

TROTSKYISM IN INDIA AND CEYLON

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Charles Wesley Ervin. *Tomorrow is Ours: The Trotskyist Movement in India and Ceylon, 1935-48*. Colombo: Social Scientists' Association, 2006, xiii + illustrations + 366 pages.

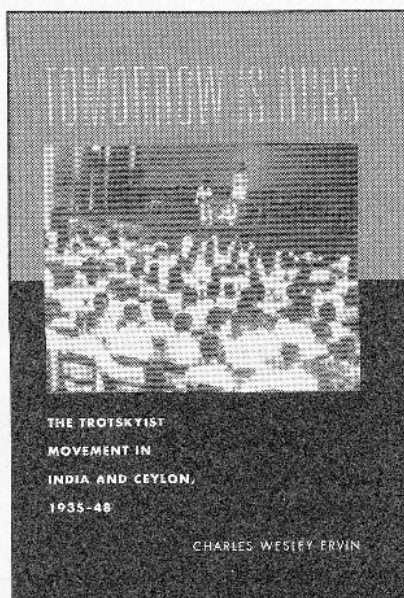
Tomorrow is Ours is an impressive account of the emergence of the Trotskyist movement in Ceylon and India, ending soon after Independence in both countries. The first chapter sketches the historical background: Mughal India, the rule of the East India Company, the consequent de-industrialisation of India, the 1857 insurrection followed by the takeover of India by the British government, the building of the railways and genesis of the textile industry, and the origins of the national movement. This is followed by a summary of debates within the Marxist movement on the national and colonial question, the nature of the impending revolutions in the colonies, and the united front vs. the popular front, all constituting an essential theoretical background to the ensuing account.

The next chapter follows the development of a Trotskyist group in London, initiated by Philip Gunawardena, which in 1935 founded the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) in Ceylon. They engaged in union organizing and electoral politics, and when the Trotskyist Fourth International (FI) was formed in 1938, established contact with it. The Stalinist minority in the party was expelled, and later became the Ceylon Communist Party. Meanwhile, small Trotskyist groups had formed in India, and there was a proto-Trotskyist group in the Congress Socialist Party. After LSSP leaders were arrested, their press seized and their meetings banned in 1940, the party decided that the revolution in Ceylon could develop only as part of the Indian revolution, and sent LSSP organizers to work with Trotskyists whom they had already contacted in India. Chapter 3 deals with this phase, which was initiated by a secret meeting attended by the jailed party leaders with the help of their jailor whom they had recruited!

In May 1942, after Colombo harbour was bombed by Japanese forces and the LSSP leaders escaped from jail, the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India was formed, and later acknowledged as the Indian section of the FI. M.G. Purdy, a Trotskyist from South Africa who had decided to live and work in India, was excluded because he supported the Allies in the war, and formed his own Mazdoor Trotskyist Party of

India. When the Congress leaders were jailed after their 'Quit India' call in August 1942, the BLPI supported the movement, mobilizing students and workers. But the CPI, which in accordance with Stalin's line supported the British in the war, helped to get BLPI leaders arrested, although some escaped to Calcutta. The sections in Madura and Madras scored major successes in union organizing. At the BLPI's first delegate conference in 1944, a minority motion proposing a less centralized organization was defeated, and a Central Committee consisting of four Ceyloneses and one Indian was elected. Contact was maintained with Trotskyists from the US and Britain during this period.

Chapter 6 deals with efforts to convert the LSSP from a mass organization into a cadre party, which resulted in a growing rift between the 'Bolsheviks' led by Doric de Souza, who wanted to build a Leninist party of professional revolutionaries, and the 'Mensheviks' led by Philip Gunawardena, who wanted to nurture its trade union base. The rift was exacerbated by state repression and the arrest of several older leaders. Philip accused Doric of being a police spy, leading to violence and a de facto split. In India too there was a split, with V.C. Shukla forming the Bolshevik Mazdoor Party. The post-war situation is taken up in Chapter 7. In the Constituent Assembly elections, the BLPI supported candidates who endorsed the Quit India struggle. In 1945, the BLPI endorsed mass demonstrations in Calcutta protesting against the trial of leaders of the Indian National Army, and in 1946, when the naval mutiny took place in Bombay, the BLPI was the first to call for a general strike in



support of it, whereas the Congress, Muslim League and CPI tried to restore peace. In August 1946, communal rioting in Calcutta left over 6,000 people dead and shook the British administration. A minority in the BLPI wanted it to drop the characterization of the Muslim League as a reactionary feudal party 'since that would only drive the Muslim masses deeper into communalism,' but the majority opposed this.

Chapter 8 goes back to the factional struggle in Ceylon, with the old guard, released from jail, reviving the LSSP in 1945 and ignoring the Regional Committee (RC) of the BLPI. The CC of the BLPI responded by expelling Philip Gunawardena and N.M. Perera, and the former went public with his accusation that Doric de Souza was a police spy. When the LSSP later proposed unity with the Ceylon section of the BLPI, it was made conditional on Philip either apologizing to Doric for calling him a police spy, or submitting to a court of enquiry. Kamallesh Bannerji came from India as a 'court of one', declared there was no basis for the accusation and therefore demanded an apology. Philip refused, upon which the CC of the BLPI expelled him, and the LSSP effectively parted company with the BLPI. Meanwhile, successful union work was going on in Bombay, Bengal and Tamil Nadu; talks with the Revolutionary Communist Party of Saumyendranath Tagore, which was to the left of the CPI, failed to result in unity because of differences over issues such as the nature of the Soviet Union. The most spectacular success of the BLPI, described in Chapter 9, was in Madras, where they took over unions, organized strikes, and developed a large working-class base. Anthony Pillai became a trade union leader of national stature, and was elected to the General Council of the All-India Trade Union Congress.

In the run-up to Independence, dealt with in Chapter 10, communal riots intensified. The BLPI conference resolution in 1947 held that 'the religio-communal partition of India is an unbelievably regressive act,'; the party, along with Trotsky, continued to believe that only a proletarian revolution could liberate India from colonialism up to and beyond August 15. Only at the BLPI conference in March 1948 did the majority finally vote to recognize the political independence of India, a position subsequently endorsed by the FI. In Ceylon, the LSSP recognized the achievement of political independence in 1948, although the economy continued to be dominated by imperialism. The final chapter describes the post-Independence debate in the BLPI over entry into the Socialist Party. The idea was at first rejected, but in 1948 the party decided unanimously to enter as a long-term strategy, against the directive of the International Secretariat of the FI. The SP refused a merger, specifying that the BLPI would have to

dissolve, sever connections with the FI and apply for individual membership. The BLPI accepted these conditions, and some members rose to high positions in the SP and its union, the Hind Mazdoor Sabha. But in 1949 the SP adopted a new constitution making it a mass party, thus marginalising Trotskyists in its membership. The SP's electoral debacle in the 1951 parliamentary elections and merger with the Kisan Mazdoor Praja Party completed the annihilation of the BLPI. But other Trotskyist groups survived and, together with former members of the BLPI, regrouped in the mid-1950s to form a new Trotskyist party.

This is a fascinating story, meticulously documented and well told. The only major lacuna is the absence of any reference to Hindu nationalism, its activities in the nineteenth century, the formation of the Punjab Hindu Sabha just prior to the establishment of the Muslim League, the formation of the Hindu Mahasabha and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) thereafter, and the presence of Hindu nationalists like Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Lala Lajpat Rai in the Congress itself. There is no reference to the fact that the notion of Muslims and Hindus constituting 'two nations', and the proposal for partition and population transfer, came first from the Hindu nationalists before it was adopted by the Muslim League nor to RSS leader Golwalkar's endorsement in 1938 of the 'purging' of German Jews. Consequently, the misleading impression is created that Jinnah, the Muslim League and Muslims were mainly responsible (with the British) for partition and the bloodshed that accompanied it. Apart from this, the book is an important addition to the history of the Left in this period. A rare collection of photographs of some of the leaders, biographical notes on the major figures in the movement, and the 1942 Programme of the BLPI add to the value of the account.

However, Ervin clearly has not written this book merely as a work of scholarship; he is equally engaged with the theory and politics of the movement he describes. Here his achievement is less even. His discussion of the united front, where communist parties retain their autonomy and independent organization but ally with other organizations for a specific purpose, and the popular front, where their separate identity is compromised, is clear and useful. Stalin's wild swings from one extreme, for example when he advocated that the Chinese Communists join the Kuomintang (the 'popular front'), to the other, when he opposed a united front between the communists and socialists against fascism, are convincingly exposed as disastrous for the working class in both cases. Ervin also points out the absurdity of the BLPI denial of India's political independence even after 15 August

1947, due to its belief that the bourgeoisie would never be able to win independence from Britain. But he stops short at drawing the logical conclusion about the theory of permanent revolution.

Marx is quoted as casting doubt on the success of the socialist revolution in Europe so long as bourgeois society was 'in the ascendant' in the rest of the world, and Lenin as believing that a national liberation movement was equivalent to a bourgeois revolution. But Trotsky argued in *The Permanent Revolution* that the bourgeoisie of the colonies was incapable of carrying out a bourgeois revolution; only the proletariat in power could carry out the tasks of the bourgeois revolution, including independence, which would then put a transition to the socialist revolution on the agenda. Surely it is clear by now that the bourgeoisie of India has indeed carried out a bourgeois revolution? If this is denied because the democratic part of the revolution is still incomplete, we could ask, when has the bourgeoisie ever carried out a democratic revolution? From the prototypical French Revolution onwards, it has made concessions to the plebeian masses when it needed their support, but had no qualms about crushing these same masses later on. Democracy has always had to be fought for, won, and defended by working class struggle. In that sense the term 'bourgeois democracy' is incorrect and dangerous; by dismissing democracy as a bourgeois institution, it has misled workers into allowing themselves to be robbed of their democratic rights in the name of socialism, instead of understanding socialism as an expansion of democracy beyond the limits that can be attained under capitalism. Indeed, installing, guarding and expanding democracy in all spheres of life (e.g. the family, community, workplace and union), and at all levels, from the local to the global, is one of the main tasks in the transition from the bourgeois revolution to a socialist revolution. But as we see in India and Sri Lanka, where democracy is very partial even sixty years after Independence, it takes decades, not years, to accomplish this task.

Another crucial debate within the socialist movement is that over the national question. There seems to be near-universal acceptance among Marxists of Stalin's definition of a nation as a 'historically-constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture' (p.143). It is doubtful whether there exists any nation on earth answering to these specifications, but this monocultural ideal of a nation is certainly cherished by fascists everywhere, including the Nazis; achieving it would entail marginalizing or, better still, eliminating minorities by

methods ranging from assimilation to ethnic cleansing and genocide. Yet this is the definition of a nation we must keep in mind when evaluating the Lenin-Luxemburg debate on the right of nations to self-determination, defined as the right to a separate state.

Apart from a reactionary minority, Marxists from Marx and Engels onwards had supported national independence for the colonies. While West European countries acquired their colonies abroad, Russia annexed the lands adjacent to it, and the debate arose in connection with a clause in the programme of the Russian Marxists dealing with these peoples. Lenin, emphasizing that the clause referred specifically to Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century, when it and its neighbouring countries were going through national movements, insisted on the right of nations like the Ukraine to have separate states, and contended that denial of this right would merely strengthen Great-Russian nationalism. Luxemburg disagreed even with the phrase 'right of nations to self-determination,' which dated from an international congress in 1896, asking, who determines the will of the nation? She was right: the 'self' pertains to the individual, and self-determination of the individual is inseparable from democracy. But who determines the nation's 'self'? Unless there is a free and fair referendum, with adequate opportunity for discussion beforehand, any decision claiming to be that of the 'nation' is bound to represent the will of particular ruling-class males of the dominant community. As such, 'national' self-determination would rule out individual self-determination, and thus democracy! National liberation, independence and secession make sense; national self-determination does not. Moreover, Luxemburg contended, in countries like Poland, 'national self-determination' would be detrimental to the interests of the working class.

Luxemburg made it clear that socialists, being opposed to all oppression, were duty bound to oppose national oppression. Lenin, on his side, conceded that the prime consideration was self-determination of the proletariat, and that 'No Russian Marxist has ever thought of blaming the Polish Social-Democrats for being opposed to the secession of Poland'. Both were opposing nationalism, Lenin in imperialist Russia, Luxemburg in oppressed Poland. So why did the disagreement arise? It surely arose due to the fact that both tried to elevate a contextual policy into a universal one. In all the imperialist countries, it was vitally important to oppose imperial delusions among workers; this is still true, for example with respect to the US occupation of Iraq. On the other hand, arguing for Shia, Sunni and Kurdish 'self-determination' in Iraq can only foster disastrous sectarian

strife and promote the divide and rule policy of US imperialism.

Confusion on this issue came back to haunt the BLPI. Debating the communal issue in 1944, it concluded that India consisted of various nationalities, such as Bengalis, Punjabis, etc., but that the Muslims, a dispersed national minority, could not be regarded as a nation. The CPI, wrongly but more consistently, argued that Muslim self-determination was a just demand; after all, the cultural difference between Hindus and Muslims could well be seen as greater than that between, say, Tamil-speaking and Telegu-speaking caste Hindus. The certainty that partition and its aftermath would be disastrous for the working class movement would have been a more correct reason for opposing partition. But this would have required giving up the 'right of nations to self-determination' as a policy valid for all time and in all cases (something that Lenin explicitly argued against at one point) – indeed, giving up the nonsensical notion of national self-determination altogether – and recognising that support for any struggle for separate statehood depends on the circumstances in which it occurs.

However, this would also have required definite policies to fight against the particular oppression of sections of the population and working class, and this was lacking. Although the comrades of the BLPI were commendably free of communalism, ethnic supremacism and nationalism, Ervin points out that the issues of caste and communalism were not even mentioned in their programme. Nor, he might have added, was the oppression of women. This was undoubtedly a weakness.

It would have been good if some of these issues had been discussed at slightly greater length in *Tomorrow is Ours*. But the very fact that the author raises them in the context of concrete historical circumstances is illuminating. We see the carnage that results from the creation of a popular front in China, the failure to build a united front in Germany, and the implementation of the right of nations to self-determination in India. Lessons can be learned and mistakes avoided in future – but only if there is a critical examination of these policies. The greatness of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Luxemburg and Trotsky lay in their development of theory and politics to grapple with the reality around them. Marxist theory and politics will prosper only when their followers do likewise.

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