



ISSN: 2158-7051

INTERNATIONAL  
JOURNAL OF  
RUSSIAN STUDIES

ISSUE NO. 11 ( 2022/1 )

## THE SOVIET UNION, THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF INDIA AND INDIRA GANDHI: INDO-SOVIET RELATIONS, 1966-1984

ELENA NORA JUCYTE\*

### Summary

After the independence of India from the British Empire declared in 1947, the Indian National Congress dominated democratic politics of the country for several decades. Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of India and the face of socialists of the Congress, had initiated the collaboration with the USSR, especially on economic front. Diplomatic relations between the two countries were established a few months before the official proclamation of independence of India and since then all Indian leaders had to deal with the Soviets. The apex of the relations was reached during Indira Gandhi's premiership (1966-84) due to the peculiarities of Indian domestic politics and the geopolitical circumstances, which created the favourable conditions for even closer ties between the two countries and bolstered assertiveness of India as a regional power.

**Key Words:** Indian National Congress, Indira Gandhi, Soviet Union, Communist Party of India, India.

### Introduction: Nehru Years

At the dawn of its independence, India was a predominantly agrarian country and faced innumerable social and economic problems. The Indian National Congress (Congress), which led Indian nationalist movement and was the dominant political power at that time, comprehended the need to reform the agricultural sector and decided to abolish the accumulation of large landholdings. However, the government's disposition towards rural India should have not neglected the industrial growth of the country, since the subcontinent needed factories capable of absorbing unemployed

workers from rural areas displaced by the mechanization of agriculture. From the political point of view, the industrialization of the country would affirm its commitment to progress; it could unite a heterogeneous country on a linguistic, ethnic and religious level and could give a boost to the literacy of the masses.

In 1938, the group of Congress politicians led by future prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru established the National Planning Committee (NPC), a body charged with outlining the economic development policy for independent India. The NPC was inspired by the economic models offered by countries such as the Soviet Union, which have industrialized within a short period of twelve to fifteen years. State intervention in economics was considered a necessary element for the rapid modernization of India and the Soviet five-year planning system became an example to emulate for many Indian officials. According to economist and civil servant Subrahmanya Bhoothalingam, the public sector “took on an almost religious significance” in Nehru’s India.<sup>[1]</sup> However, in the early years of independence, inside the ruling Congress party two contradictory tendencies manifested themselves. The Congress adopted socialist principles of state ownership and regulation in order to improve productivity and curb economic concentration. Alternatively, it pursued liberal economic policies and stimulated private investments to achieve maximum increases in production.<sup>[2]</sup> These contradictions, started on the economic front, later on would become more evident and interfere in the foreign policy debates dividing Indian government into pro-American and pro-Soviet camps.

At first, the relations of independent India with Stalin’s USSR were cold. Soviet ideologists viewed Indian leadership negatively labelling it “reactionary” and “pro-imperialist” while calling expressively Mahatma Gandhi an “apostle of backwardness”.<sup>[3]</sup> Stalin’s foreign policy based on “two camp” approach to international relations influenced Soviet view of largely ex-colonial countries which emerged after the World War II and strictly limited contacts with them. Nevertheless, Nehru appointed his sister Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit as the first ambassador to the Soviet Union as a sign of goodwill. The first ambassador of India was largely ignored by the Soviet leadership and did not meet Stalin for once during her ambassadorship. At this point, one of the sources of considerable friction between India and the Soviet Union was former’s nascent non-alignment policy that stressed the importance for newly independent countries not to join either of two major power blocks. In 1946, Nehru proposed to “keep from the power politics of groups, aligned against one another”. In the same speech, he admitted that India with the Soviet Union “will have to undertake many common tasks and have much to do with each other”.<sup>[4]</sup> E. Zhukov, the famous Soviet orientalist at the time harshly condemned Indian position in foreign affairs claiming that its non-alignment meant “to justify a policy of collaboration with English capitalism”.<sup>[5]</sup> Indeed, India was a member state of Commonwealth of Nations, the intergovernmental organization made up of sovereign and independent states united by a past membership of the British Empire. First signs of a breakthrough in Indo-Soviet relations arrived in 1950 when Stalin met Indian ambassador to the Soviet Union.<sup>[6]</sup>

India’s fluctuating relations with the United States (USA) and latter’s support for Pakistan, which emerged after the partition of Indian subcontinent in 1947, highly contributed to the improvement of Indo-Soviet relations. However, before the independence, India like many other colonial states looked for the guidance of the democratic USA. In 1940, Nehru observed that the USA was the only great country left “to keep the torch of democratic freedom alight”.<sup>[7]</sup> The World War II weakened the British Empire and colonial India seized the moment to push its demands for independence. British reluctance to grant Indian independence outraged Nehru, who looked toward Roosevelt. American president, in turn, applied considerable pressure on Churchill to grant India at least the status of temporary dominion.<sup>[8]</sup> British prime minister was adamant to concede it. On the

whole, the American efforts were futile. Nevertheless, the United States was the first country to establish full diplomatic relations with India after its independence in 1947.

Roosevelt died in April 1945 and Harry Truman, his successor, had little experience in foreign policy and relied heavily on his advisors who held the view that the USA was destined to assume a global leadership role.<sup>[9]</sup> Roosevelt had hoped for some sort of cooperation with the Soviets but the Truman administration had completely reversed this line of thinking. In addition, the bipolar worldview that became dominant after the war was quite irreconcilable with Nehru's convictions about the global role of Asia in the world affairs. At the onset of Cold War, Nehru comprehended the need to protect India from becoming an appendage of either block. Regarding the Soviet Union, he remained prudent and cautious, and concentrated his efforts on creating stable and amicable relations with China, which was too emerging from the colonial past. The "Asianism" of Nehru was based on the premise that common experience of colonialism was a strong basis on which to build Asian solidarity.

Nehru was not alone in forming the foreign policy of India. Krishna Menon was a politician, diplomat and good friend of Nehru since the 30s. In 1928, after having spent a considerable amount of time in England, there he established the India League, which campaigned for the full independence of India. Menon gathered around himself young Indian radicals; some of them in the following years would enter Indian politics as the members of the Communist Party of India (CPI). A number of them were intimate friends of Nehru's daughter Indira who studied in England at the time.<sup>[10]</sup> He was a decisive actor in distancing India from the USA whilst having underestimated the looming threat from China.<sup>[11]</sup> Even though Menon was one of the architects of "Non-Aligned" concept, he was also known for his staunch pro-Soviet and pro-communist sympathies.<sup>[12]</sup> Menon was never appointed External Affairs minister because of the considerable opposition in the cabinet to his pro-communist views, although Nehru himself relied entirely on Menon's judgement on the matters of foreign policy.<sup>[13]</sup> In 1957, Menon Became Defence Minister and virtually finished his political carrier in this post because of India's humiliating defeat by China in 1962.

Since the late 50s, Sino-Indian relations were deteriorating steadily. The culmination was the border war which broke out along disputable Himalayan border between the two countries. The conflict ended with unilateral ceasefire declared by China on 21 November 1962. The shocking defeat suffered by India changed some Nehru's views and those of many Indian officials. The close Sino-Indian friendship in the 50s, which had produced the famous slogan *Hindi chini bhai* (Indians and Chinese are brothers) brought great delusion to India and changed some attitudes that were at the heart of Nehru's foreign policy doctrine. In a 1963 *Foreign Affairs* article, Nehru reflected on the impact of the events of 1962 on his beliefs:

"The nation as a whole is growing up. It is learning that in the world today it is not enough to be devoted to peace, or to mind one's own affairs, but that it is also necessary to have adequate armed strength, to adjust our relations with friendly countries in the light of the changing actualities of the international situation and, aboveall, to preserve and consolidate national unity".<sup>[14]</sup>

During his tenure, Defence minister Menon was driven by the view that China, being a communist state, would never attack across the disputed border.<sup>[15]</sup> Furthermore, downplaying Chinese threat, Menon left the Indian military forces unprepared. After the humiliating defeat, Nehru reluctantly had to dismiss him. This event constrained India to rely more heavily on the Soviet Union for diplomatic support and military equipment as the Americans and Chinese continued to support Pakistan.

Even before these developments, some important steps towards deeper Indo-Soviet cooperation were taken. The visit of Jawaharlal Nehru to the Soviet Union in June 1955, and that of

Nikita Khrushchev in India in the autumn of the same year, marked the start of cooperation between the two countries at an economic level. Soviet economic aid started to flow to India in the 50s in the form of financing for public sector projects. The landmark event was the Indo-Soviet agreement to build Bhilai Steel Plant signed in New Delhi on 2 March 1955.<sup>[16]</sup> Furthermore, the independent India had adopted Soviet-style planned economy although it officially remained a mixed economy. This economic outset brought in the “License Raj”, a sophisticated system of government licenses and regulations to set up and run business and which according to its critics, favoured corruption and political stagnation.<sup>[17]</sup>

During the Khrushchev Thaw, the Soviet Union, adopted “the model of peaceful coexistence”, according to which two countries that differed in their economic, political and social systems must cooperate on the basis of mutual respect and non-interference in other’s domestic affairs. Nehru and Khrushchev declared that the relations between India and the USSR would be guided by the principles of this doctrine.<sup>[18]</sup> The rise of China as a new power in Asia from the 50s on and deteriorating relations with it due to doctrinal divergences convinced the Soviet Union to invigorate and consolidate relations with India. On the other hand, bitter disillusionment with China suffered by India in 1962 after Sino-Indian War paved the way for further Indo-Soviet rapprochement.

### **Indira Gandhi Years**

Indian National Congress was founded in 1885. In 1969, the daughter of Nehru Indira Gandhi split the party which led India to independence and dominated the politics in the country after independence. After the death of Nehru in 1964, Lal Bahadur Shastri was appointed prime minister. The short period of his reign was marked by the second armed conflict with Pakistan for the disputed region of Kashmir. The peace agreement that followed, The Tashkent Declaration, was signed on 10 January 1966 in the capital of the Soviet republic of Uzbekistan. Soviet Prime Minister Alexei Kosygin was the mediator between the Indian prime minister and Pakistan’s president Mohammad Ayyub Khan.<sup>[19]</sup> The night after signing the Tashkent declaration, Lal Bahadur Shastri passed away. Nehru’s daughter, Indira Gandhi was nominated prime minister of India. Old Congress bosses, informally known as “Syndicate”, chose her candidature in order to exercise what they defined as “collective leadership”.<sup>[20]</sup> The Congress in its essence was a big tent party where all shades of political opinion were accommodated. Nehru, given his role in the nationalist movement and his political authority managed to settle down various conflicts between rival factions inside the party. The premature death of Lal Bahadur left a political vacuum on Indian political scene. The Syndicate decided to choose a presumably weak politician which could symbolically affirm the continuation of Nehru’s political line and behind which Congress old bosses could exercise real power. Thus, the daughter of Nehru was an ideal chose, who before becoming PM of India was quite obscure politician. In 1959, she had been the President of the Congress Party. In Shastri’s government, she was the Minister of Information and Broadcasting. Indira Gandhi was expected to continue socialist policies following her father, but she have never expressed clearly her ideological positions. Some adulators called her “the most distinguished representative of the youth of India and the rue exponent of the progressive and socialistic trends in the country”.<sup>[21]</sup> Ideologically, she inherited socialist credentials, while on the political and economic side, a launched friendship with the Soviet Union.

However, Indira Gandhi chose the United States for her first state visit. The press described her talks with Lyndon Johnson as “successful”. Returned to India on 6 June 1966, Mrs. Gandhi

announced a decision to devalue the rupee. Since the USA had already invested in Indian market and the country still relied heavily on US food aid, it was widely speculated that new prime minister succumbed to the pressure of Americans.<sup>[22]</sup> Various parties harshly criticized the move during the electoral campaign of 1967 and all of them exploited this political measure to depict the evils of the Congress government. The most outspoken critics of the move were the Communist Party of India which called it “the blackest act of treachery since independence carried out at the dictates of US imperialism, acting through World Bank by a clique in Delhi”.<sup>[23]</sup> Sensing the weakened position of the Congress before the elections of 1967, the CPI called on its supporters to vote against Congress.

The first test for the new head of government came with these elections of 1967. The ballot brought the victory, but not a landslide one, since the Congress lost more than 20% of the seats. The Congress moguls, so-called Syndicate, saw the daughter of Nehru, as a naive politician open to manipulation. By contrast, the Soviet government attitude towards the new government was ambiguous. Initially, the Soviet press congratulated Mrs. Gandhi’s rise to power but soon Soviet newspapers like *New Times* and *International Affairs* worried about “the growing strength of capitalist monopolies in India” due to India’s increasing dependence on American aid in the 60s.<sup>[24]</sup> Soviet media did not attack openly the new prime minister but misgivings and perplexity with the new government and the political circumstances in India were emphasized through various statements.

The Congress position had started to deteriorate in 1957 onwards, when general elections results revealed party losses to Jana Sangh on the right and to the CPI on the left. Already in 1959, when Indira Gandhi became the President of the Congress Party, her long-time friend and future advisor T.N. Kaul warned her about awaiting a split and the need of resolute action. According to the Congress did not represent one political ideology, but had, among its leadership and members, people holding ideas ranging from the extreme right to the extreme left and only leadership of Nehru is holding them together. The most powerful members of the Congress in T.N. Kaul’s words were elder and more conservative “who are whittling down the programme of “younger and more progressive elements ” of the Party. He advised Mrs. Gandhi: “The problem should be faced and faced now instead of being postponed till a later date, when the rift in the Congress may be so great that it will break up into a number of small, weak units and lose the advantage of national leadership it has at present”.<sup>[25]</sup> Indira Gandhi did not face this problem until 1969, when she managed to secure communist support for her line.

The new prime minister needed to distinguish herself from the Syndicate who put her in power. As her position was very unstable both inside the Congress and in Indian political scene in general, principal secretary of Prime Minister P.N. Haksar, had advised her “that the best way to vanquish the Syndicate would be to convert the struggle for personal power into an ideological one”.<sup>[26]</sup> This strategy should have been followed by the extensive use of socialist rhetoric. Overall, her ideologically charged cabinet urged her to keep a leftist line and distance herself from the United States and its supporters in India. The political shift to the left would also have distanced the prime minister from the Syndicate, mostly pro-American and pro-free market. After the general elections of 1967, Indira Gandhi declared that the domestic and foreign policies of the government would continue to be democratic socialism and non-alignment and the government would have to be left-of-centre.<sup>[27]</sup> These remarks were the first uncertain steps towards adopting socialist rhetoric that further on took shape of a populist one.

In 1969, Mrs. Gandhi nationalized the banking sector and took other radical and socialist-oriented economic measures which drew her closer to the Communist Party of India. The same year, Indira Gandhi decided to support the independent candidate rather the official Congress candidate

for the vacant position of president of India and thus violated the established practice in the party. As a result, she was expelled from the party for “indiscipline”. In the end, the Indian National Congress was split into two. Mrs. Gandhi and her supporters formed Congress (R), R for “Requisitionists” and Syndicate - Congress (O), for “Organisation”. After the split, Congress (R) was still left 45 seats short of majority in the Indian parliament. Indira Gandhi turned to independent parties and particularly to communists for support. The Communist Party of India entered into an alliance with Congress.

Following the split in Congress in 1969, Indira Gandhi became the target of the accusations of the Congress rival party Congress(O), according to which the prime minister had the “intention to sell India to the USSR using her secretary Parmeshwar Narain Haksar as a direct link to Moscow plotting with the Soviet embassy in New Delhi”.<sup>[28]</sup> The accusations of this type became recurrent in Gandhi’s years. The principal advisors of Indira Gandhi, more informally known as a “Kashmiri mafia” (like her, all of them were of Kashmiri origin) were in the lead and shaped her government policies. The core group consisted of Parmeshwar Narayan Haksar himself, Rameshwarnath Kao, Durga Prasad Dhar and Triloki Nath Kaul, all of them could be defined as having leftist leanings and the main promoters for strengthening Indo-Soviet relations.

In the initial stages of Mrs Gandhi’s premiership, I. Gandhi herself had some reservations about the Soviet Union. In her correspondence to T.N. Kaul written in May 1966, she was lamenting the continuous attacks from the left faction of the Congress and the Indian left parties in general. She even hinted that behind attacks from the Left were the reflections of Soviet thinking and instruction.<sup>[29]</sup> The same year, S.A. Dange, the Chairman of the CPI, fiercely and repeatedly expressed anti-Congress and anti-Government positions.<sup>[30]</sup>

The closest advisors of Prime Minister were convinced that the Communist Party of India consulted the Soviet leadership on regular basis.<sup>[31]</sup> The sudden change of the position of CPI, which in the following years would become the staunchest supporter of the government of Indira Gandhi, seemed to reinforce this assumption. By 1969, the strategic objectives of Kremlin’s foreign policy radically changed. The Sino-Soviet split was complete. Kremlin leadership found itself in a need of cordon sanitaire around China. India occupied a strategic position in this regard.<sup>[32]</sup> As a result, the Soviets necessitated an ally in the Indian government. In turn, Indira Gandhi, given the political circumstances and her own unstable position, could have used the Soviet support. Officially, the CPI adopted the strategy of collaboration with the Congress.

In 1973, D.P. Dhar, former Indian ambassador to the Soviet Union and Minister for Planning at the time, in his note to the Prime Minister stressed that “an economically weak India, and accordingly a politically weak leadership in this country, is not in accord with the broad national interest of the Soviet Union”.<sup>[33]</sup> He emphasized the convergence of interests of India and the Soviet Union owing to certain historical developments, especially those regarding Sino-Soviet split. The supposed stability of the leadership of Indira Gandhi, according to D.P. Dhar, was highly appreciated by the Soviet leaders. He added that “for this reason that they support the leadership of the Prime minister. I am convinced that they would not favour anything that could possibly undermine the PM’s position in the country or in the Party”.<sup>[34]</sup>

Soviet support for India was crucial in the East Pakistan crisis, which was brewing in the late 60s. In East wing of Pakistan, separated by the vast portion of Indian territory from its Western wing, ethnically and linguistically different from it, the movement for the independence was gaining momentum. According to the previous pro-Pakistan political line hostile to India, American President Nixon clearly favoured Pakistan and repeatedly accused India of providing military support to East Pakistan’s independence movement. As far as the Soviets were concerned, an increasing Indo-Soviet

military cooperation could have served as a profitable diplomatic strategy. Already in 1969, the Soviet Minister of Defence, Andrei Grechko, had come up with the suggestion to enshrine the cooperation in a treaty. At the time, many Indian officials had ignored the proposition, even though the Soviet pressure for signing it was mounting.<sup>[35]</sup> On the contrary, the inner circle of prime minister, from the beginning accepted enthusiastically the possibility to sign such an agreement, especially if it could contain a security guarantee against China.<sup>[36]</sup> The advisors kept on pressuring the prime minister to sign the treaty but on that occasion, she blatantly refused and even explicitly denied her ambassador to Moscow P.N. Dhar to negotiate any terms with the Soviets. Ironically, the country which removed internal opposition to the treaty with the Soviets, even amongst pro-American Indian officials, was the United States itself. The possibility that China would enter in the conflict in East Pakistan was looming in the minds of many in the Indian government, but Nixon's closest aide Henry Kissinger promised that the United States would react seriously to any Chinese move against India. Kissinger from New Delhi headed to Beijing for secret talks with the Chinese Prime Minister Zhou Enlai. Unexpected Sino-American rapprochement changed the power dynamics in South Asia and, more generally, the position of India and the superpowers. Ten days later Kissinger called in the Indian ambassador and warned him that USA would not assist India in the case of Chinese aggression. Indian officials favouring Soviet Union took it as a clear sign to seize an opportunity and sign the treaty, while those favourable to the United States asked for a treaty with both superpowers in order to maintain Indian non-alignment.<sup>[37]</sup> Eventually, the staunch pro-Pakistan line of USA quickly extinguished such hopes. The preparations for signing the treaty with the Soviets had started quite secretly. Indeed, few in the Indian government were aware of the ongoing negotiations. The Soviet side sought to use the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation signed on the 8<sup>th</sup> of August 1971 as a sort of propaganda measure in India, while Indian side tried to restrain from pompous friendship declarations and merely asked for concrete military assistance and equipment in the presence of a looming military confrontation with Pakistan. Particularly important was the clause IX of the treaty that formalized the Soviet aid to India in case of aggression and vice versa.<sup>[38]</sup>

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of December, India got involved directly in the conflict after Pakistan jetfighters carried out series of the pre-emptive strikes codenamed Operation Chengiz Khan on Indian Air Force bases. The conflict was going swiftly towards an end in favour of India. Pakistan government signed an instrument of surrender on 16<sup>th</sup> of December, which led to the creation of Bangladesh and assertion of India as a regional superpower.

Indo-Soviet treaty of Friendship and Cooperation was widely welcomed in the Indian press. Even though there were some who lamented over the lost Indian non-alignment, those voices gone astray in a wave of enthusiastic statements celebrating Indo-Soviet friendship and its importance for India. Even the chief minister of troubled Kashmir, whose borders were not far away from the external border of the Soviet Union, hailed Indo-Soviet treaty as “of great significance for the cause of world peace. <...> the treaty signed is the logical culmination of the mutual friendship and close cooperation between the two countries”. Braj Narayan Brajesh, the president of right nationalist party, All-Hindu Mahasabha, said that “with the signing of treaty the possibility of a war between Pakistan and India over Bangladesh issue had been averted. Now Pakistan, China or America has to think twice before doing anything against India”.<sup>[39]</sup> Indira Gandhi's conduct before signing the treaty and during the crisis in East Pakistan showed the sort of independence of action and thinking which probably neither the Soviet Union, nor the USA had expected. The treaty tarnished India's non-alignment position internationally, particularly in the West, but the country's victory in Bangladesh strengthened its position regionally and paradoxically reduced its dependence on the

Soviet Union. All the glory for the victory went to New Delhi and especially to Indira Gandhi who was named “Durga” after the Hindu warrior goddess, while the Soviet Union merely showed off its ability to help an ally vis-à-vis the mounting pressure from China. From then onwards the USSR relied even more on Indian support to counterbalance it.

### **Indo-Soviet Economic Relations**

During the premiership of Indira Gandhi, especially the first mandate (1966-1977), the Indo-Soviet relations reached new heights in economic field. The bilateral trade between India and the Soviet Union based on multiyear agreements rose constantly year by year. On the Indian side, trade turn eastwards was based on the hope, which many Indian and Soviet officials cherished, reducing India’s dependence on the West. A bigger goal of the Soviets, to integrate India into a world socialist economy, was not always acceptable to those Indian officials who still harboured ideals of *swadeshi* or self-sufficiency. Soviet propaganda exploited this Indian dream of *swadeshi* and often stressed USSR’s role in helping Indians to achieve it. Indian exports to the Soviet Union primarily consisted of commodities and agriculture products like tea, iron ore, raw hides and jute and in some years outnumbered those of Soviet Union to India which consisted of machinery, iron, steel or oil. Soviet-financed Indian public enterprises sold their products to the USSR but their production did not fulfil the demand of the Soviet market and paradoxically, Indian private manufacturers produced many commodities.<sup>[40]</sup> The Soviet aid to India flow continued well into 70s, but it was not that profitable due to heavy repayment conditions. Indian net outflow was financed from trade surplus, which grew constantly every year.<sup>[41]</sup>

After signing the Indo-Soviet treaty in 1971, another agreement was reached to set up a joint commission with the function of discussing and continuing the two countries’ economic plans. Active mediation of one of Indira Gandhi’s advisors D.P. Dhar in the establishment of said commission led to speculations in the Indian press that India would join the Council of Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON), the Soviet economic organization created in response to the Marshall Plan. Such plans were indeed in the minds of Indian officials, especially of D.P. Dhar, who after his ambassadorship to the Soviet Union in 1969-1971, became the Minister for Planning. In D.P. Dhar’s words, Nikolai K. Baibakov, a top Soviet official in October of 1974 “was perfectly willing to explore the idea of India establishing an informal contact with COMECON”. Concretely it might mean that India could deal with the Investment Bank and other credit agencies of COMECON without becoming a member of that organization.<sup>[42]</sup>

Even more important was the agreement on cooperation between the Gosplan, Soviet planning body and Indian Planning commission on establishment of a joint study group. First Deputy Premier A.N. Kosygin “was extremely happy about the cooperation being developed between the Gosplan and the Indian Planning Commission”. He said, “There will come a time when you will have a joint plan with us. We will not live to see it, but those who come after us will see it”.<sup>[43]</sup> The premature death of D.P. Dhar in 1975 halted the ambitions of India to merge economically even closer with the Soviet Union.

### **Emergency and Return to Power of Indira Gandhi**

Although the opposition cheered India’s victory in the Bangladesh Liberation war, dissatisfaction with the ruling party and its leader was growing. After the split of the Congress Party



in 1969, Indira Gandhi had started to pick loyal candidates for key positions in state administration and institutions. Trusty bureaucrats were rewarded for their allegiance by being installed in State Assemblies. This paved the way for the centralization process of the country, which intensified after the victory of 1971. Moreover, rampant corruption in the Congress-ruled states of India was a public secret. In 1973, the central government manifested its purpose to control the judiciary by appointing a new chief justice to the Supreme Court ignoring the well-established tradition to appoint the most senior member of the bench. A few months earlier, the Supreme Court had challenged Parliament's attempt to amend the constitution.

The divided opposition expressed louder its frustrations and doubts about the functioning of parliamentary democracy. In 1974, the unrest started by the student demonstrations in Gujarat led to the dissolution of the State Assembly. Jayaprakash Narayan, socialist and political activist, popularly referred to as JP, took the revolt to his home state of Bihar. He raised two main issues: corruption and authoritarianism of I. Gandhi's government. With these accusations, Narayan managed to unite the opposition and involve in the movement even Hindu extremists parties like JanaSangh and Hindu Mahasabha. The CPI remained loyal to Indira Gandhi and shared each point of her political agenda. Due to the presence of Hindu extremists in Jayaprakash's movement, Indira Gandhi started to discredit the protesters using slogans like "Save Democracy" and "Defeat fascists", while the Soviet press helpfully dubbed JP movement as "reactionary". In public, Indira Gandhi viewed this popular unrest like a temporary phenomenon caused by economic hardships in the country. The movement led by Jayaprakash Narayan gripped the whole country in a chain of strikes, demonstrations and riots with the sole objective being to oust the prime minister. Indira Gandhi did not succumb to pressure and declared a state of Internal Emergency on the night of June 25, 1975. The main political opponents of Indira Gandhi along with thousands of protesters were arrested, citizen rights suspended and the censorship of the press imposed.

Across Indian political spectrum, the CPI was the lone supporter of the Emergency. The Kremlin was justifying and supporting Indira Gandhi's actions. *Pravda* claimed that the measures taken by the government were just and legitimate in the context of economic crisis in India of 1975, which posed serious threats to the national unity of India. Furthermore, the Soviet press emphasized that the movement of the opposition was intended to destroy India's friendship with the socialist world and open the doors to foreign private capital. During the brief visit of Indira Gandhi to Moscow in 1976, the press praised her for defeating "rightist conspirators".<sup>[44]</sup>

Various biographers stress growing obsessions of the Prime Minister, which began in the very midst of political turmoil of the second half of the 70s. Indira Gandhi started to hint that the American intelligence activities were responsible for the growing opposition to her government. Shankar Dayal Sharma, the president of Congress (R), had been saying publicly "the CIA was plotting against the progressive forces in India".<sup>[45]</sup> On 26 June, the day the emergency was proclaimed, Indira Gandhi announced on the radio "a deep and widespread conspiracy had been brewing ever since I began to introduce certain progressive measures".<sup>[46]</sup>

The Emergency ended quite abruptly as it started. On 18 January 1977, Indira Gandhi informed the nation that elections would be held in March. Five opposition parties joined together and Janata Party was formed. The result of the first election held after the Emergency was the crushing defeat for the former prime minister and her party. The would-be Prime Minister Morarji Desai charged Mrs. Gandhi and her party "with doing whatever Soviet Union does" and declared that Indo-Soviet treaty might automatically disappear.<sup>[47]</sup> Some Janata leaders argued about the return to genuine non-alignment in Indian foreign policy, but as time went by, the Janata government concluded that given the long-standing amity, military and economic links, to change the pro-Soviet

line in Indian politics would be too risky. After discovering the security guarantees enshrined in the Indo-Soviet treaty, the government wanted to assure the Soviet leaders that the relations between the countries were to be preserved. In 1977, the Prime Minister Desai went to Moscow and repeated the old time refrain about the necessity to enhance and consolidate Indo-Soviet friendship. Despite the flirt of Janata government with the Soviets, Indira Gandhi accused repeatedly the new government of being in West's pocket and anti-Soviet in its very nature stressing that the Soviet Union is the only true friend of India. These assurances could seem a desperate cry for Soviet support, which as the future events will show, was swaying away from Indira Gandhi.

The Janata government united by the sole objective of politically destroying Indira Gandhi, but torn by internal power struggles collapsed quickly and fresh elections were called for. A landslide victory in the general elections of 1980 marked the return of Indira Gandhi to Indian politics. Relations with the Soviet Union during her second term underwent some changes and became colder due to two main reasons. First, at the end of 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, a country with which India had good relations. Another important development affected the CPI, the staunchest supporter of Indira Gandhi. The CPI was split into two in 1964 over internal factionalism, differences on strategical-tactical line of the party and evaluation of Indian National Congress. The Eleventh Congress of CPI held at the beginning of April 1977 formalized the anti-Congress line and sought "a left and democratic alternative" with the breakaway Communist Party of India (Marxist) CPI(M). The CPI pointed out that "far from isolating and suppressing rightist reactionary elements, the Emergency actually enabled them to exploit people's discontent and grab the power through a popular mandate".<sup>[48]</sup> The CPI's clumsy attempts to remodel a tarnished image by supporting the Emergency did not save the party from a serious electoral defeat while support for the CPI(M) arose. The curious detail is that a member of the Politburo G.A. Aliev attended the Eleventh Congress of the party. This led to the assumption that the Soviets approved of the new line.

The responsibility to express India's position on Soviet military operations in Afghanistan fell to Indira Gandhi. She instructed the External Affairs team that India should not condemn the Soviet invasion and express its opposition to such intervention in any country.<sup>[49]</sup> Not surprisingly, India abstained from voting on the General Assembly resolution condemning the action. Indira Gandhi assured Parliament that "India would make every effort to ensure speedy withdrawal of Russian troops from Afghanistan".<sup>[50]</sup> Although the pro-Soviet rhetoric remained unchanged throughout the second term of Indira Gandhi, a chill crept into Indo-Soviet relations. The Soviet press did not congratulate Mrs. Gandhi's re-election as they had previously. This could have been foreseen by the fact that the Soviets openly blessed the decision of the CPI to seek unity with the CPI(M) during the Eleventh Congress of the Communist Party of India held in 1977.

Though India did not condemn officially the Soviet move in Afghanistan, it kept insisting, in vain, for the withdrawal of Soviet troops using diplomatic tactics and relying on the support of neighbouring countries of Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. The brief visit of Andrei Gromyko, the Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs, to New Delhi was to inform Indian government that the Soviets had no intention to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan.<sup>[51]</sup> After a while, India decided to separate the issue of Afghanistan from the working scheme of Indo-Soviet relations, much to the relief of both Soviet and Indian governments.

Before the state visit of Brezhnev to New Delhi in December 1980, the Indian side wished to sign new agreements of arms supply and trade. However, during the meeting, Indira Gandhi raised the question regarding the CPI's withdrawal of support for her government. At a reception arranged in honour of the Soviet leader she stated that "understandably, we face onslaught from the right and, not so understandably, from the left".<sup>[52]</sup> Later, Brezhnev mentioned Mrs. Gandhi's remarks during

his meeting with the CPI delegation but he did not require a change in the party's position. Although Indira Gandhi kept pressuring the Soviets to bring the CPI into line, they ignored the request.

Simultaneously, S.A. Dange, a founding member of the CPI, was expelled for "indiscipline" from the party. The sharp contrasts of opinion on the support for the Congress of Indira Gandhi had arisen right after the Emergency, in 1977. The glimpses of internal conflict inside the CPI could be caught in the correspondence between Rajeshwara Rao, General Secretary of the CPI and S.A. Dange, the Chairman of the party. The first episode of S.A. Dange's "indiscipline" occurred few months after the Eleventh Congress of the CPI where the new anti-Congress Party line was adopted. On 4 December 1977, S.A. Dange had delivered the speech at the Krishna Menon memorial meeting in which he expressed his view that "Indira Gandhi should be pardoned for all her sins" and declared his support for her adding that he was "speaking in his personal capacity". On 22<sup>nd</sup>, one day before his party issued an official note condemning his actions, Dange sent his resignations of Chairmanship by telegram justifying his action "on the grounds of health".<sup>[53]</sup> R. Rao heatedly reminded S.A. Dange that his pro-Congress stance did not conform the Party's accepted policy and he did not accept his resignations by telegram.<sup>[54]</sup> The eventual outcome of the tensions inside the CPI was the formation of a splinter party All-India Communist Party (AIPC) in 1981 led by Dange's daughter Roza Deshpande and formed by his stalwarts. S.A. Dange, still a member of the CPI, attended in person the first congress of the new party. For this gesture, he was expelled from the CPI. The Soviet Union did not give the new party any political endorsement.

The Soviets did not express their position regarding the tensions between the ruling Congress and the CPI, even though from the end of the 70s it was speculated that the Soviets supported the R. Rao faction inside the CPI and its "left unity" line. Only in 1982, quite trivial event exposed Soviet stance towards S.A. Dange and his supporters. On February 10, the news reached India that Soviets refused to grant a transit visa to S.A. Dange who was going to attend the annual meeting of Soviet-controlled World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) in Havana. This gesture was interpreted as a clear signal to S.A. Dange that he is no longer relevant. Furthermore, this episode set discussions in India as to whether the Soviets still approved of Indira Gandhi. Some saw that due to S.A. Dange's uncritical pro-Indira Gandhi stand, he was used previously as a useful link between Soviet leaders and Indian Prime Minister in times of need. After the conflict between the factions of Rao and Dange within the CPI, it was widely believed that the Soviets prevented a possible exodus of members from the CPI to the newly formed AIPC led by Dange's daughter. Dange himself said that it became apparent that Moscow's fraternisation of I. Gandhi has been "tactical", while its relations with Indian communists were held to be of "strategic" importance.<sup>[55]</sup> In another words, the Soviets always had an objective in mind to encourage breakaway CPI(M) and the CPI to merge in order to control Indian communist movement.

## Cultural Relations

Tensions between Indira Gandhi, the CPI and the Soviet Union were not confined merely to politics. The cultural relations between India and the Soviet Union constituted an important and crucial part of Indo-Soviet ties and became an additional instrument in power struggles.

The Indo-Soviet Cultural Society (ISCUS) played a crucial role in controlling cultural exchange between the two countries. Indo-Soviet Cultural Society was founded in 1942 in India with the name *Friends of the Soviet Union*. The principal aim of the organization was "to establish cultural contact between Soviet and Indian people". The association closely collaborated with VOKS

(All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries), an entity created by the Soviet government. In 1952, FSU ceased to exist, changed its name and became the Indo-Soviet Cultural Society (ISCUS).

The Indo-Soviet Cultural Society published journals and books, organized symposiums, conferences, exhibitions, film screenings all-over India and in the Soviet republics in collaboration with Soviet- Indian Friendship Society. The ISCUS carried out its activities under the direction of the following committees: Committee for Russian language training, for Higher Education, for the Promotion of Mutual Understanding, Publishing Committee, just to mention a few directive bodies.<sup>[56]</sup> During years when Indira Gandhi was in power, the closest advisors of the prime minister like P.N. Haksar, P.N. Dhar, and T.N. Kaul, members of parliament, government and of the most important Indian universities participated in the activities of ISCUS; Indira Gandhi herself occasionally delivered opening addresses at its conferences.<sup>[57]</sup> On the occasion of the seventh Annual Conference of ISCUS, a diplomat and a former ambassador to the Soviet Union, K.P.S. Menon was elected as President of ISCUS and T.N. Kaul as Vice-President. In 1978, K.P.S. Menon was awarded the Lenin Peace Prize, which was usually conferred on prominent communists and supporters of the Soviet Union who were not Soviet citizens. Among its winners were Fidel Castro, Pablo Picasso, Nelson Mandela, Salvador Allende and posthumously Indira Gandhi.

For many years, ISCUS was controlled by the CPI, which enjoyed the government's support. The Communist Party of India used Indo-Soviet cultural societies, scattered all over India, as a levers for money, power and influence in the dealings with the Soviet Communist world.<sup>[58]</sup> In 1981, during the period when her disaccords with both CPI and Soviet Union grew sharper, Indira Gandhi set up a rival organization called *Friends of the Soviet Union* to counter the CPI-dominated Indo-Soviet Cultural Society (ISCUS). The official inauguration of the FSU symbolically took place on the anniversary of Jawaharlal Nehru's death. I. Gandhi claimed that the revival of this historic organization would enable Indo-Soviet friendship to be more effective and non-partisan. Mrs. Gandhi stressed that the FSU was qualified to fulfil the role of promoter of Indo-Soviet friendship because "it had people of different political affiliations and many other who have no party loyalties". At that time, Indira Gandhi emphasized "the need to liberate the movement from the clutches of those who considered themselves to be custodians of Indo-Soviet friendship. <...> it was the professional friends and foes of the Soviet Union who created problems for us".<sup>[59]</sup> What these claims revealed indirectly was the actual discontent of Indira Gandhi with the decision of the CPI to withdraw its support for her and apparent Soviet approval of this new line. This event was a clear warning to the CPI and the Soviets. In fact, both of them met the founding of an alternative friendship association with anxiety and confusion.

L.I. Rovnin led 10-member Soviet delegation to the first convention of the Friends of the Soviet Union; instead, ISCUS function organized two days later was sparsely attended. Then after both conventions he and Soviet ambassador to India, Y.M. Vorontsov, delivered speeches in which they made clear that the ISCUS should be the main body in developing and promoting Indo-Soviet friendship despite the setting up of a rival organization by the Congress (I) with the blessings of the Prime Minister.<sup>[60]</sup> The cultural relations of India with the Soviet Union was always more of a political matter. From the Soviet side, these relations were controlled by the entities created by government and the objectives of cultural relations were more or less compatible with the foreign policy ones. Tightly controlled Soviet cultural relations offered to Indian political figures not so evident but highly effective tool to communicate with and press its demands on the Soviet government.

## Concluding Remarks

During the years of Jawaharlal Nehru when Indo-Soviet friendship was launched mostly in the economic field, the Prime Minister himself hoped for rapprochement with China, but bitter disillusionment after the events of 1962 left all the hopes shattered. In the same period due to the Sino-Soviet split, the Soviet Union too felt compelled and constrained at the same time to befriend India even more closely. Following Nehru's 17 years-long premiership which ended 1964, his successor Lal Bahadur died unexpectedly in 1966 leaving a political vacuum behind. The unstable position of the new Prime Minister Indira Gandhi forced her to seek support among the Left as even the factions of her own party was bitterly against her.

In later years, Indira Gandhi always stressed that she is not a socialist, but a pragmatist and presented her radical socialist policies as the only available path for India's growth. Pandit Nehru's socialist leanings were not so deeply enshrined in the political thought of his daughter, who used to turn political battles into ideological ones taking advantage by means of instrumental use of socialist rhetoric. The Soviet Union, the source of inspiration for developing countries, which aimed to industrialize rapidly, had become an early economic model for India too. In the years of Indira Gandhi, the friendship with the Soviet Union became a political instrument not only to strengthen the position of India internationally but was also used as the trump card in domestic politics. Deteriorating Soviet Union's and India's relations with China, eventual Sino-American rapprochement, pro-Pakistan tilt of the USA and turbulent Indian domestic politics in the 60s and 70s were decisive factors which deepened and transformed the Indo-Soviet friendship into a full-fledged strategic partnership.

---

<sup>[1]</sup>David C. Engerman, *The Price of Aid: The Economic Cold War in India*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2018), p. 273.

<sup>[2]</sup>Francine R. Frankel, *India's Political Economy 1947-2004: The Gradual Revolution*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 71.

<sup>[3]</sup>Robert H. Donaldson, *Soviet Policy toward India: Ideology and Strategy*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp. 70–71.

<sup>[4]</sup>N. Jayapalan, *Foreign Policy of India*, (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001), p. 79.

<sup>[5]</sup>Ibid, p. 71.

<sup>[6]</sup>“Record of the conversation between I.V. Stalin and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan”  
<https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/119261>

<sup>[7]</sup>Gopal Sarvepalli, *Jawaharlal Nehru: A Biography, Volume One (1889-1947)*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 260.

<sup>[8]</sup>Francine R. Frankel, *When Nehru Looked East: Origins of India-US Suspicion and India-China Rivalry*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 5-9.

<sup>[9]</sup>Walter Isaacson and Evan Thomas, *The Wise Men: Six Friends and the World They Made*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987).

<sup>[10]</sup>Francine R. Frankel, *India's Political Economy 1947-2004: The Gradual Revolution*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 634; and P.N. Dhar, *Indira Gandhi, The 'Emergency' and Indian Democracy*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 113.

<sup>[11]</sup>Francine R. Frankel, *When Nehru Looked East: Origins of India-US Suspicion and India-China Rivalry*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. xiii.

<sup>[12]</sup>T.J.S. George, *Krishna Menon: A Biography*, (Bombay: Jaico Publishing House, 1966).

<sup>[13]</sup>Francine R. Frankel, *India's Political Economy 1947-2004: The Gradual Revolution*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 54.

<sup>[14]</sup>Jawaharlal Nehru, "Changing India", *Foreign Affairs*, vol.41, no. 3 (1963), pp. 462-463.

<sup>[15]</sup>Before his death in 1950, Minister of Home Affairs Vallabhbhai Patel repeatedly warned Nehru emphasizing that Chinese communism was merely a bellicose form of nationalism.

Ramachandra Guha, *India after Gandhi: The History of the World's Largest Democracy*, (London: pan Macmillan Ltd, 2008), pp. 334-338.

<sup>[16]</sup>Bernard D'Mello, "Soviet Collaboration in Indian Steel Industry, 1954-84", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 23, No. 10 (1988), pp. 473-486.

<sup>[17]</sup>Howard L. Erdman, *The Swatantra Party and Indian conservatism*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 131.

<sup>[18]</sup>Hafeez Malik, *Soviet-Pakistan Relations and Post-Soviet Dynamics, 1947-1992*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan Limited, 2016), p. 121.

<sup>[19]</sup>"Tashkent Declaration signed by Prime Minister of India and President of Pakistan", <https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/5993/Tashkent+Declaration>

<sup>[20]</sup>Ramachandra Guha, *India after Gandhi: The History of the World's Largest Democracy*, (London: pan Macmillan Ltd, 2008), pp. 409-410.

<sup>[21]</sup>I Instalment, *Correspondence Indira Gandhi*, subject no. 137, The papers of T.N. Kaul, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML), New Delhi.

<sup>[22]</sup>David Lockwood, *The Communist Party of India and the Indian Emergency*, (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2016), pp. 75-76.

[23]CPI, *Party Education Series: Grade I Course* (New Delhi: Communist Party of India, 1972), p. 32.

[24]Nihal Singh, *The Yogi and the Bear: Story of Indo-Soviet Relations*, (London: Mansell Publishing Limited, 1986), p. 57.

[25]I Instalment, *Correspondence Indira Gandhi*, subject no. 55, The papers of T.N. Kaul, NMML.

[26]Inder Malhotra, *Indira Gandhi: a personal and political biography*, (London: Coronet books, 1991), pp. 116-117.

[27]Ram S. Kochar, *Congress and Socialism: Economic Programmes and Policies*, (New Delhi: Anamika Publishers & Distributors, 1997), p. 135.

[28]Katherine Frank, *Indira: The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, Harper Perennial, London 2005, p. 317.

[29]I Instalment, *Correspondence Indira Gandhi*, subject no. 83, The papers of T.N. Kaul, NMML.

[30]Ibid.

[31]Ibid.

[32]Satindra Singh, *Communists in Congress: Kumaramangalam's thesis*, (New Delhi: D.K. Publishing House, 1973), xx.

[33]III Instalment, *Planning Minister's notes to Prime Minister regarding his discussions with Soviet*, subject no. 10, The Papers of P.N. Haksar, NMML.

[34]Ibid.

[35]David C. Engerman, *The Price of Aid: The Economic Cold War in India*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2018), pp. 309-311.

[36]Ibid, pp. 325-327.

[37]Ibid, pp. 309-331.

[38]"Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Co-operation"  
<https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/5139/Treaty+of>

[39]The Times of India, 11 August 1971.

[40]David C. Engerman, *The Price of Aid: The Economic Cold War in India*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2018), p. 296.

[41]III Instalment, *Letters received by PN Haksar as a Principal Secretary to Prime Minister on*

various issues from Indian ambassador such as D.P. Dhar, Dr S. , B. Pant. Includes record of conversation between Chairman Kosygin and Ambassador D.P. Dhar on 23 March 1971, subject no. 81, The Papers of P.N. Haksar, NMML.

[42]III Instalment, *Planning Minister's notes to Prime Minister regarding his discussions with Soviets*, subject no. 76, The Papers of P.N. Haksar, NMML.

[43]Ibid.

[44]Nihal Singh, *The Yogi and the Bear: Story of Indo-Soviet Relations*, (London: Mansell Publishing Limited, 1986), p. 129.

[45]Inder Malhotra, *Indira Gandhi: a personal and political biography*, (London: Coronet books, 1991), p. 156 and Katherine Frank, *Indira: The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, (London: Harper Perennial, 2005).

[46]*Indira Gandhi: Selected Speeches and Writings 1972 to 1977*, (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1984).

[47]Nihal Singh, *The Yogi and the Bear: Story of Indo-Soviet Relations*, (London: Mansell Publishing Limited, 1986), p. 134.

[48]*Political Review Report (Adopted by the Eleventh Congress)*, (New Delhi: CPI Publications, 1978), p. 21.

[49]Nihal Singh, *The Yogi and the Bear: Story of Indo-Soviet Relations*, (London: Mansell Publishing Limited, 1986), p. 159.

[50]Ibid, p. 160.

[51]Ibid, p. 165.

[52]Ibid, p. 173.

[53]II Instalment, subject no. 48, The Papers of S.A. Dange, NMML.

[54]II Instalment, subject no. 51, The Papers of S.A. Dange, NMML.

[55]*The Times of India*, February 10 1982.

[56]Peter Sager, *Moscow's hand in India: an analysis of Soviet propaganda*, (Berne: Swiss Eastern Institute, 1966), pp. 169-170.

[57]Rasheeduddin Khan (ed.), *India and the Soviet Union: Cooperation and development*, (Bombay: Allied Publishers, 1975), pp. 1-5.

[58]Nihal Singh, *The Yogi and the Bear: Story of Indo-Soviet Relations*, (London: Mansell Publishing Limited, 1986), p. 174.



[59] *The Times of India*, May 28 1981.

[60] *The Times of India*, May 30 1981.

---

\***Elena N. Jucyte** - PhD, Italian Institute of Oriental Studies, Sapienza University of Rome  
e-mail: [elenanora.jucyte@uniroma1.it](mailto:elenanora.jucyte@uniroma1.it)