

LSE

THE LONDON SCHOOL  
OF ECONOMICS AND  
POLITICAL SCIENCE ■

# LSE Research Online

**Taylor C. Sherman**

## “A new type of revolution”: socialist thought in India, 1940s-1960s

**Article (Accepted version)  
(Refereed)**

**Original citation:**

Sherman, Taylor C. (2018) “A new type of revolution”: socialist thought in India, 1940s-1960s. [Postcolonial Studies](#). ISSN 1368-8790 (In Press)

© 2018 The Institute of Postcolonial Studies

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/88138/>  
Available in LSE Research Online: May 2018

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

This document is the author’s final accepted version of the journal article. There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher’s version if you wish to cite from it.

## **“A New Type of Revolution”: Socialist Thought in India, 1940s-1960s**

**Taylor C. Sherman**

**Department of International History, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK**

**Abstract:** Although it is often said that early postcolonial India was socialist, scholars have tended to take this term for granted. This article investigates how Indians defined socialism in the two decades after independence. It finds that there were six areas of agreement among Indian socialists: the centrality of the individual, the indispensability of work, the continued importance of private property, that the final goal was a more equal – but not flat – society, that this change had to be brought about without violence, and that the final goal of Indian socialism ought to be spiritual fulfilment. Understanding how Indians defined their version of socialism, it is argued, will help scholars re-evaluate the role of the first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, in defining the goals India pursued after independence. It will also re-orient our understanding of the expectations and limitations of the Indian state in this crucial period in Indian history.

**Keywords:** socialism, postcolonial political thought, Gandhian political thought, Nehruvian consensus, state, cooperatives

Scholarship on the history of early postcolonial India has begun to gain pace over the past decade or more. Clustering around the aftermath of partition,<sup>1</sup> development programmes,<sup>2</sup> and India’s democratic state,<sup>3</sup> historians have begun to reveal a more complex and dynamic picture of the first two decades after independence. In these works, readers find frequent mention of India’s socialism in this period. And yet, this supposedly foundational ideology remains largely unexamined. This gap in the scholarship is surprising because many Indians acknowledged after 1947 that the ideas that had underpinned the previous four decades of political organisation, viz. nationalism, were no longer sufficient to give shape to political life in independent India. Thus, although postcolonial Indian history is notoriously hampered by a dearth of sources, there is no shortage of published works by Indian political thinkers after 1947. The decades after independence, it turns out, were a time of intense discussion about which ideas and ideals ought to underpin the new nation. The following pages explore socialist thought in mid-twentieth-century India with the objective of sketching the outlines of Indian socialism for the first time.

Although this is an exploration of ideas rather than action, identifying the main features of Indian socialism engenders a broader re-assessment of early postcolonial Indian history in three ways. Firstly, whereas the existing scholarship tends to regard Jawaharlal Nehru as the primary philosopher-king and architect of independent India, the follow pages reveal him to be a more marginal character when it came to defining the content of Indian socialism. Secondly, challenging

---

<sup>1</sup> Chatterji, Joya, *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947-1967* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Zamindar, Vazira, *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Immerwahr, Daniel, *Thinking Small: the United States and the Lure of Community Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); Engerman, David, *The Price of Aid: The Economic Cold War in India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Gould, William, *Bureaucracy, Community and Influence in India: Society and the State, 1930s-1960s* (London: Routledge, 2010); Shani, Ornit, *How India Became Democratic: Citizenship and the Making of the Universal Franchise* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

the existing consensus about India in this period, this research highlights the relatively limited role of the state in Indian Socialist thought. India's was a socialism of scarcity and self-help. India's socialists, while not discounting the state altogether, emphasised the development of the individual and the importance of voluntary collective action to achieve the revolution they imagined. Finally, the article seeks to bring to light the unwritten hierarchies of gender and class that were embedded in postcolonial socialist thinking. In so doing, the aim is to provide a clearer picture of the possibilities and the limitations of this seminal Indian ideology.

Until very recently, historians have not deemed socialist political thought in India to be worthy of much attention. To one group of scholars, socialism in India was seen to be, at best, an off-the-shelf variation of socialist thought developed elsewhere, or, at worst, an unfortunate imitation of economic ideas centring on the planned economy which fit very poorly in India.<sup>4</sup> Recent scholarship, however, has undermined the idea that India's five-year plans were at the heart of Indian socialism. Planning, it has been shown, is not inherently socialist.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, capitalists were often able to co-opt or simply undercut any socialist aims in the five-year plans.<sup>6</sup> In light of these developments, this article seeks to broaden the scope of enquiry beyond the plans to explore the wider range of ideas which constituted Indian socialism.

To another group of scholars, Indian socialism and Nehruvian socialism were virtually coterminous.<sup>7</sup> However, Nehru preferred not to turn what he termed his 'basic approach' into a more elaborate political philosophy. The focus on Nehru, therefore, has both overstated his importance and painted a misleading picture of uniformity (or worse, barrenness) in Indian political thinking after 1947. Christopher Bayly, in one of his last articles, began to take Indian socialism seriously, turning his attention beyond Nehru to his close circle of peers. Bayly seemed to conclude, however, that India's socialists were not really very socialist at all. Rather, their thought was not much more than an amalgam of fragments of other great doctrines, including liberal democracy, communitarianism and eugenics.<sup>8</sup> Although he acknowledged that these ideas were transformed as they were imported from outside, Bayly's primary method was to assess Indian ideas according to the degree to which they conformed to concepts developed outside of India.

This article adopts a different methodology. While sensitive to the global flow of ideas, it examines Indian socialism on its own terms, rather than by holding it up to an imagined pure form of socialism developed elsewhere.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, historians of socialist ideas in Europe have discarded the notion that there was ever a single, cardinal version of the creed.<sup>10</sup> Indian socialists engaged with socialist thought and policy around the world. Thus, this might be thought of as a work of pluralisation, exploring the multivalent development of socialist ideas as they circulated through India in the

---

<sup>4</sup> Chatterjee, Partha, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), ch.5.

<sup>5</sup> Ekbladh, David, *The Great American Mission: Modernization and the Construction of an American World Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), p.1-5.

<sup>6</sup> Chibber, Vivek, *Locked in Place: State-Building and Late Industrialisation in India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp.133-147.

<sup>7</sup> Khilnani, Sunil, *The Idea of India* (London: Penguin Books, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, 2003), pp.75-88.

<sup>8</sup> Bayly, C.A., 'The Ends of Liberalism and the Political Thought of Nehru's India', *Modern Intellectual History* 12:3 (2015), pp.605-626, p.606.

<sup>9</sup> Chakrabarty, Dipesh, *Provincialising Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), ch.1.

<sup>10</sup> Sassoon, Donald, 'Socialism in the Twentieth Century: An Historical Reflection', *Journal of Political Ideologies* 5:1 (2000), pp.17-34, p.18.

middle of the twentieth century. To this end, this article explores the thinking of those who identified themselves as socialist. Some of the individuals wore the mantle of socialism lightly, using the term frequently, but declining to define it. Others thought and wrote extensively, defining Indian socialism for themselves and, they hoped, for a larger audience. Others still, remained busy with their own projects, only referring to socialism at the margins. Focusing primarily on published works in which these thinkers defined the problems of the day and the aims of the revolutions they pursued, this research identifies themes that were central to the project that these thinkers called socialism.

In the following pages, Indian socialist thought is divided into three strands. In so doing, the aim is not to imply that these were discrete schools of thought within the socialist tradition. Rather, the object is to provide a structure within which it is easier to bring out the texture of Indian socialist thinking. The first strand might be called the Congress Left. They included India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, but to label them Nehruvian socialists would overstate his influence. Nehru did not much care to philosophise about what socialism was. He preferred to 'avoid precise definitions because they tend to become dogmas and slogans which come in the way of clear thinking'.<sup>11</sup> Just as this strand was not confined to one person, the Congress Left also did not encompass the whole party, which embraced a far wider span of ideas. Those considered below include Vijayalakshmi Pandit, an eminent diplomat of the era and Nehru's sister, and Sampurnanand, a prominent Congressman from Uttar Pradesh. These men and women articulated their version of socialism in speeches to national and international audiences, and they wrote treatises on Socialism to refine their ideas. Those in this strand did tend to accept the necessity of using the levers of state power to pursue India's social and economic transformation. However, one must not overstate the importance of the state in this line of thinking.<sup>12</sup> Members of the Congress Left were also advocates of self-help in building a socialist society. Bottom-up activity was admired in part because the state lacked the resources to act in many fields, but also because self-help was regarded as an essential element of individual growth and societal advancement.

The second strand might be called the Opposition Socialists. This group included the Socialist Party, or Praja Socialist Party (PSP), as it became known after 1952. Although originally part of the Congress (and known as the Congress Socialist party), the Socialist Party, broke away with the aim of becoming the main opposition party to the Congress.<sup>13</sup> The PSP was a constantly changing organisation, combining with the Kisan Mazdoor Party, and then later splitting in 1955. Many of these Opposition Socialists were associated with the PSP, but only for a time. One of the main ideologues in this group was Rammanohar Lohia, who founded the Party's journal, *Mankind*, and served as the PSP's General Secretary for a short time. Others like Jayaprakash Narayan, joined briefly and then moved on. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, who was one of the founding members of the Congress Socialist Party, falls into this grouping. She pressed for women's uplift, assisted in refugee rehabilitation, and worked for the revival of indigenous performative arts and village handicrafts. After an unsuccessful bid for elected office on a Socialist Party ticket in the first general

---

<sup>11</sup> Nehru, Jawaharlal, 'The Socialist Goal (extract from Maulana Azad Memorial Lectures)', H. D. Malaviya (ed.), *Congressmen's Primer for Socialism (A Compilation)* (1959), p.185

<sup>12</sup> Zachariah emphasises the differences between Gandhi and Nehru on the role of the state, Benjamin Zachariah, *Developing India: an Intellectual and Social History, c.1930-1950* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), ch.4; Khilnani, *The Idea of India*, pp.70-75.

<sup>13</sup> "'Yeh Azadi Jhoothi hai": The Shaping of the Opposition in the First Year of the Congress Raj', *Modern Asian Studies*, 48:5 (2014), pp.1358-1388; Shah, Sonal, *Indian Socialists: Search for Identity* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1994).

election, she left the party. These men and women ran for and held public offices, published regularly on the main issues of the day, and engaged in large-scale political and social work outside the purview of government. Like the Congress Left, the Opposition Socialists advocated a mix of state action and self-help. However, these socialists were keener than the ruling Congress Party on using the tactics of opposition developed during the national movement, such as strikes and *satyagraha* (civil disobedience).<sup>14</sup> Unlike many members of the Congress, who grew uncomfortable at the mention of caste, the PSP was an early advocate of reservations for Dalits and Adivasis, as well as for women and 'backward castes'.<sup>15</sup>

The final strand was the Gandhian Socialists. Many of these men and women did not always use the term socialism, preferring instead the Gandhian neologism, *sarvodaya* (uplift of all). These included the Tamil-Christian economic thinker, J.C. Kumarappa, as well as the ascetic crusader, Vinoba Bhave, regarded by some (not least himself), as Gandhi's spiritual heir. Ashoka Gupta, the eminent social service worker who devoted her life to refugee rehabilitation and uplift of the rural poor, especially women, fell into this group. These women and men tended to be found more often engaging in the politics of doing as they worked on the ground to realise their ideals. They also published widely on contemporary issues and wrote regularly to state and national leaders, who engaged with their ideas. The Gandhians mostly pursued their objectives outside the purview of the state, but one must not over-interpret their thinking as being aggressively anti-statist. Many viewed their efforts as complementary to state activity. Rather, what truly set them apart from the Congress Left and the Opposition Socialists was their advocacy of the austere life, not just for select individuals but for everyone. With this ideal they elaborated a fundamentally different approach to the economic life of the nation.

It must be admitted from the outset that the division of these thinkers into these three strands is somewhat artificial. Indeed, many individuals are not easy to place definitively within one strand, not least because their political thinking often entailed a 'zigzag journey'.<sup>16</sup> Thus, Jayaprakash Narayan straddled both the Opposition Socialists and the Gandhian Socialists, but also remained friends with members of the Congress Left including Nehru. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur had been Gandhi's secretary for sixteen years and shared many of his ideas, but she also took up positions in Nehru's Cabinet after independence. Still, readers more familiar with these figures may bristle at the thought of placing Bhave and Lohia in the same orbit, or the Praja Socialist Party with the Gandhians. Only by reading these political thinkers together can we begin to discern the fact that they shared a reasonably coherent set of ideas that they called Indian Socialism. Like any other tradition of political thought, it included not only a shared core, but also debates and lacunae.

These three strands of socialist thought in India evolved over time, developing in dialogue with socialisms in the Soviet Union and Europe. To give a schematic picture of this dialogue as it developed between the 1930s and 1960s, one can say that in the 1930s, one witnessed the strong influence of Marxism and the Soviets on Indian socialists. Many, from Jawaharlal Nehru to Jayaprakash Narayan advocated a state monopoly over most of the economy, including industry and

---

<sup>14</sup> Praja Socialist Party, *Statement of Policy* (Bombay: Praja Socialist Party, 1956), p.31

<sup>15</sup> Socialist Party of India, 'Socialist Party Election Manifesto (1962)', R. Lohia (ed.), *Marx, Gandhi and Socialism*. (Hyderabad: Navahind, 1963), p.522.

<sup>16</sup> Jani, Pranav, 'Bihar, California, and the US Midwest: the Early Radicalization of Jayaprakash Narayan', *Postcolonial Studies* 16:2 (2013), pp.155-168, p.156.

trade.<sup>17</sup> Still, there were some deviations in these early years: many Indians who were attracted to socialism did not agree with the idea that nationalism was a bourgeois ideology. By the 1940s most socialists in India were emphasising the importance of pursuing change through peaceful means, especially through democratic processes. Along with the rest of the world in the 1950s, many Indian socialists began to acknowledge more openly the crimes of Stalinism. Indian socialism evolved to decry the way Soviet communism trampled the individual. Equally, socialists in the 1950s began to learn from early experiments of government in India after independence. By the 1960s, India's socialism changed further in light of the experience of the first two plans.

Although socialism had wide purchase in postcolonial India, socialist thought was not ubiquitous; it was distinct from rival political ideas on the right and on the left. In particular, Indian socialists took pains to set themselves apart from the Communist Party of India on at least three fronts. The first was the alleged willingness of the communists to resort to violence. Vinoba Bhave, who dedicated his life to quelling communist-inspired peasant uprisings in the 1950s derided the apparent attachment of India's communists to violence: 'Communists would rather accept a stone achieved through struggle than a piece of bread secured through persuasion and change of heart.'<sup>18</sup> The Communist Party of India had initially pursued revolution via peasant revolts, but by 1951, they had put down their arms in order to pursue change through the ballot box. Nonetheless, India's socialists continued to accuse communists of advocating violence, ignoring the evolution of communist thinking. The second critique of communism was that it required, 'suppression of individual freedom'.<sup>19</sup> This criticism gained volume in the 1950s as news of Stalin's excesses became widely accepted in the outside world. Finally, socialists accused India's Communists of doing Russia's bidding. As Vinoba Bhave put it, 'If Russia changes its line of action they do likewise. They have no independent intelligence of their own.'<sup>20</sup> This allegation implied that India's Communists had committed the cardinal sin of a newly independent people: submitting themselves to foreign domination again. One suspects that these criticisms were more a caricature than an accurate appraisal of communist thought in India.<sup>21</sup> However, there are very few studies of communists in early postcolonial India, and none that explore their political thought in this period; a comparison of India's two leftist ideologies still awaits its historian.<sup>22</sup>

In spite of its evolution over time, one can identify a core, which was in place by the late 1940s and early 1950s. Most socialists agreed that their socialism was not the same as Russian or European socialism. In fact, the whole Cold War did not offer much of a choice, whether in foreign policy or domestic. Rammanohar Lohia, in his speech to the Asian Socialist Conference held in Rangoon in

---

<sup>17</sup> On Jayaprakash Narayan, Prasad, Bimla, 'Introduction', B. Prasad (ed.), *Socialism, Sarvodaya and Democracy: Selected Works of Jayaprakash Narayan*. (London: Asia Publishing House, 1964). pp.ix-xliii. On Nehru: Purushotham, Sunil, 'World History in the Atomic Age: Past, Present and Future in the Political Thought of Jawaharlal Nehru', *Modern Intellectual History*, first view, 2016, p.17

<sup>18</sup> Bhave, Vinoba, *Sarvodaya and Communism* (Tanjore: Sarvodaya Prachuralaya, 1957), p.10

<sup>19</sup> Nehru, Jawaharlal, 'The Basic Approach', reprinted in Sampurnanand, *Indian Socialism*. (London: Asia Publishing House, 1958). pp.67-79, p.70.

<sup>20</sup> Bhave, Vinoba, *Bhoodan Yajna (Land-Gifts Mission)* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1953), p.127.

<sup>21</sup> On deviation between the CPI and Moscow in the 1930s see, Roy, Franziska, and Benjamin Zachariah, 'Meerut and a Hanging: "Young India," Popular Socialism, and the Dynamics of Imperialism', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 33:3 (2013), pp.360-377, p.361.

<sup>22</sup> For a recent overview of the history of the Communist Party of India, Chakrabarty, Bidyut, *Communism in India: Events, Processes and Ideologies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). On Communism in Pakistan during this period, see, Ali, Kamran Asdar, *Communism in Pakistan: Politics and Class Activism 1947-1972* (London: IB Taurus, 2015).

1952, summarised this feeling when he declared that capitalism and communism were 'equally irrelevant to human civilisation. Votaries of Mr Ford or Mr Stalin may yet wage grim wars but the solution of man's misery lies elsewhere.'<sup>23</sup> What India needed, instead, in Vinoba Bhave's words, was 'a new type of revolution'.<sup>24</sup>

Indian socialists believed they could chart a path to this new type of revolution. While there were important debates within this tradition, there were six broad areas of agreement: the centrality of the individual, the importance of work, the continued relevance of private property, that the final goal was a more equal society, the necessity of pursuing their aims without violence, and, finally, that Indians' collective transformation would include a spiritual dimension. After discussing these areas of overlapping consensus,<sup>25</sup> this article will turn to consider one important lacuna in Indian socialist thought: how to move from the reform of individuals to the transformation of society.

### **For the All-Round Development of the Individual**

The central figure of Indian socialism was the individual, and this remained unchanged in the two decades after independence. Indian socialists rejected the stark choice between the individual and the collective that seemed to be on offer in choosing between western capitalism and communism. Instead, the individual and the community were to be reformed together. As Sampurnanand put it, 'We often hear of the interests of society but, as a matter of fact, society can have no interests other than those of its constituent units. Its...sole duty, lies in creating conditions conducive to the free all-round development of the individual.'<sup>26</sup>

This surprising focus on the individual had its origins in three historical factors. The first was the experience of colonialism. To focus on individual freedom was to discard imperialist practices which governed entire populations, and which tended to regard Indian life as dispensable. The second influence was anti-colonial thought, especially that of Mohandas K. Gandhi. When it came to the relationship between the individual and the collective, Gandhi rejected the utilitarian maxim of the greatest good for the greatest number, given the implication that some would always be left behind in this equation.<sup>27</sup> Indian socialists had adopted a similar position. Describing her work on refugee rehabilitation, Ashoka Gupta summarised this approach: 'just as one cannot ignore the social problems in general, ignoring individual/personal problems does not really lead to much progress. Overlooking the needs of ... even one person in the name of the greater common good burdens the mind.'<sup>28</sup> Thirdly, the prominent place of the individual owed something to the critique of Stalinism which intensified after his death in 1953. Discussing Soviet Communism in 1958, Nehru noted that he had 'the greatest admiration for many of the achievements of the Soviet Union', but that communist countries had been wrong to coerce individuals in the pursuit of larger aims and to

---

<sup>23</sup> Lohia, Rammanohar, *Aspects of Socialist Policy*, (Bombay: Socialist Party of India, 1952), p.17.

<sup>24</sup> Bhave, Vinoba, *Bhoodan Yajna (Land-Gifts Mission)*, (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1953), p.16

<sup>25</sup> Rawls, John, 'The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus', *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies*, 7:1 (1987), pp.1-25, pp.4-5.

<sup>26</sup> Sampurnanand, *Indian Socialism*, pp.9-10.

<sup>27</sup> Mohandas Gandhi *Hind Swaraj and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, 2014), p.49

<sup>28</sup> Gupta, Ashoka, *A Fighting Spirit: Selected Writings of Ashoka Gupta*. (New Delhi: Niyogi Books, 2013), p.29

exterminate those who did not comply.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, he argued, 'real social progress will come only when opportunity is given to the individual to develop'.<sup>30</sup>

Just as the individual in British liberalism was implicitly a white, male, property owner,<sup>31</sup> the individual of Indian socialism, at least in some conceptualisations, was male, Hindu, upper caste and land-owning. As Jayaprakash Narayan explained in 1952, reform of society would arise from reform of the individual: 'Society cannot be good unless individual men are good', he went on to add, 'and particularly those men who form the elite of society'.<sup>32</sup> Why was this so? For one, most of these Indian socialists were themselves from the elite of society, and they sought to understand and reform their own class first. Second, they believed that the greatest human endeavour was to serve others to the point of voluntarily sacrificing everything in their service.<sup>33</sup> As with Gandhian forms of social service, this path was closed to those who had nothing to sacrifice, and to those who were served.<sup>34</sup> This excluded Dalits and Adivasis, backward castes and often women too, anyone, in short, who might be on the receiving end of such generosity. Finally, many Gandhian Socialists and members of the Congress insisted that the upper classes had to be persuaded, rather than coerced, into accepting new property relations. In this schema, the psychological needs of the elite, male, property owner outweighed the material needs of the landless labourer or the factory worker. This was a form of extreme deference to the privileged classes.

The Opposition Socialists stand out somewhat here. Their written works tended to focus more on the plight of and rights of workers and peasants. Additionally, their broad discussions in the 1950s of the reform or protection of these groups were sometimes balanced with language lionising them.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, the Opposition Socialists tended to be more willing to use satyagraha and other forms of collective political action to bring about what Lohia called 'a change of heart' in the propertied classes, signifying a slightly less deferential attitude to those with established interests.<sup>36</sup>

### **Productive Employment for Personal Growth**

The second idea that all these thinkers agreed upon was the *sine qua non* of work. Work was not simply a matter of making the cogs in the economic machine turn. Rather, purposeful occupation was widely understood as a means of self-expression and personal growth. Here is the Gandhian Socialist, J.C. Kumarappa, in his seminal book, *Gandhian Economic Thought*: 'We are a bundle of nerves. We have to study, work, play, laugh, etc. for our growth. Work is to our higher faculties what food is to the physical body. The occupation we follow should contribute towards the growth of our

---

<sup>29</sup> Nehru, 'The Basic Approach' p.70

<sup>30</sup> Nehru, 'The Basic Approach' p.73

<sup>31</sup> Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: a Study in Nineteenth-century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

<sup>32</sup> Narayan, Jayaprakash, 'Materialism and Goodness (1952)', in Prasad (ed.), *Socialism, Sarvodaya and Democracy*. pp.97-99, pp.97-8

<sup>33</sup> Bhave, Vinoba, *Bhoodan Yajna (Land-Gifts Mission)*. (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1953), p.19

<sup>34</sup> On the hierarchies of Gandhian social service see, Aishwary Kumar, 'The Ellipsis of Touch: Gandhi's Unequals', *Public Culture*, 23:2 (2011).

<sup>35</sup> For example, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay admired the way working-class women were 'comparatively freer than the upper class women in India.' Chattopadhyay, Kamaladevi, 'Enfranchisement of Women' in Dubois, Ellen Carol and Vinay Lal (eds.), *A Passionate Life: Writings By and On Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay* (New Delhi: Zubaan Books, 2017), pp.76-80 at pp.76-7.

<sup>36</sup> Lohia, *Aspects of Socialist Policy*, p.57.



personality'.<sup>37</sup> Productive employment was not just a matter of personal development, however. It was a question of building the right kind of citizens for the new India. For the Gandhians, certain types of work, especially village industries, were believed to encourage resourcefulness, creativity and problem-solving. In so doing, according to Kumarappa, 'Politically village industries provide the conditions for the development of democracy.'<sup>38</sup> We see similar ideals among the Congress Left. Not only did the plans promise to pursue full employment, but planners and governments made frequent appeals to citizens to engage in self-help, in everything from producing khadi (home-spun cloth) to digging their own irrigation channels and building their own village schools.<sup>39</sup>

There were some shades of differentiation in how work was understood between the different strands of socialist thought. For the Gandhians, work included not just village industries such as making cloth, paper, and bamboo products, but also hard manual labour. According to Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, who had been Gandhi's secretary, and then took on a leading role in public health after independence, 'It is not the work we do that matters, but the spirit in which we do it. The lowest kind of work done for the love of God ranks higher with Him than the most brilliant done for personal gain. The former sets us free, the latter leads us to greater bondage.'<sup>40</sup> J.C. Kumarappa and Rajkumari Amrit Kaur were both Gandhians and Christians, and their conception of work was influenced by Christian thinking on the virtuous individual, just as Gandhi's had been.<sup>41</sup>

For many Opposition Socialists, by contrast, manual labour and village industries were doomed, and the key was to use the 'positive technology of the present age',<sup>42</sup> through the small machine. Although small machines, from radios to electric water pumps, were already in use in India,<sup>43</sup> the Socialist Party Leader, Rammanohar Lohia envisioned much more:

The small-unit machine run on electricity or oil is the answer. Only a few such machines exist; many more will have to be invented. ...This machine shall be available to hamlet and town as much as to city... This machine will not only solve the economic problem of the underdeveloped world; it will also enable a new exploration and achievement of the general aims of society.<sup>44</sup>

This was economic salvation through technological innovation, but also through decentralisation, one of the ways the Opposition Socialists tried to differentiate themselves from the Congress. While

---

<sup>37</sup> Kumarappa, J.C., *Gandhian Economic Thought*, (Bombay: Vora & Co. Publishers, 1951), p.58. For an almost identical view expressed of the Praja Socialist Party, see Praja Socialist Party, *Statement of Policy* (1956), pp.42-3

<sup>38</sup> Kumarappa, *Gandhian Economic Thought*, p.43

<sup>39</sup> The main programme for village self-help was community development, discussed below. See, Daniel Immerwahr, *Thinking Small: The United States and the Lure of Community Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), ch.3. On self-help in education see, Sherman, Taylor C. 'Education in Early Postcolonial India: Expansion, Experimentation and Planned Self-Help' *History of Education* 2018. DOI: 10.1080/0046760X.2017.1413214

<sup>40</sup> Kaur, Rajkumari Amrit, *The Concept of Social Service: Its Relation to World Needs and Problems*. (London: The National Council of Social Service, 1951), pp.11-12.

<sup>41</sup> I am grateful to Sneha Krishnan for pointing this out; on Gandhi and Christianity see Bhikhu C. Parekh, *Gandhi: a Very Short Introduction*, pp.9, 58-59.

<sup>42</sup> Lohia, Rammanohar, *Marx, Gandhi and Socialism*, (Hyderabad: Navahind, 1963), p.14.

<sup>43</sup> Arnold, David, *Everyday Technology: Machines and the Making of India's Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

<sup>44</sup> Lohia, *Aspects of Socialist Policy*, p.38

they agreed on the necessity of planning, the Opposition Socialists accused the Congress Left and the planners of focusing too much on urban industry to the detriment of rural areas.<sup>45</sup>

All sides agreed on the centrality of work to the economy, to democracy and to the individual. However, there were implicit hierarchies at play in the ways in which the concept was defined. For many men in the Congress Left and the Opposition Socialists, purposeful occupation was primarily making, not caring. By according more prestige to production, they implicitly discounted the everyday occupation of most ordinary women, which centred around caring within the family.<sup>46</sup> Among the Congress Left and the Opposition Socialists, there were calls for women's equality, but they tended to focus on social reform, political participation, and women's access to waged labour.<sup>47</sup> Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, by contrast, took a refreshingly radical position. She not only called for equal wages for men and women, but also insisted that the housewife be accepted as 'a distinct economic entity' who makes an 'invaluable contribution' to the economy.<sup>48</sup>

For the Gandhians caring work could contribute to personal and social growth, but to do so, the carer had to make extraordinary sacrifices. One of the central concepts developed by the Gandhians was the notion of 'gifting' to others as a means of catalysing a social and economic revolution. This idea emerged with the Bhoodan (land-gift) Movement. Gandhi's self-styled spiritual heir, Vinoba Bhave, invented the land-gift as a means of addressing the problem of inequality in rural areas by asking landowners to make a gift of part of their land to the landless of their village.<sup>49</sup> To the land gift was soon added shramdan (labour-gift), sampattidan (property-gift), as well as gramdan, the gift of entire villages into cooperative ownership. Perhaps the pinnacle of this theme was jeevandan, the gift of one's life to the cause of improving rural life in India. Jayaprakash Narayan conceived of the idea of Jeevandan, in 1954, after becoming increasingly disillusioned with ordinary politics.<sup>50</sup> Jeevandan was a new way of living based on self-sacrifice for the collective good. The jeevandani (the person gifting their life), was to give up his property and 'as far as possible lead a simple life', working with his hands, and using only village products. The aim was to bring about a 'non-violent revolution' in the countryside.

The gendered expectations behind this kind of work were evident in Narayan's *Guide for Jeevandan*: jeevandanis had a duty to ensure their wives and children wore *khadi* and went to schools that taught village crafts to young students. In other words, it was expected that jeevandanis would be men, and that they would continue to exercise their patriarchal roles within their families. Even as they continued to set the norms of behaviour at home, JP wrote, 'Jeevandanis must free themselves from their family responsibilities but, if occasion demands, can devote minimum time required for such affairs.'<sup>51</sup> However, if a jeevandani was a member of a political party, he could continue as

---

<sup>45</sup> Socialist Party of India, 'Socialist Party Election Manifesto (1957)', reprinted in Lohia, Rammanohar, *Marx, Gandhi and Socialism*. (Hyderabad: Navahind, 1963), p.496

<sup>46</sup> Women's work on the family plot was taken for granted, Agarwal, Bina, *A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

<sup>47</sup> Praja Socialist Party, 'Statement of Policy' (1956)

<sup>48</sup> Chattopadhyay, Kamaladevi, 'Restatement of Human Values' in Dubois and Lal (eds.), *A Passionate Life: Writings By and On Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay*, pp.57-66, at p.65.

<sup>49</sup> Sherman, Taylor C. 'A Gandhian Answer to the Threat of Communism? Sarvodaya and Postcolonial Nationalism in India', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 53:2 (2016), pp.249-270

<sup>50</sup> Prasad, 'Introduction', in Prasad (ed.), *Socialism, Sarvodaya and Democracy*. pp.ix-xliii, pp.xvi-xvii.

<sup>51</sup> Narayan, Jayaprakash, 'Guide for Jeevandan [unknown date]', in Jayaprakash Narayan, *Sarvodaya Social Order (4th ed.)*. (London: Asia Publishing House, 1957). pp.44-47, p.45.

such; if he was a labourer, he ought to continue that work. This placed caring below making and ruling in a gendered hierarchy of worthwhile labour.

### **Socialism Without Abolishing Private Property: Cooperative Self-help**

The third feature of socialist thought was the continued relevance of private property in India. This was part of the wider deference to existing property holders, but it was also tied to a more circumscribed set of expectations about the power of the state to enact change. This position had evolved out of experiences in other socialist countries and in India. Jayaprakash Narayan, writing in 1961, noted that he, like other socialists in India, had once believed that nationalisation was the key to building socialism. But he had changed his stance in light of the experience in communist countries, where, it had been proven that nationalisation, 'ends up in the most rigorous economic dictatorship, giving rise to new forms of economic exploitation and inequality.'<sup>52</sup>

The Praja Socialist Party followed a similar path. In 1952 Rammanohar Lohia had argued that ownership by individuals or by the state ought to be abolished in favour of collective community ownership.<sup>53</sup> Within a few years, however, the Party began to argue that private property – albeit redistributed – was necessary to increase agricultural production.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, by 1956, the PSP was going so far as to promise peasants that they would not be forced into cooperatives.<sup>55</sup>

A similar evolution took place among the Congress Left. The Congress Party's Economic Committee report from January 1948 recommended progressive nationalisation, but under pressure from industrialists, the Congress Government dropped plans for the state to take over a large part of private industry.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, India's Constitution, ratified in January 1950, protected private ownership, providing that no property could be confiscated without compensation.<sup>57</sup> When it came to rural property, land reform legislation passed in the 1950s set a limit on the maximum amount of land that a family could hold (in theory if not in practice), and also fixed prices to enable those who worked the land to purchase it. The reforms were based on the idea that private property would continue, with ownership configured in slightly different ways.<sup>58</sup>

It is often assumed in the scholarship that the Congress Left's approach to private ownership was only a concession to propertied classes, which they would reverse if possible. However, reading the works of these thinkers one can see that by the 1950s they were comfortable with the continued existence of private enterprise and with a more limited role for the state. Instead of calling for nationalisation, many were content to simply urge entrepreneurs and business leaders to work for the common good rather than only for their own profit.<sup>59</sup> For some this was part of a genuine scepticism about amassing too much power in the hands of the state. Sampurnanand warned that establishing a state monopoly over the economy would not only 'sound the death knell of all true

---

<sup>52</sup> Narayan, Jayaprakash, 'Swaraj for the People (1961)', Prasad (ed.), *Socialism, Sarvodaya and Democracy*, pp.239-274, p.260.

<sup>53</sup> Lohia, *Aspects of Socialist Policy*, p.38.

<sup>54</sup> Praja Socialist Party, *Statement of Policy* (Bombay: Praja Socialist Party, 1954), p.7

<sup>55</sup> Praja Socialist Party, *Statement of Policy* (1956), p.11

<sup>56</sup> Chibber, Vivek, *Locked in Place*, pp.133-147.

<sup>57</sup> Frankel, Francine, *India's Political Economy: the Gradual Revolution, 1947-77*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), p.80.

<sup>58</sup> Herring, Ronald J., *Land to the Tiller: the Political Economy of Agrarian Reform in South Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), ch.5.

<sup>59</sup> Narayan, Shriman, *Socialism in Indian Planning*. (London: Asia Publishing House, 1964), p.29.

art, science or literature', but it would also render citizens 'helpless and hopeless' by making them entirely dependent upon the state.<sup>60</sup>

For others, this was rooted in doubts about the capacity of the state to shape large swathes of the economy. While the second five-year plan is often regarded as the epitome of socialist state planning, with scholars assuming that the planners aimed for the state to take a prodigious role in the economy, a closer look reveals the ways in which the planners circumscribed their own ambitions. P.C. Mahalanobis, the chief architect of the second plan, partitioned the economy into what he called two different 'spheres'. One sphere, that of large-scale industrial development, he argued ought to be directed by the state. But for what he called the 'diffuse' sector, he felt state intervention would be too difficult.<sup>61</sup> To get a sense of the scale of the sphere he set aside, according to one estimate, the diffuse or unorganised sector comprised 90% of the employment and 84% of India's gross national product in the early 1950s.<sup>62</sup> Here, contrary to what other scholars have assumed,<sup>63</sup> we find agreement between the Congress Left and the Gandhians that the state ought to have a very limited role in reconfiguring property relations when it came to the vast majority of economic activity.

Instead of collectivisation or nationalisation, many socialists put great store in the promise of voluntary collective association through co-operatives. While it was in line with global trends in rural development,<sup>64</sup> this faith in the cooperative also had roots in three aspects of Indian politics and economics of the late 1940s and early 1950s. The first was the recent experience of the national movement, where collective action had achieved the goal of *purna swaraj* (complete self-rule). The second was in the practical matter of India's poverty. The state had so few resources to offer that one of the only ways to move towards less stratified property relations was to encourage voluntary cooperation. Finally, socialist conceptions of democracy centred on moving forward by consensus, which seemed to fit in well with the ideals of the cooperative movement as imagined in mid-century India.

Although there were many non-official cooperatives, one of the main government initiatives for encouraging them was the Community Development Programme. Community Development was designed to encourage villagers to work together to articulate their own development needs and then organise to fulfil them.<sup>65</sup> It was imagined that village panchayats (councils) would oversee the political life of the village drawing up development plans and implementing them, while cooperatives would be the 'economic arm' of the panchayat.<sup>66</sup> The cooperative would promote 'self-interest by mutual help' and its motto would be 'each for all and all for each'.<sup>67</sup> In so doing, rural India's 'perennial problems',

---

<sup>60</sup> Sampurnanand, *Indian Socialism*, p.29.

<sup>61</sup> Mahalanobis, P.C., 'Address delivered as President of the National Institute of Sciences of India', 8 January 1958, *Talks on Planning* (London: Asia Publishing House), p.70.

<sup>62</sup> Banerjee, Nirmala, 'The Unorganized Sector and the Planner', in Bagchi, Amiya Kumar (ed.), *Economy, Society and Polity: Essays in the Political Economy of Indian Planning in Honour of Professor Bhabatosh Datta* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp.71-103, p.75.

<sup>63</sup> Zachariah, *Developing India*, ch.4; Khilnani, *The Idea of India*, pp.70-75

<sup>64</sup> Unger, Corinna, 'Industrialization vs. Agrarian Reform: West German Modernization Policies in India in the 1950s and 1960s' *Journal of Modern European History* 8:1 (2010), pp.47-65.

<sup>65</sup> Immerwahr, *Thinking Small*, ch.3

<sup>66</sup> Ministry of Community Development and Co-operation, *Three Basic Institutions* (Faridabad: Government of India Press, 1959) p.4

<sup>67</sup> *Three Basic Institutions*, p.7

from underproduction to chronic indebtedness could be 'solved if farmers co-operate and pool their resources in men, money and material and cultivate land for mutual benefit'.<sup>68</sup> Co-operative work towards village development was not a marginal strategy of a Government of India otherwise focused on urban industrialisation, as others have argued.<sup>69</sup> Instead, co-operation was the answer to India's central predicament, which was the imperative to pursue economic development without the ability to commit state resources.

However, this utopian vision of revitalised village communities was not egalitarian. Rather, the cooperative was, in Nehru's words, 'essentially the idea of a big family becoming bigger and bigger'. In this family, the stronger sections of society had a 'moral duty to rehabilitate [the] economically weak and socially backward' of India.<sup>70</sup> In other words, instead of being eliminated, the hierarchies of caste and class which were at the heart of India's inequality would be re-deployed for the common good. No attempt was made to confront the origins of these hierarchies or to redress the centuries of pain inflicted upon the lower castes and classes within them.

The Opposition Socialists and the Gandhians had no less utopian ideas about what voluntary collective activity could achieve. Indeed, because the focus of both parties' energies was the countryside, and they faced the same fiscal constraints, they suffered from a similar kind of fanciful optimism about power of collective self-help. The Gandhian plan for rural reform grew out of the bhoodan movement to become the gramdan movement. Gramdan – the gift of the village – was the idea that villagers would hand over the ownership and management of all village lands to the village council, which would ensure that 'wealth is utilized equitably for the benefit of every member of the community, as also of the community as a whole'.<sup>71</sup> As with the Congress Left, this was a plan to redeploy existing hierarchies for new ends, rather than to radically reorganise the social life of the village.

For the PSP, the origins of a new rural social order would be a 'Food Army' of one million volunteers, who would clear and cultivate land and then quickly begin to work as cooperatives. This army would establish 'new villages whose joyous life may impel and support neighbouring villages towards activity'.<sup>72</sup> In spite of practical experiences that would suggest otherwise,<sup>73</sup> the cooperative was the archetypal institution for a socialism of scarcity.

### **Less Inequality, but not 'Dead Equality'**

Outlining the contours of the way the cooperative was imagined as a model for Indian socialism helps us understand the fourth theme of the tradition: the common aim was a more equal, but by no means flat, society. India arrived at independence with deep and abiding economic and social inequalities. India's nationalists had berated the British for draining India's wealth, and had promised the people the days of scarcity would end with freedom. At the same time, India's socialists insisted

---

<sup>68</sup> *Three Basic Institutions*, p.8

<sup>69</sup> Gupta, Akhil, *Postcolonial Developments: Agriculture in the Making of Modern India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), p.13.

<sup>70</sup> *Three Basic Institutions*, p.7.

<sup>71</sup> Narayan, 'Swaraj for the People (1961)', p.254

<sup>72</sup> Praja Socialist Party, *Statement of Policy* (1954), p.9

<sup>73</sup> [CHECK] Robert, B. 'Agricultural Credit Cooperatives in Madras, 1893-1937: Rural Development and Agrarian Politics in Pre-independence India', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 16:2 (1979), pp.163-184

that landowners, capitalists and bureaucrats could not be eliminated, but rather had to be converted to a more benevolent mindset. As such, their goal was not to bring about a radical levelling of classes; rather it was to trim the more extreme peaks and troughs of India's inequality.

We do witness some change over time with respect to the overall position on inequality. Through the 1950s, the Gandhians and the Congress Left stressed that they were comfortable with a differentiated society. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur argued, 'dead equality there can never and should never be. Manifold diversity is a part of the fullness of social life provided man realises that the fruits of such diversity are for the use of others.'<sup>74</sup> Although members of the Praja Socialist Party wrote and spoke in slightly more radical language, they, too wished only to reduce inequality. Their 1957 election manifesto promised to limit income inequalities to a ratio of 1:10 by adjusting the tax regime.<sup>75</sup>

By the early 1960s, however, those on the left of the Congress were increasingly aware that after more than a decade in power they had moved further away from the goal of a more equal society. Congress rhetoric shifted to focus on equality of opportunity, rather than equality of outcome.<sup>76</sup> As the Congress tilted to the right, the Opposition Socialists inclined to the left. Recognising inequality was primarily a function of caste, Rammanohar Lohia's new Socialist Party began calling for more 'preferential opportunities for the backward'.<sup>77</sup> Although India's Constitution provided for reservations in legislatures and government service, the Party pushed for a greater proportion of reservations in 'all high positions' and called for reservations for women and 'backward castes of religious minorities' as well.<sup>78</sup>

Even as their positions shifted, socialists continued to run up against the fact that the Indian state had limited resources to devote to removing inequality. Thus, even as the Congress Party resolved to move towards a more 'socialistic pattern' of society at their Avadi session in 1955, Nehru noted, 'Socialism...might help you to divide your existing wealth, if you like, but in India, there is no existing wealth for you to divide; there is only poverty to divide.'<sup>79</sup> A central dilemma for both the Congress Left and the Opposition Socialists, therefore, was the question of whether to work towards development for all, thinly distributed, or to concentrate government efforts in selected sectors or regions.<sup>80</sup> For those who held the reins of power, these were not so much duelling camps, as rival impulses felt at the same time within the same people. Different ministries experimented with different approaches to this question. For example, the Centre's approach to agriculture began with an extensive Grow More Food programme in the late 1940s, which called on every Indian to join the 'crusade for food production'. Nehru told the public in a radio address, 'It is a war in which every citizen can be a soldier and can serve his or her country.'<sup>81</sup> However, the programme of throwing

---

<sup>74</sup> Kaur, *Concept of Social Service*, p.17.

<sup>75</sup> 'Socialist Party Election Manifesto' (1957), p.498.

<sup>76</sup> 'Congress Resolution on Socialism and Democracy', S. Narayan (ed.), *Socialism and Indian Planning*, (New York: Asia Publishing House, 1964), p.167.

<sup>77</sup> Socialist Party of India, 'Socialist Party Election Manifesto (1962)', p.516.

<sup>78</sup> Socialist Party of India, '*Socialist Party Election Manifesto (1962)*', p.522.

<sup>79</sup> Nehru, *Nehru on Socialism*, p.108.

<sup>80</sup> On this question in the field of primary education see, K. Saiyidian, J.P. Naik, and S. Abid Husain, *Compulsory Education in India* (New Delhi, Universal Book and Stationery Co., 1952), p.viii.

<sup>81</sup> Sherman, Taylor C., 'From "Grow More Food" to "Miss a Meal": Hunger, Development and the Limits of Postcolonial Nationalism in India, 1947-1957' *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 36:4 (2013), pp.571-588, p.578

better seeds, fertilisers and implements at everyone and anyone failed to produce more food.<sup>82</sup> As a consequence, and partially in response to pressure from international donors such as the Ford Foundation, the Centre's policy on agriculture turned to intensive development of selected districts by the late 1950s.<sup>83</sup> In education, the reverse occurred, as the Centre started out with a selective, intensive approach in the First Five-Year Plan. In response to pressure from below, however, the Centre began to move, tentatively and briefly, toward providing more extensive education in the Third Plan.<sup>84</sup> It was a caricature, therefore, when Opposition Socialists pilloried Congress governments for concentrating on narrow slices of the economy instead of working to increase everyone's wealth together.<sup>85</sup>

This is one area where the Gandhians really stood out with a markedly different vision. Gandhians hoped to pursue a more equal society not by lifting everyone up, but by converting everyone to a simpler life. Their assessment of India's economy in the 1940s and 1950s rejected the entire basis of economic dynamism. For the economist and *sarvodaya* worker, K.G. Mashruwala, the 'money-dominated economy' was one of the obstacles to the creation of a more equal society. In pursuit of money people chased profits 'instead of providing for the needs of oneself and society'. The result was a 'large body of parasites' or middle men who lived off trade, commerce and rent.<sup>86</sup> Such an economy was antithetical to a socialist society, as the Gandhians defined it. As Vinoba Bhave put it, as man makes money, he 'loses something more precious than money, viz. the love of his fellow men'.<sup>87</sup> Instead, the aim of each individual, family, village, region and nation ought to be to work for self-sufficiency, and no more. To most of the Gandhians, the key was to convert people to a life of *tapas* (austerity) where the ultimate aim was not prosperity, but *aparagriha* (non-possession).<sup>88</sup> In the words of J.C. Kumarappa, the new order would entail, 'self-control and self-discipline instead of self-indulgence'.<sup>89</sup>

### Slow, Peaceful Change

This brings us to the fifth concept central to Indian socialism: non-violence. There was consensus that violence of any kind had to be eliminated from domestic politics.<sup>90</sup> Of course, this aspect of socialist thought owed much to Gandhi and the successes of the putatively non-violent national movement. A non-violent approach to social change was also part of the Indian critique of Stalinism, where, as Nehru put it, 'means distorted ends', and thereby the entire project had been discredited.<sup>91</sup> All of India's socialists rejected the idea that ends could justify means. As Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay put it, 'Means are to a large extent ends, for an achievement is in its essence an

---

<sup>82</sup> Sherman, 'From "Grow More Food"', p.587.

<sup>83</sup> On the Ford Foundation see, Sackley, Nicole, 'Foundation in the Field, p.252-3. Not all states followed the Centre's lead. On Tamil Nadu's approach to the agrarian economy see, C.T. Kurien, *Dynamics of Rural transformation: A Study of Tamil Nadu: 1950-1975* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1981).

<sup>84</sup> Sherman, 'Education in Early Postcolonial India' (forthcoming).

<sup>85</sup> 'Socialist Party Election Manifesto', 1957, p.496.

<sup>86</sup> Mashruwala, K.G., 'Planning for India' in *Planning Commission and Sarvodaya Approach* (Muzaffarpur: Bihar Khadi Samiti, 1952). pp.39-52, p.48.

<sup>87</sup> Bhave, *Bhoodan Yajna*, p.68.

<sup>88</sup> Bhave, *Bhoodan Yajna*, p.68. These ideals have their origins in Gandhi's own thinking, see Hardiman, *Gandhi*, p.77.

<sup>89</sup> Kumarappa, *Gandhian Economic Thought*, p.72.

<sup>90</sup> Lohia, 'Aspects of Socialist Policy', p.69.

<sup>91</sup> Nehru, 'The Basic Approach', p.70.

experience. Therefore, democratic practices have to be the way of life with every socialist'.<sup>92</sup> If the aim was a more just and more equal society, the means to achieve that goal was democracy.

Although majoritarian conceptions of democracy were common in India at this time,<sup>93</sup> most of the Indian socialist thinkers considered here absolutely rejected the conflation of democracy with the tyranny of the religious majority at the ballot box. Instead, Gandhians and members of the Congress Left understood democracy as government by consensus building. Nehru termed this 'persuasion'.<sup>94</sup> Bhave declared his aim was 'converting' his opponents to his views.<sup>95</sup> By the early 1960s Jayaprakash Narayan was so averse to conflict of any kind that he advocated abolishing elections altogether because their adversarial nature undermined the consensus required for cooperative work.<sup>96</sup>

Many accepted that such an approach would require patience. As Vijayalakshmi Pandit told a Canadian audience in 1958, 'in whatever we do we must correlate ends and means and move forward only through the processes of democracy, even if the pace is somewhat slow'.<sup>97</sup>

The Praja Socialist Party was a little bit different, in that, as an opposition party, they were keen on satyagraha (civil disobedience), at a time when most in government were arguing that the time for disobedience was over.<sup>98</sup> However, this was a question of variation within a larger consensus about the necessity of bringing about a 'change of heart' through non-violence.<sup>99</sup> Here we can see parallels with India's independent foreign policy, which aimed at building consensus through institutions and working to resolve conflict through peaceful means.

## Socialist Salvation

Finally, a good deal of socialist thought in India contained a spiritual dimension, which often drew on Vedantic influences. This facet of socialist thinking can be understood as arising in part from the wider context of religious reform and nationalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Although the Congress Party had pursued a nominally secular programme, very few of its members adhered to the kind of scientific, agnostic secularism that was the signature of Jawaharlal Nehru.<sup>100</sup> Even many of those who favoured a secular form of government understood India and its history in distinctly religious terms, and many often implicitly equated India with Hinduism.<sup>101</sup> The search for a higher purpose for India's socialism was not just an outgrowth of religious revival, it also a product of the Indian critique of Stalinism. As Jayaprakash Narayan wrote in 1951, the 'Stalinist interpretation of socialist philosophy has reduced it to a crass Machiavellian code of conduct utterly devoid of any

---

<sup>92</sup> Chattopadhyay, 'The Simple Case for Democratic Socialism', p.104

<sup>93</sup> e.g. Sherman, Taylor C., *Muslim Belonging in Secular India: Negotiating Citizenship in Postcolonial India* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015), ch.4.

<sup>94</sup> Nehru, 'The Basic Approach', p.71.

<sup>95</sup> Bhave, Vinoba, *Sarvodaya and Communism* (Tanjore: Sarvodaya Prachuralaya, 1957), p.11

<sup>96</sup> Narayan, Jayaprakash, 'Swaraj for the People (1961)', p.254.

<sup>97</sup> Pandit, Vijaya Lakshmi, *The Evolution of India*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), p.37.

<sup>98</sup> Chakrabarty, Dipesh, 'In the Name of Politics: Democracy and the Power of the Multitude in India', *Public Culture*, 19:1 (2007), pp.35-57.

<sup>99</sup> Lohia, *Aspects of Socialist Policy*, p.57

<sup>100</sup> Khilani, Sunil, 'Nehru's Faith', A. D. Needham, and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (ed.), *The Crisis of Secularism in India* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2006), pp.89-103.

<sup>101</sup> Gould, William, *Hindu Nationalism and the Language of Politics in Late Colonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Pandit, *Evolution of India*, pp.7,15; Kaur, *Concept of Social Service*, pp.101-1.



sense of right or wrong, good or evil.<sup>102</sup> By moving away from a strict materialism, India's socialists hoped to re-introduce spiritual progress in India.

With their roots in Gandhi's own beliefs and practices, Gandhian Socialists regularly incorporated moral and spiritual elements into their vision of an ideal society and the route to achieving it. It may be surprising to hear the Christian Rajkumari Amrit Kaur quoting the Upanishads and evoking Vedantic themes, but this was part of a larger pluralistic approach to faith, one which sought to reach Indians by using religious imagery. Speaking of the ideal of working to serve others, Kaur told an audience: 'When your spirit joins the ever-moving air and your body is reduced to ashes, remember your work alone remains behind.'<sup>103</sup> While some used metaphors rooted in religion to speak to their Indian audience, others viewed their project on more grandiose terms. Vinoba Bhave wrote of his mission in messianic terms. He declared that his project of replacing the existing social order with one based on 'equality and mutual co-operation' was nothing less than the pursuit of the 'salvation of mankind'.<sup>104</sup>

The position of Opposition Socialists evolved on this question. By the early 1950s both Jayaprakash Narayan and Rammanohar Lohia had concluded that dialectical materialism was an insufficient basis for their version of socialism because it did not inspire moral behaviour in people.<sup>105</sup> Rammanohar Lohia suggested that the answer lay in a more respectful and open approach to religion, 'Socialists will also do well to feel somewhat humble towards the compassionate discipline and the ethical training of religion'.<sup>106</sup> Even if they no longer 'worshipped at the shrine of dialectical materialism', they had not yet fully developed the spiritual dimension of their socialism.<sup>107</sup> Led by Acharya Narendra Deva, the PSP elaborated a 'Socialist Conception of Morality' in 1956, which was based on 'Swatantra, Samata and Lokahit (liberty, equality and common good)'. Although the individual and his 'self-perfection' were at the centre of this morality, self-perfection was defined as 'the sublimation of impulses... in the promotion of Lokahit.' These were 'moral norms', differentiated from religious morality in order to accommodate India's many religions.<sup>108</sup> The influence of Vivekananda's Vedanta, with its emphasis on self-mastery and selflessness, is evident here.

Nehru had to undertake his own journey on the question of spirituality in politics. Famously, India's first prime minister had admitted in the 1930s that 'organised religion...has filled me with horror'.<sup>109</sup> He had no great interest in the afterlife, and a distaste for ritual. Nehru was no bigoted atheist, but he mostly left any talk of 'things of the spirit' out of his politics.<sup>110</sup> At the second general election, however, Congress had won a lower share of the vote and had lost control of Kerala to the Communists. The moment for an adjustment seemed to have arrived. Sampurnanand, who was Chief Minister of India's largest state, Uttar Pradesh, warned his party that the Congress was losing the enthusiasm of the people. To Sampurnanand, the diagnosis was obvious: 'we have not paid any

---

<sup>102</sup> Narayan, Jayaprakash, 'Socialism and Sarvodaya (1951)', in Prasad (ed.), *Socialism, Sarvodaya and Democracy*, pp.91-96, p.94.

<sup>103</sup> Kaur, *Concept of Social Service*, p.10.

<sup>104</sup> Bhave, *Bhoodan Yajna*, p.19

<sup>105</sup> Narayan, Jayaprakash, 'Materialism and Goodness (1952)', in Prasad (ed.), *Socialism, Sarvodaya and Democracy*, pp.97-99.

<sup>106</sup> Lohia, *Aspects of Socialist Policy*, p.79

<sup>107</sup> Narayan, 'Materialism and Goodness', p.98.

<sup>108</sup> *Praja Socialist Party, Statement of Policy, (1956)*, p.39

<sup>109</sup> Nehru, Jawaharlal, *An Autobiography: With Musings on Recent Events in India* (London: John Lane The Bodley Head, 1936), p.374

<sup>110</sup> Nehru, *Autobiography*, p.377; Khilnani, 'Nehru's Faith'.

attention to the spiritual element in human nature.<sup>111</sup> As a scholar of Sanskrit, Sampurnanand's ideas were steeped in the Vedanta.<sup>112</sup> Indians, as individuals and as a nation, he argued, needed 'something to live for and, if necessary, to die for', as they had had during the campaigns for independence.<sup>113</sup> According to the Congressman, 'We have to evolve a new type of humanity. The new man will be conscious of those spiritual bonds which unite him with all that lives and strives to rise to the fullness of his own self by constantly and consistently serving humanity.'<sup>114</sup> This was a call for the Congress Party, and Nehru in particular, to re-orientate Congress' ideology to reinvigorate the Congress movement. This would help the Party compete with the communists, who, Sampurnanand worried, were providing young Indians with a more compelling sense of mission.

Nehru responded with a longer rumination on the nature of his project, one of the only times he paused to reflect in more abstract terms on his project. The result was *The Basic Approach*, a roughly twenty-page article published in the Congress Party's Economic Review on the anniversary of Independence in 1958. Purushotham has recently argued that the article exemplifies 'Nehru's turn to Vedanta'.<sup>115</sup> However, when one examines the pamphlet in more detail, and especially when one views it in its larger discursive context, it is clear Nehru was replying to Sampurnanand, rather than responding to some mysterious internal call to Vedanta. In his response, Nehru repeated his belief that organised religion was essentially irrelevant to the problems of the day. At the same time, rationalism, he conceded, 'somehow appears to deal with the surface of things, without uncovering the inner core'.<sup>116</sup> Echoing Sampurnanand, the Congress President accepted that the mind does long for 'something to live for and, if necessary, something to die for'.<sup>117</sup> But, he lamented, accepting that everything is connected to some Divine Impulse, 'does not solve any...problems, and, in a sense, we remain where we were'.<sup>118</sup> In the very last sentence of the article, Nehru conceded begrudgingly that 'perhaps' Indians ought to keep in mind 'Vedantic ideals' as they sought to remedy their economic problems.<sup>119</sup> This was hardly the stuff of a full conversion. Here Nehru was the outlier, conceding to the larger impulse within his colleagues in the Congress Left to incorporate a higher purpose into India's socialism. This underlines the fact that Nehru did not define India's socialism, solely or even primarily. It also gives us an important hint about India's secularism, which will be explored further in the conclusion.

### **A Lacuna: From Small Reforms to Social Transformation**

Indian socialist thought, like any living political ideology, contained contradictions and lacunae. Perhaps the most critical gap was the failure to fully imagine the process by which India could move from the reform of the individual to the transformation of society. Without violence to break existing social structures, and with often extreme deference to elites, there was no road map for how to realise their social and economic revolution. Jayaprakash Narayan went the furthest in trying to flesh out what new state structures and

---

<sup>111</sup> Sampurnanand, 'Congress Ideology and Programme', in Sampurnanand, *Indian Socialism*, pp.57-66, p.57.

<sup>112</sup> Sampurnanand, *Indian Socialism*, p.x. Gould, William, 'Congress Radicals and Hindu Militancy: Sampurnanand and Purushottam Das Tandon in the Politics of the United Provinces, 1930-1947', *Modern Asian Studies*, 36:3 (2002), pp.619-655.

<sup>113</sup> Sampurnanand, 'Congress Ideology', p.59.

<sup>114</sup> Sampurnanand, 'Congress Ideology', p.64.

<sup>115</sup> Purushotham, 'World History in the Atomic Age', p.25-6.

<sup>116</sup> Nehru, 'The Basic Approach', p.69

<sup>117</sup> Nehru, 'The Basic Approach', p.73

<sup>118</sup> Nehru, 'The Basic Approach', p.74.

<sup>119</sup> Nehru, 'The Basic Approach', p.79

new social relations in the countryside ought to look like in a socialist India. However, his vision doubled down on the necessity of proceeding by consensus and remained blind to the ways in which this approach reproduced deference to elites.<sup>120</sup>

For many of the other socialists in India, the leap from the present to a socialist future was a dream that could not be set on paper. The most striking example of this is in the thought of Vinoba Bhave. Even he could see that persuading individual landowners to gift small patches of land to the poorest would not solve rural India's problems. Indeed, it might even make them worse by increasing land fragmentation. Instead, he declared, 'when a revolution in the way of life is contemplated, it must take place in the mind.'<sup>121</sup> The act of giving, he argued, would 'generate purity of mind...and love for the poor.'<sup>122</sup> And then, once people had begun to donate, 'the whole atmosphere will undergo a sudden change in the twinkling of an eye'.<sup>123</sup> None of India's socialists was able to offer anything more than the promise that a change in the psychological atmosphere would almost magically bring about the transformation of social and economic relations without violence.

## Conclusion

There are, of course, limitations to what a study of political ideas alone can tell us about an historical period. Nonetheless, taking ideas seriously is essential if we are to gain a better understanding of the motives, priorities and limitations of the politics of the time. Two broad conclusions arise from a clearer definition of Indian socialist thought. Firstly, socialism is often used as a shorthand for the monopolistic ambitions of the state.<sup>124</sup> Even scholars who have explored the ways in which state control over various sectors of the economy was limited by compromise, have tended to characterise these compromises as concessions to propertied interests.<sup>125</sup> In other words, they assume the ambition of extensive state control remained intact. However, given the supremacy of the individual, the importance of creative work, and the centrality of private property in Indian socialist thought, it is clear that the socialists of the day had much more circumscribed ambitions for the state than has been acknowledged. All of them placed great store in private, voluntary, collective effort. Far from being an unwilling concession, it was regarded as an essential feature of the moral development of the individual-in-society. True, their thoughts on the question of nationalised property evolved, but it is significant that by the early 1950s most Indian socialists were not even thinking of a state monopoly over economic life, let alone over the social life of the people. In important ways Indian socialism was a socialism of self-help. This has implications for how historians view state projects and where we might look for political impetus.

Finally, understanding India's socialism will help historians begin to re-evaluate the so-called Nehruvian consensus of the period 1947-1964. Nehru was a man of immense intellect, integrity and energy. He was at times a great statesman. But he was not a big thinker. He often declined to put a clear definition on the lofty concepts that guided his politics. Therefore, the influence of his thought over postcolonial Indian politics has almost certainly been overstated. For example, we have seen

---

<sup>120</sup> Narayan, Jayaprakash, 'Swaraj for the People (1961)', pp.239-274.

<sup>121</sup> Bhave, *Bhoodan Yajna*, p.7.

<sup>122</sup> Bhave, *Bhoodan Yajna*, p.10.

<sup>123</sup> Bhave, *Bhoodan Yajna*, p.16.

<sup>124</sup> Uday Singh, 'The Social Question and the Absolutism of Politics', [www.india-seminar.com/2010/615/615\\_uday\\_s\\_mehta.htm](http://www.india-seminar.com/2010/615/615_uday_s_mehta.htm) accessed 14 December 2017

<sup>125</sup> Chibber, *Locked in Place*; Frankel, *India's Political Economy*.

that conceptions of India as an essentially Hindu nation were pervasive amongst socialists, though Nehru did not share them. He was only a reluctant and partial convert to the idea that the socialist project ought to have a spiritual mission. Recognising this helps us understand not only Indian socialism, but the struggles for the soul of Indian secularism, another creed strongly associated with Nehru, which historians have recently shown was more contested than a narrow focus on one individual would admit.<sup>126</sup> The time now seems ripe for a larger re-evaluation of the Nehruvian consensus.

The women and men who thought of themselves as socialists were engaged in decades-long debates with one another, but also with competing ideologies in India. To the left of India's socialists were India's communists. Making the same mistake as the socialists of the 1950s, historians have caricatured Indian communism and refused to investigate this set of political ideas on its own terms. To the right, the Swatantra Party and its associated thinkers grappled with evolving ideas about the relative weight of the state and the market, individual and society. Below the national level, parties based on language, region, religion, or caste affiliations generated their own answers to India's political problems and identified different ones of their own, often in the vernacular. In sum, the first two decades after independence were a time of vibrant political debates, which historians have ignored for too long.

### **Acknowledgements**

I am grateful to Karuna Dietrich Wielenga, and the participants at the South Asia Day held at Wolfson College Oxford in May 2017 for their feedback on an earlier version of this work, as well as to David Washbrook, who commented more than once on this research as it developed. I would also like to thank the reviewers and editors at Postcolonial Studies for their constructive comments on earlier versions of the article.

### **Notes on the Author**

Taylor C. Sherman's current research project is a reassessment of the Nehru years in Indian history. Her previous works include *State Violence and Punishment in India* (2009), and *Muslim Belonging in Secular India: Negotiating Citizenship in Postcolonial Hyderabad* (2015).

---

<sup>126</sup> Sherman, *Muslim Belonging in Secular India*. Jayal, Niraja Gopal, *Citizenship and its Discontents: An Indian History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).