

Intellectual Foundations of Socialist Ideology in India: A Historical Study

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Abstract: This paper examines the intellectual foundations of socialist ideology in India from the early twentieth century to independence. Socialist thought in India did not emerge as a mere importation of European Marxism, but rather as a product of complex interactions between global ideological currents and indigenous intellectual traditions. Drawing upon the works of Acharya Narendra Deva, Jayaprakash Narayan, Rammanohar Lohia, and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar—along with contributions from revolutionary nationalists, labour leaders, and peasant activists—this study traces the evolution of socialist consciousness in colonial India. It highlights how agrarian distress, economic exploitation, caste oppression, and nationalist aspirations shaped the distinctive character of Indian socialism. The paper argues that socialist ideology played a pivotal role in democratizing the freedom struggle, broadening its social base, and offering alternative visions for postcolonial reconstruction.

Introduction

Socialist ideology in India developed within a rich and dynamic intellectual setting in the early twentieth century, shaped by struggles against colonial capitalism, indigenous systems of social inequality, and the global wave of anti-imperialist movements. Unlike in Europe—where socialism arose primarily as a response to industrial capitalism—Indian socialism was deeply rooted in agrarian realities, caste structures, and the fight for political liberation. This historical study examines the intellectual foundations of socialist thought in India, focusing on both external influences—such as Marxism, the Russian Revolution, international anti-colonialism—and internal socio-economic conditions that gave socialism its distinctively Indian character.

The emergence of socialist consciousness was closely linked to the growing realization among nationalist leaders that political freedom would remain incomplete without socio-economic transformation. As India moved from moderate nationalism to mass politics, ideas of equality, justice, and economic planning came to the forefront. It is within this ideological landscape that Indian socialism evolved—not in isolation, but through continuous dialogue with Gandhian ideas, liberal constitutionalism, Ambedkarite social justice, and revolutionary nationalism.

Global Intellectual Influences: Marxism, Leninism, and Anti-Imperialist Thought

The global context played a decisive role in shaping socialist ideology in India. Karl Marx's critique of capitalism and his theory of class struggle began to circulate among educated Indians by the early 1900s. Indian students and activists in Britain, Europe, and the United States—such as M.N. Roy, Shapurji Saklatvala, and Virendranath Chattopadhyaya—engaged deeply with socialist and communist movements abroad. M.N. Roy's early writings, especially *India in Transition*, articulated a Marxist analysis of colonialism and provided one of the earliest systematic socialist critiques of British rule.

The **Russian Revolution of 1917** produced an electrifying impact on Indian politics. It demonstrated the possibility of overthrowing oppressive power structures and building an alternative social order based on workers' and peasants' councils. The Bolshevik model appealed powerfully to Indian intellectuals because it combined anti-imperialism with radical socio-economic restructuring. Socialist and communist literature began circulating clandestinely, inspiring trade unionists, labour organizers, and revolutionary groups, particularly in Bengal and Punjab.

Equally influential were global anti-imperialist movements in Ireland, China, and Latin America. Figures like Rabindranath Tagore and Jawaharlal Nehru interpreted these movements as part of a broader historical struggle against imperialism. Nehru's participation in the Brussels-based League Against Imperialism in 1927 further widened the intellectual horizons of Indian nationalism and strengthened the ideological legitimacy of socialism.

Thus, global socialism offered Indian thinkers a vocabulary for understanding the structural nature of colonial exploitation and envisioning a transformative future beyond political independence.

Indian Intellectual Traditions and the Social Roots of Socialism

While global forces triggered interest in socialism, the ideology took root in India through the reinterpretation of indigenous intellectual resources. Indian socialist leaders drew heavily upon:

1. **The Bhakti and Sufi egalitarian traditions:** These traditions emphasized compassion, social equality, and the moral worth of labour—values compatible with socialist ethics.
2. **Buddhist and Ashokan ideas of welfare:** Acharya Narendra Deva, a scholar of Buddhism, integrated Buddhist concepts of compassion and social responsibility into socialist philosophy, advocating a synthesis of Marxism and Indian ethical traditions.
3. **Anti-caste thought from Jyotirao Phule and the Satya Shodhak movement:** Phule's critique of Brahmanical hierarchy provided a foundational framework for later socialist and Ambedkarite analyses of social inequality.
4. **Peasant grievances and rural distress:** India's overwhelmingly agrarian social structure ensured that socialist ideology would absorb issues of tenancy, landlordism, and indebtedness far more deeply than its European counterparts.

As a result, **Indian socialism blended Marxist structural analysis with indigenous moral philosophies**, making it uniquely responsive to both economic and social oppression.

Economic Exploitation and the Appeal of Socialist Thought

Colonial policies created the material basis for the spread of socialist ideology. The economic impact of British rule—articulated by Dadabhai Naoroji's Drain Theory and R.C. Dutt's economic nationalism—highlighted systematic extraction from India. These critiques paved the way for more radical interpretations offered by socialist thinkers.

By the 1920s, India witnessed:

- **persistent agrarian crises**, especially in UP, Bihar, and Bengal

- **displacement of artisans** due to industrial imports
- **harsh working conditions in mills and plantations**
- **growth of urban poverty**

The formation of the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) in 1920 signaled the rise of organized labour politics. Leaders such as S.A. Dange and Muzaffar Ahmad brought Marxist perspectives into worker struggles, while peasant movements in Awadh, Andhra, and Bengal gave socialism a powerful rural base.

Economic distress made socialist ideology appear not merely revolutionary but practical and necessary. It offered explanations for poverty and exploitation while proposing alternative forms of economic organization, including planned development, workers' rights, and the elimination of landlordism.

Gandhian Politics and the Rise of Socialist Alternatives

Although Gandhi's principles differed from socialism in significant ways, Gandhian mass movements created the political space in which socialist ideology flourished. Movements like the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–22) and the Civil Disobedience Movement (1930–34) drew workers, peasants, and youth into active political participation, radicalizing popular consciousness.

However, socialist thinkers critiqued Gandhi on several fronts:

- **his acceptance of trusteeship**, seen as insufficiently radical
- **his emphasis on village economies**, viewed as incompatible with modern industrial needs
- **his reluctance to confront class conflict directly**
- **his focus on moral reform rather than structural change**

These critiques motivated leaders like Jayaprakash Narayan and Rammanohar Lohia to found the **Congress Socialist Party (CSP) in 1934**, which became the principal vehicle for socialist ideology within the nationalist movement.

Rather than opposing Gandhi outright, the CSP sought to push the Congress toward more radical economic and social agendas. This internal ideological contest strengthened the intellectual maturity of the freedom struggle.

The Congress Socialist Party and the Institutionalization of Socialist Thought

The formation of the CSP marked a turning point in Indian socialist history. The CSP, led by Jayaprakash Narayan, Acharya Narendra Deva, and Rammanohar Lohia, became a powerful intellectual and organizational force advocating:

- nationalization of key industries
- abolition of landlordism
- workers' rights and peasant mobilization
- planned economic development
- social equality and rights for oppressed castes and communities

The CSP represented the first major attempt to integrate class-based politics with India's anti-colonial struggle. Its leaders produced influential ideological writings that shaped generations of activists.

Acharya Narendra Deva emphasized humanistic Marxism and ethical socialism, interpreting socialism through Buddhist and Indian philosophical lenses.

Jayaprakash Narayan championed total revolution, participatory democracy, and decentralized socialism.

Rammanohar Lohia advanced socialist thought through critiques of caste and imperialism, especially through his concept of “Sapta Kranti” (Seven Revolutions).

Thus, the CSP institutionalized socialist ideology and connected it deeply with India’s freedom movement.

Ambedkarite Contributions to Socialist Discourse

Although Ambedkar was not a member of the Congress Socialist Party, his critique of caste provided a revolutionary lens to understand structural inequality in India. Ambedkar argued that economic socialism would be meaningless without the destruction of caste-based hierarchies. His writings, especially *Annihilation of Caste*, introduced a radical critique of Indian society that pushed socialist thinkers to confront the limitations of class-based frameworks.

Ambedkar’s emphasis on constitutionalism, labour rights, and social democracy profoundly shaped the ideological landscape of late colonial India. His thought represents one of the most significant intellectual foundations for Indian social justice movements.

Conclusion

The intellectual foundations of socialist ideology in India were built on an extraordinary synthesis of global Marxist thought, indigenous philosophical traditions, radical critiques of colonial capitalism, and demands for social reconstruction. Socialist thinkers played a critical role in expanding the horizons of the freedom struggle—transforming it from a movement for political independence into a broader struggle for social and economic justice.

The distinctiveness of Indian socialism lies in its multidimensional critique of exploitation: economic, social, political, and cultural. It was not merely a borrowed doctrine but an evolving intellectual movement grounded in Indian realities. Its legacy continues to shape democratic debates and struggles for equality in contemporary India.

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