose organized a big labour rally in Calcutta in 1937 where they urged the workers to unite, organize and join hands with the Congress. Conservative Vallabhbhai Patel, Rajendra Prasad and J. B. Kripalani founded a Hindustan Majdur Sabha in 1938. It was relatively easy for the Congress Working Committee to empathize with the Bengal jute workers and criticize the harsh measures adopted by the rival coalition ministry of Fazlul Huq and his Krishak Praja Party when it passed the Bengal Jute

Ordinance of 1939 that reduced hours of work and adversely affected jute mill workers and jute growers (Mitra 1981: 1840). The Congress also expressed sympathy towards workers in Punjab, where the Unionist Party was in power.

In its own provinces, however, the Congress had to change what Bipan Chandra and others have called its 'pro-labour stance' (Chandra et al. 2000: 331) very quickly as the capitalists, headed by Birla, complained of rampant 'indiscipline' in Congress provinces (Birla 1953: 227). Birla and his compatriots also threatened to move capital from Bombay and UP to the neighbouring princely states which hardly had any labour laws. In the provinces with elected ministries, on the other hand, liberal and/or leftist and Communist leaders predominated, and the Ahmedabad textile strike in 1937 pointed to the fact that Communists were penetrating a Gandhian stronghold (Sarkar [1983] 1995: 361).

The capitalist threat of moving capital from Bombay made the Congress ministry there act with alacrity—it rushed through an act in two months, without discussions in the Select Committee. The Trade Disputes Act, implemented in November 1938, included severe provisions to control strikes and curb labour unrest. It imposed compulsory arbitration, imprisonment of six months for illegal strikes without corresponding provisions for arbitrary lockouts and strict rules for registering new trade unions that made it virtually impossible for such unions to be registered without the sanction of the management (Sarkar [1983] 1995: 362). If Communists were invading Gandhian strongholds, the Congress was aiming to control labour militancy in the strongest base of the Communists. The Bombay ministry went back on the promise, made in the election manifesto, that Congress would recognize the right of workers to form trade unions and strive to protect their interests. Congress ministries showed no inclination to ask for a removal of the ban on the Communist Party of India, on grounds that the decision lay with the Raj.

Understandably, the entire trade union movement, with the exception of the Ahmedabad union under Gandhian leaders Gurzarilal Nanda and Khandubhai Desai, opposed the act, and nearly all non-Congress parties, the Muslim League and Ambedkar's party among them, collaborated with the trade unions. A rally addressed by Communist leaders S. A. Dange and Indulal Yagnik and Ambedkar on 6 November was attended by 80,000 people, and the following day, a strike rocked the entire province. Interestingly, Nehru only had some objections to the clause of registration of new unions, but had no problems with the act as a whole. Subhas Bose, the Socialist President of the Congress, protested in private to Sardar Patel, but did not make any public statement against the act.

Even in Madras, where the Congress had got full cooperation from AITUC and veteran union leader V. V. Giri had become the industrial and labour minister, the Congress ministry fell far short of taking a 'pro-labour stance' during strikes by the Coimbatore textile mill workers between 1937 and 1939. The history of Coimbatore labour during the 1930s, remarks Murphy Eamon, was 'one of bitter struggle—militant workers opposed to intransigent, ruthless employers', both Indian and European (Eamon 1981: 29). During the struggle, the Congress government tended to put brakes more on the workers than on the employers.

Addressing the workers during a general strike in 1937, V. V. Giri made it clear that the Congress ministry did not approve of strikes when other methods of representation had not been exhausted, and that the government preferred internal methods of settlement to external ones (Krishna 1992: 1503). The

Congress ministry, argues C. S. Krishna, did not 'advance the class interests of workers' and the Congress union took a 'reformist' rather than a 'revolutionary' approach towards the proletariat (ibid.: 1504).

In David Arnold's view, Congressmen in office often found themselves torn between the workers, many of whom had voted for or identified with the Congress, and the industrialists. More significantly, British capitalists managed to manipulate the 'ambiguities and conflicting ambitions of Congress' effectively to 'espouse their interests during industrial disputes', a fact that became evident in the industrial conflict in the Nellikuppam sugar factory in South Arcot between 1937 and 1939 (Arnold 1977b: 17). The European-controlled management successfully made the Congress ministry take its side. Even though ministerial support for European industrialists was 'neither automatic nor inevitable', in the end the 'pull of capital' turned out to be stronger than 'the appeal of labour' (Arnold 1977b: 17-18).

It is true that the Communists and the workers were united, to a certain degree, by a commonality of interests—both were opposed to capitalists and the state. At the same time, 'shared antagonisms' did not automatically result in an alliance (Chandavarkar 1994: 411-12). There were other factors at work. Communists were outsiders in factories and had no base in the workplace. Their endeavours to present themselves as an alternative source of patronage, therefore, had to take into account existing social relations among workers in their neighbourhoods. At the same time, the development of new institutional structures and a legal framework made the services offered by Communists very valuable for the workers. Mutual interest and constraint enabled an alliance in which Communists gained a strong foothold in trade unions, but made frequent use of ties of caste and religion in organizing the workers in general and strikes in particular (Joshi 1985).

On the whole, Communist participation lent a radical edge to the workers' struggle, best demonstrated in recurrent strikes all over India from the decade of the 1920s. The brief period of cooperation between Congress Socialists and Communists in the mid-1930s produced another wave of strikes in 1937-38. This cooperation came to an end as Congress governments began to adopt severe measures to curb labour militancy. The Congress Left failed to persuade the Congress leadership to take a more sympathetic attitude towards trade unions and Kisan Sabhas.

The Communists, it has been argued with reference to Bengal, failed to understand the close links between jute mill workers and jute growers. Migration to the jute mills of Calcutta was largely cyclical; most mill workers retained their connection with villages and went back during times of harvest (Chakrabarty 1989), since lack of land was not the only factor for migration (De Haan 1995). This lack of understanding on the part of Communists meant that they could not encourage the growth of united workers' and peasant movements (Mitra 1981: 1846-47).

The crisis of the Congress Left became clear in the Tripuri session of the Congress in 1939. Subhas Bose, elected President of the Congress in the Haripura session in 1938, decided to stand for re-election. In his first year as president, Bose had tried to push for *swaraj* as a 'National Demand', opposed the idea of a federation and sent an ultimatum to the British government. Bose's candidacy for the 1939 session was rivalled by Sitaramayya, whom Gandhi declared to be his nominee. Subhas Bose won by 1,580 votes against Sitaramayya's 1,377, and got massive leads in Bengal and Punjab and substantial ones in Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, UP and Assam.

And yet, Gandhi and the Congress Right managed to turn things around very quickly. Fifteen out of thirteen members of the Congress Working Committee, including Jawaharlal Nehru, resigned and Subhas Bose was directed to nominate his new executive 'in accordance with the wishes of Gandhiji' by means of a resolution moved by Govind Ballav Pant. The resolution won in the Subjects Committee on account of disunity within the Left. Subhas Bose tried in vain for two months to set up a working committee that was acceptable to all. He was forced to resign (Bandyopadhyay 1984: 323–35; Gordon 1974: 274–75). He started the Forward Bloc within the Congress in an effort to bring the Left together, but did not achieve much success. Rajendra Prasad, a staunch Right-winger, replaced Bose as the Congress President.

In 1942, when the ban on the Communist Party was lifted because it backed British War efforts, the tug of war between the Congress and Communists over the leadership of workers got a distinct twist. Soviet Russia was Britain's ally in the Second World War, and Indian Communists were directed to support the War. This pro-state stance of the Communists made workers move away from them and turn towards the Congress. Once more, the workers demonstrated autonomy in their dealings with capitalists, Communists and the state; they did not render unconditional support either to the Congress or to the Communists. Different meanings of freedom and distinct modes of achieving it continued to lend dynamism and diversity to the nationalist struggle (Bandyopadhyay 2004: 381).

THE FEDERATION AND THE PRINCES

The provincial part of the 1935 Act became effective with the elections in 1937. The federal part, however, remained a 'non-starter' since no one seemed interested in it (Bandyopadhyay 2004: 326; Sarkar [1983] 1995: 338). As discussed in the last chapter, Muslim leaders felt that the federal structure was still too unitary and would result in the domination by the Congress and Hindu majority at the centre. The princes, who had initially suggested that princely states and British India should form a federation, became unenthusiastic once the prospect of Congress takeover of the central government receded with the waning of the Civil Disobedience movement. In the perception of a contemporary observer, the division between British India and the native states 'greatly complicated and retarded' the 'political progress of India' (Farley 1942: 96).

The 562 princely states, comprising almost two-fifths of India's territory, had remained 'walled off' and relatively autonomous internally since they were under the loose supervision of British residents posted at their courts, although their external relations remained under British control (Fisher 1991; Kooiman 1995: 2125, 2002: 15; Lee-Warner 1894). The outbreak of the First World War brought the larger princes close to the Raj. They donated generously to War funds, provided military service and welcomed army recruitment in their states. Consequently, they wanted some recognition of their services from the British government at the end of the War. They asked to be spared from the increasing vigilance of the British political department and from the political turmoil in British India, and demanded greater participation in the consultations carried out by the British with Indians (Copland 1997: 33–34). They made use of the enquiries initiated by the government with regard to constitutional reforms to ask for a Chamber of Princes, an advisory body with direct access to the Government of India.