

Bangladesh's Marxist-Leninists—II

Sumanta Banerji

FROM a review of the last decade, it is obvious that the different Marxist-Leninist groups faced an ideological crisis immediately after the liberation of Bangladesh. Almost all of them agreed that the liberation was primarily brought about by the intervention of the Indian army — which prevented a protracted national liberation war against Pakistan and pre-empted the emergence of an indigenous patriotic (probably Leftist) leadership — and that the Awami League government was subservient to Soviet Union and the Indian government. But they differed on the strategy to be followed. Was the main contradiction between the masses and the external powers represented by 'Soviet social-imperialists and Indian expansionists', or between the masses and the indigenous feudal and compradore interests? While these ideological debates continued, split after split followed in the ranks, eroding the strength of the Marxist-Leninists and making them vulnerable to the militarily superior offensive launched by the state's repressive forces as well as the Awami League hoodlums.

In the meantime, the initial euphoria among the masses generated by the 1971 liberation was fast evaporating due to the inevitable crisis in the economic and political fields. Inflation, blackmarketing, hoarding of food-grains by profiteers and landlords, the emergence of Awami League armed hoodlums terrorising villagers and citizens testified to the failure of Sheikh Mujibur's policies. In a desperate bid to maintain power, Mujib declared Emergency on December 28, 1974; made himself President for five years in a constitutional change on January 25, 1975 and stampeded all the political parties into joining a single party called the Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League (BAKSAL) on February 24 that year. The divided and enfeebled Marxist-Leninists could hardly be expected to pose a challenge to this fast-moving pace of dictatorial onrush and provide a viable alternative to the people of Bangladesh. In such a situation, the decisive strike could be sprung only by an organised group. It was a section in the army which dealt the fatal blow by assassinating Mujib and his family members on August 15. Lawrence Lifschultz in his "Bangladesh:

The Unfinished Revolution" has exhaustively investigated the American links behind the August 15 events. But he has also — in the other part of the book dealing with Abu Taher's uprising — touched upon the popular feeling of relief at Mujib's departure and expectation of a change. It is this mass expectation on which the Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD) — a break-away group from the Awami League, led by students and young intellectuals committed to a vague Leftist strategy of a 'socialist revolution' in Bangladesh — capitalised, and in conjunction with the patriotic sections of the 'jawans' of the Bangladesh army attempted an uprising on November 7, 1975. But the uprising paved the way for the return of yet another dictator, Ziaur Rahman, safeguarding the interests of the same feudal and compradore interests, as evident from the record of his regime. This experience carries lessons for the Marxist-Leninists of Bangladesh. As one Marxist-Leninist pamphlet referring to the November 7, 1975 events points out: "Why, in spite of the role of patriotic forces in the army, state power again reverted to the same ruling clique instead of progressive patriots? The answer to this question is: the 'Jawans' of the army, although inspired by patriotic instincts, are not aware of their own class role. In the present socio-economic structure of Bangladesh, the political leadership which can make them aware of their historical role and organise them to carry out that responsibility has not yet emerged. Those who are carrying on the progressive Leftist tradition have failed to come forward unitedly to play their historical role" (Programme of the Patriotic Front, August 1981(?)).

JSD's ROLE

The ability of the JSD to fill the vacuum created by the absence of an effective and viable revolutionary opposition to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's regime (it was mainly the students and petty-bourgeois militants who flocked to the JSD, which proved to be a powerful challenge in November 1975 when it received support from the army 'jawans' led by Abu Taher) should be a lesson for the Marxist-Leninists of Bangladesh. Uninhibited by the need to explain subtle theoretic-

cal distinctions of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism — in which the various Marxist-Leninist groups of Bangladesh delight to indulge — the JSD chose two issues: first, the general frustration among the masses because of Sheikh Mujib's failures in the economic sphere; and second, the patriotic aspirations of the people, particularly the army 'jawans' who had fought in the liberation war and found to their dismay that they were being forced to submit to pressures from the Indian government (immediately after liberation, Major Jalil — who later became a leader of the JSD — protested against the depredations carried out by the Indian army, and as a result, was imprisoned by the Mujib regime). These two issues were the bases of JSD popularity in 1974-75.

But the JSD failed to achieve their objective, as their strike was confined to a coup d'etat only. There was no plan to co-ordinate the mutiny in the barracks with peasants' uprising in the countryside, where 80 per cent of the Bangladesh population lives. Such a co-ordination could have pre-empted the return of a careerist armyman-politician like Ziaur Rahman who continued to represent the interests of the ruling classes and imperialists. The Marxist-Leninist groups who were active in the countryside at that time — the EPCP (M-L), the Purba Bangla Communist Party (M-L) and the Sarbahara Party — and were committed to armed struggle, suffered from prejudices against the leaders of the JSD. The JSD leaders, Rab and Siraj, one-time activists of the Awami League students' front, had played a prominent part during 1971 in fighting and killing Marxist-Leninists. The mutual bitterness between the JSD ranks and Maoists continued even after liberation and still lingers.

The various Marxist-Leninist groups of Bangladesh still do not have any concrete programme for the 'jawans' of the army. Yet, unlike soldiers in other parts of the sub-continent, the members of the armed forces in Bangladesh have a militant and radical past. Their role in the liberation war and their radicalisation in the course of events set them apart from the armed forces of Pakistan or India. It is significant that during the last one decade there have been at least 20 small or major attempted army coups in Bangladesh. While political observers can dismiss them as foreign-inspired attempts, a dispassionate analysis can-

not ignore the desperate urge for a change among the 'jawans' which has led them all these years to support one coup or another. Not all the coups can be explained as expressions of rivalry among the army officers, which incidentally is an important factor in the crisis in the armed forces of Bangladesh. As for the 'jawans', they primarily come from the peasantry or working class families, and are affected by the economic disabilities that have hit the poor in villages and cities in the recent years. To their utter dismay they found that the November 7, 1975 coup which many among them supported, brought about a regime which failed to solve basic economic problems.

Inflation reached alarming heights during Zia's six-year regime. The prices of essential commodities showed a six to 10 times increase. The cost of living index during 1980-81, the last year of his government, went up by 17 per cent. The country's economy which during the Pakistani days was dominated by 22 families, is today controlled by 200 millionaires who have mushroomed during the last decade by taking advantage of the liberal credit policy of the banks for industrial development. On the other hand, once-profitable industries like jute and textiles have begun to show a declining trend in production. The public sector corporations have suffered tremendous loss because of widespread corruption and mismanagement.

Instead of taking firm measures against the upstart millionaires, Zia leaned more and more on the US for loans and imports. US commitment of assistance which was only \$ 59.8 million in 1973-74 (during the last years of Mujib's regime) rose to \$ 221.9 million in 1978-79, which significantly synchronised with a decline in Soviet commitment — from \$ 32 million in 1973-74 to \$ 6.5 million in 1977-78. Similarly, the value of goods imported from the US went up from about \$ 80 million to \$ 230 million between 1976-77 and 1978-79, while that from Eastern Europe including the USSR showed a much smaller increase from \$ 40 million to a little over \$ 63 million. There was definitely a shift, in the policy of dependence, from the Soviet camp to the West, particularly the US.

CHANGE IN DEPENDENCE PATTERN

It was this clearly discernible change in the dependence pattern that forced many Marxist-Leninists to reassess their old judgment about the ruling powers of Bangladesh. The Sarbahara

Party described Zia as a "puppet" of US imperialism and called for the destruction of US imperialists, Soviet social-imperialism and Indian expansionists. But Toaha's Samyabadi Dal which at first supported Zia, at a later stage accused him of subservience to 'Indian expansionism' on issues like Farakka. Toaha's consistent proximity to the official Chinese view, and his adherence to Beijing's new fangled 'Three World Theory' which holds Soviet social-imperialism as the main enemy, possibly led him to ignore Zia's pro-US stance. Yet, the national compulsion of opposing Zia forced him to find an ideological rationale that would justify the opposition. What better rationale could there be than branding Zia as a weak-kneed ruler kowtowing before India and the Soviet Union? Some other Marxist-Leninists, however, like the pro-Beijing faction of Bhasani's NAP, held that Zia was a staunch fighter against the Indian expansionists and Soviet social-imperialism and they sunk their identity into Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). In the name of opposing Indian expansionism and Soviet social-imperialism, some Marxist-Leninists did not hesitate to ally with the extreme Rightwing elements like the Muslim League or Jamaat-e-Islami, who are traditionally anti-Indian and anti-Communist. During the recent elections, they joined the 17-party National Front formed by Ataur Rahman Khan along with Rightwing elements to fight Russia and India.

Thus, it is evident that during Zia's regime, the bogey of 'Indian expansionism' and 'Soviet social-imperialism' — on the fear of which an entire generation had been brought up in Bangladesh — continued to be evoked both by Zia (to oppose Awami League) and Zia's opponents, including some Marxist-Leninists. The bogey was a convenient by-pass for Zia to divert the attention of the masses from domestic economic problems, as well as a handy stick to beat the Opposition. The latter also found it a suitable slogan to curry favour with the anti-Indian sections of the population. The pattern of political campaign was a close parallel to the Indian situation, where the CIA is evoked as the bogeyman — both by the ruling party (which blames 'foreign hands' for every failure) and the Left Opposition (which attacks the ruling party for not being tough enough with the CIA).

Commenting on the pre-occupation of Bangladeshi Marxist-Leninists with

India and Soviet Union, one of their followers in a self-critical mood says: "All their discussions and decisions stem from their opposition to Russia and India, not from a Marxist or a class viewpoint... They do not work in the interests of our people, but for the sake of their international allies." (Syed Tarikuzzaman, *Forum*, October 19, 1981.) The same criticism is made by another Bangladeshi Marxist-Leninist theoretician, when he says that Leftists in Bangladesh "dissociated from class struggles, [have] become direct or indirect servants of one superpower in the name of opposing the other". (Badruddin Umar, "Leftists of Bangladesh", *Sanskriti*, September 1981.)

HEALTHY SIGNS

These comments are healthy signs of a new realisation among Marxist-Leninists of Bangladesh. Their experience during the last 10 years as well as the recent developments in China have forced them to take a fresh look at their own country and slowly disassociate themselves from Chinese policies. Both the factions of the Sarbahara party have denounced the present Chinese leadership. The Anwar Kabir-led faction has called upon all "devoted Marxists to firmly oppose the neo-revisionist leadership of China and uphold Mao Zedong Thought". The other faction led by Ziauddin has urged all Marxist-Leninists to reject the 'Three World Theory' of the "revisionist Chinese Leadership". The Purba Bangla Communist Party (M-L) in a circular published sometime ago stated: "After having analysed the national and international policies of the present Chinese party, we can come unhesitatingly to the conclusion that revisionists are in power today in the Teng-led Chinese party... But we believe that they would not be able to remain in power for long." Abdul Huq's Revolutionary Communist Party of Bangladesh has also rejected the 'Three World Theory' but remains firm in the Maoist strategy of 'encircling cities with villages'.

It is significant that these are the groups which still have some armed bases in the countryside, and enjoy mass popularity in their bases. The Sarbahara party for instance regularly holds people's courts to punish local criminals in the villages they control. But one has to admit at the same time that both numerically and area-wise their influence is marginal in the context of entire Bangladesh.

There are still no political forces on the horizon capable of bringing together

all the splintered Marxist-Leninist groups around a single coherent set of strategy and tactics. Identification of the principal contradiction, isolation of the main enemy and selection of the potential allies, development of a flexible combination of legal and underground functioning, assigning a role to the army 'jawans' in the future revolution — are still questions to which satisfactory answers have to come up. It is on these questions that the various Marxist-Leninists are differing, shifting and splitting.

To list catalogue of groups and their specific features would miss the purpose. There are at least 12 groups. It might be useful, though somewhat unfair, to regroup them under the following headings: those who regard the contradiction between feudalism and the masses as the basic contradiction, and those who do not accept this. The first group can be subdivided into two: those who primarily work legally in open mass fronts, and those who are underground. Among the groups at the moment, at least three groups — the Sarbahara Party, the Revolutionary Communist Party of Bangladesh (M-L) and the Purba Bangla Communist Party (M-L) — are functioning from the underground and carrying out armed operations. Among those groups which do not regard feudalism as the main enemy, and appear to stress the development of capitalism in agriculture are the Bangladesh Communist Party (M-L), Bangladesh Janamukti Party, and Workers Party. All the three work through open mass organisations.

GHOST OF THE PAST

The ghost of the past still haunts all the groups. The failure to resolve the tussle between stress on domestic class conflicts and that on the contradiction between the nation at large and the external colonial powers dogs them at every step. In 1971 they paid the price for ignoring the rising mood of hostility of the entire East Bengali people against West Pakistan, and lost the leadership of the movement to the Awami League. In 1975 again, their pre-occupation with theoretical debates about relations between Bangladesh and India to the neglect of the more urgent task of uniting themselves and mobilising the masses against internal corruption and repression of the Mujib regime, paved the way for an army faction to strike the blow, and later for the JSD to emerge as the motivating force for the next change. The domestic class conflict on the one hand, and the contradiction between Bangladesh people and external colonial powers

(with West Pakistan in 1971, with Soviet social-imperialism and India in 1975 and with US imperialism today) on the other keep shifting — sometimes one, sometimes the other assuming importance. It is the failure to identify the main contradiction at a given time in a fast changing political scenario that has led the Bangladesh Marxist-Leninists to let slip opportunities in the past, even though they can claim a band of dedicated cadres and the martyrdom of the largest number of ranks and followers.

The attempts by some of the active groups to break away from Chinese influence, the setting up of the 'Shaheed Biplabi O Deshapremik Smriti Samsad' (mentioned earlier) as a centre

of united action against repression not only for the revolutionary group but for other radical elements outside the Marxist-Leninist fold, the renewal of interest in Marxism among a large body of students and young people as evident from the growth of study groups, are perhaps straws in the wind. If an imaginative leadership with a coherent strategy that would link day-to-day practice for the workers and peasants with a revolutionary project of ultimate transformation of Bangladesh society, can bring together these various strands into a unified body, only then can the Marxist-Leninists make their bid for the leadership of the next popular upsurge.

(Concluded)

The University of Papua New Guinea

(Port Moresby)

ECONOMICS DEPARTMENT

Applications are invited from suitably qualified persons for the following positions in the department of Economics:

1. ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR/SENIOR LECTURER

Preference will be given to candidates having a Ph. D. or equivalent, internationally recognized academic achievements and ability to provide leadership in teaching and research. The applicants should have specialized in the Economic Theory of Socialism, Economic Planning and Comparative Economic Systems, having a strong interest in Marxian Economics with reference to developing economies.

The successful applicant will teach mainly in the final year of the undergraduate Economics Degree and in the Honours Programme, from First Semester (February) 1983.

2. SENIOR LECTURER/LECTURER

Preference will be given to candidates having a Ph. D. or equivalent qualification. Teaching and/or research experience relevant to a developing country would be an advantage.

The applicants should have specialized in Macro Economics with applied interests in International Trade Theory, Regional Economics and Economic Policy.

The successful applicant will be engaged in teaching undergraduate and Honours level courses and in supervising research at Honours and Postgraduate levels.

SALARY: Associate Professor : K20,680 per annum plus gratuity
 Senior Lecturer : K18,680 per annum plus gratuity
 Lecturer 2 : K16,830 per annum plus gratuity
 Lecturer 1 : K14,980 per annum plus gratuity.

Applications will be treated as strictly confidential and should include a full curriculum vitae, a recent passport size photograph, the names and addresses of three referees, and an off-print copy of relevant articles published in journals of international standing.

The successful applicant will be offered a contract for a three-year appointment. The gratuity entitlement is based on 24% of salary earned and is payable in installments or lump sum and is taxed at a flat rate of 2%. In addition to the salaries quoted above, the main benefits include: support for approved research; rent-free accommodation; appointment and repatriation airfares for appointee and dependants; settling-in and settling-out allowances, 6 weeks annual recreation leave with home airfares available after each 18 months of continuous service; generous education subsidies for children attending schools in PNG or overseas; a salary continuation scheme to cover extended illness or disability. Applicants who wish to arrange secondment from their home institutions will be welcome.

Applications should be forwarded to the Assistant Secretary (Staffing), University of Papua New Guinea, P O Box 320, UNIVERSITY, to reach him not later than 31 August 1982.

SECRETARY (UNIVERSITY OF PNG)