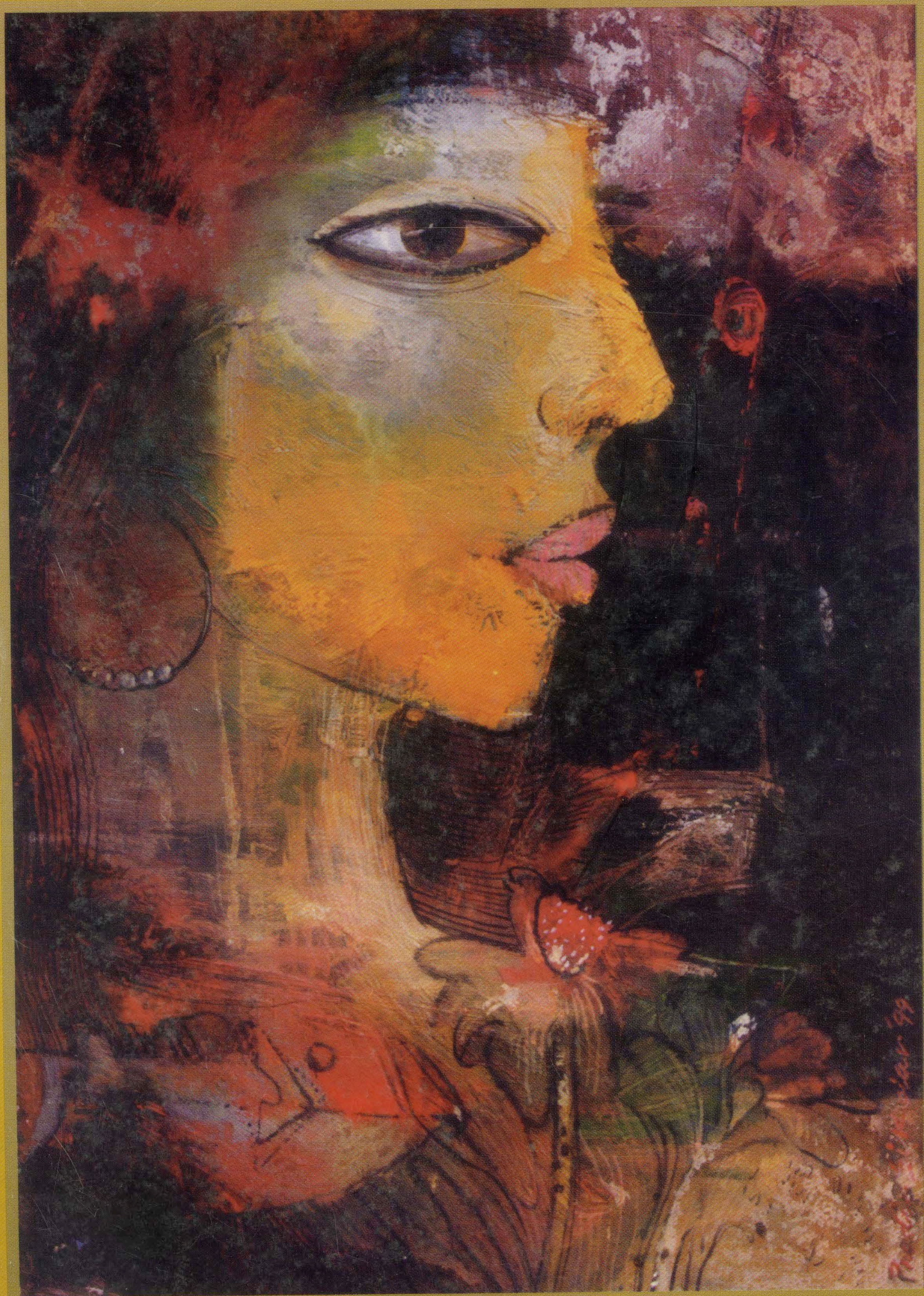
The Statesman

FESTIVAL 99



For three days in August 1991, the much vaunted "new world" order seemed threatened by a return to the stalemate of the Cold War as hardline Communists reasserted their power in a dramatic military coup, deposing President Mikhail Gorbachov and sending tanks onto the streets of Moscow. With the new government declaring a state of emergency, the military rapidly closed in and Russian Federation President Boris Yeltsin became the focus of widespread popular resistance to the coup, memorably proclaiming his support for democracy from atop a tank in front of a beleaguered Russian Parliament building. The coup collapsed as suddenly as it had begun and a shell-shocked President Gorbachov returned from a Crimean dacha where he had been held under house arrest. But the balance of power had shifted radically to Yeltsin, Russia and reform. States broke away and on 21 December the USSR ceased to exist.

OPINION

A SOVIET ICON FOR INDIA, 1917-47

Hari Vasudevan

AMONG the memorable aspects of India's history in the 20th century, the "framing" of the Soviet Union as an icon for this country has been important for entire generations of intelligentsia. The promotion of the USSR to a status more than that of role model was achieved well before Independence and it was the product of Indo-Soviet relations during 1917-47. By the time of India's freedom, the Soviet state had become a lodestone and a target of devotion to many in South Asia. Thereafter, during the half century after 1947, that status — the status of an icon — was refurbished and developed; even as its origins in the two decades following the October Revolution were to be acknowledged and respected.

With the disintegration of the Soviet state in 1991, and the rapid decline in public interest in orthodox Communist ideas in recent times, much of this legacy has ceased to be a focus of political discussion and reference. Yet, for the first time, with the availability of a large volume of archival material from the newly opened Russian archives, it has become possible to re-evaluate the once-unique position of the USSR in our national life. In the course of this re-evaluation, many "inconsistencies" in received wisdom may be set right: as for instance the contradiction between the cordiality of Indian relations with the Soviets before 1947, and the brutality with which major Indian revolutionaries were treated during Stalin's Purges. Whatever the nature of the balance sheet thereafter, given the importance of the Soviet icon for India, the exercise of re-evaluation requires an effort. For polemics of the Left and Right, the story plays a role in the broader history of the Left commitment to nationalism; while, for the socialist, it offers light on the intelligentsia's "left" leanings.

* * *

Certainly, the image of the Soviet Union in South Asia during the 1920s and 1930s must be related to the overall "progressive", anti-Imperialist posture of Soviet Russia internationally at the time. Friends (eg Louis Aragon), or foes (such as George Orwell), put about that image: and in popular literature it fell to Bulldog Drummond or the heroes of E Philips Oppenheim to contain the menace of the Red Guard. In the Indian subcontinent, the polemic had its impact — circulated in the English and vernacular press, which, in one way or the other, painted the Soviet Union as anti-capitalist, anti-Colonial, anti-religion, egalitarian and socially innovative. The specific details of the Indian case must be understood initially from history books by CPI scholars and Communist "fellow travellers". Their accounts of pre-1947 Indo-Russian relations document the Soviet sympathy for the anti-British movement in India in general.

They begin with Russian aid for the activities of Abdur Rabb-Barq, M P B T Acharya, Mahendra Pratap Obeidullah Sindhi and the Provisional Government of Free India during 1917-18 and

after, in Afghanistan and Central Asia. Here the accounts provide detail of training, monetary aid and Russian protection against Afghan and British agents. Thereafter, they deal with the involvement of the Soviet-sponsored Comintern in the supply of funds and personnel to the labour movement and the "national struggle" after 1917 — drawing out the story through the anti-British conspiratorial activities of M N Roy, Virendra Nath Chattopadhyay, Abani Mukherji and many others, with Soviet aid and protection in the mid-1920s.

Other key points in the subsequent story are: the emergence of the Communist Party of India in 1925, against such a background; the activities of the Workers and Peasants Parties of Bengal and Bombay, occasionally functioning with Soviet help before 1929; and the work of Communist emissaries who came directly from Moscow or were sent by the CPGB (eg Ben Bradley and Phillip Spratt). Accounts are replete with a vocabulary regarding the "progressive" character of the October Revolution, its meaning for mankind, "national liberation" and "the struggle against Imperialism". References abound of Soviet participation in the Comintern — and the USSR's commitment to the decisions of Cong-resses of the Comintern, Profintern (International Communist Trade Union) and the Krestintern (International Communist Peasant Movement) to take steps to end Imperialism.

The implications are clear. Indo-Soviet friendship came to be a "time-tested treasure" for India. Aid to the Indian freedom movement, unstintingly given by the USSR, was a source of gratitude and admiration among Indian Communists and revolutionaries. If reason is to be sought for the iconic status of the USSR in India public life by 1947, that reason is self-evident: it lay in the tangible and beneficial assistance rendered to this country in its struggle against imperialism.

Exaggeration, though, and neglect of salient information is ubiquitous in this literature. It rarely deals with the limited resources of the Soviet state and the country's immense poverty during the 1920s and 1930s; and it does not acknowledge that sympathy and theoretical direction was all the USSR had to offer India at this time. Sometimes written under the supervision of Soviet scholars who were keen to stress the USSR's role in making India free, it was quick to ignore uncomfortable details. The facts, true, of the movements of revolutionaries, are hysterically reinforced in the reports of British Intelligence Officers Kaye, Petrie and Williamson on "Communism in India": reports which have been repeatedly reprinted in recent years and which have a wide readership among scholars and the public. The reports, however, underline a crucial aspect of Russia's interest in India at this time — an aspect which seldom finds mention in "left" accounts.

Soviet interest in India was determined by realpolitik as much as a sympathy for national revolution. Part of a broader strategy of securing Soviet interests in Central Asia and Afghanistan

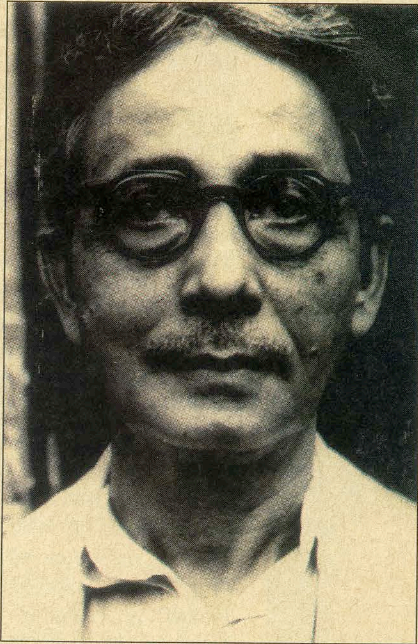
Clearly, as is the case of China, the Soviet interest in India was determined by realpolitik as much as a sympathy for national revolution. Aid to India was part of a broader Soviet strategy of securing Soviet interests in Central Asia and Afghanistan. It developed during the Russian Civil War when Abdur-Rabb and others were required to spread anti-British propaganda in Central Asia against British intervention on behalf of the Emir of Bukhara (1919-1920). The perspective of intelligence reports draws attention to these issues, whereas "left" accounts ignore them.

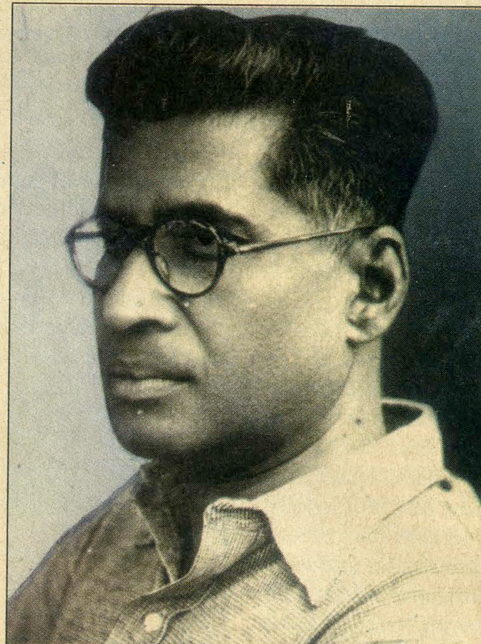
These are crucial deficiencies in the value of such accounts for a sense of why the Soviet state attracted reverie and devotion before 1947 in the subcontinent. Per se, in fact, it is the language and polemic of the accounts (mainly written after 1947) that are as interesting in this regard as the arguments and their matter. For it is certain, from a comparison of pre-Independence statements by Indian revolutionaries and the text of such history writing, that the books provide a polemic that is based on received wisdom; and that such "wisdom" reflected a tradition which was already well established in the 1920s and 1930s and which required "filling out" with "research". In a tangible sense, the arguments and "facts" of the position that Soviet activism itself was the foundation of the USSR's status in India is of limited significance. But the research accounts themselves indicate the mood and proclivities of an earlier period: and they point to legends, stories and "facts" which were the foundation of such inclinations.

* * *

During the 1920s and 1930s itself, such legends and stories were reinforced by a range of other literature which gave an added dimension to the impact of works that might claim to be "researched" accounts of the Soviet interest in India. As relevant as the "facts" and narrations of "Soviet aid" for the formation of an iconic status for the USSR in South Asia, before 1947, were general accounts of Russia, Communism and Lenin by Indian writers in Indian languages at this time. In Hindi, such literature began with R S Avasthi's various writings of 1920-21 (*Russian Revolution, Lenin, His Life*

and His Thoughts), and continued in his later works (*The Red Revolution*, etc). S D Vidyalankar's *The Rebirth of Russia* and *The Soviet State of Russia*, Dev Vrat's *Russia Today*, D R Prem's *Awakening of Russia* and S D Bharthi's *Mahatma Lenin* also substantially contributed to this growing genre, and there were to be similar writings in Bengali (eg, *Soviet Sovayda* by Benoy Ghosh), in Marathi, Malayalam, Tamil and Telugu. The standard "fellow traveller" and writer who produced literature in this vein with immense popularity was Rahul Sanskrityayana. Almost all this literature was devoid of the balanced and speculative quality which marked Jawaharlal Nehru's *The Soviet Russia*, or Rabindranath Tagore's *Letters from Russia* (also written in the 1920s). It was outrightly hagiographic literature, often undiscriminating in its admiration for the USSR. But it was literature that had a wide-ranging impact among a less discerning readership, and it was also recommended by followers of trade unions and the Communist Party of India for reference.





A range of memoirs of Muzaffar Ahmed (left) and M N Roy gave deeper hues to the image of Soviet greatness

Again, unquestioningly adulatory, a range of memoirs (of M N Roy, Muzaffar Ahmed, Shaukat Usmani, Sampurnanand and lesser figures) gave deeper hues to the image of Soviet greatness. Based on actual experience of the Soviet state, they could claim a degree of authenticity which "histories" and general works could not. The bulk of them came from the 'mujahirs' who had crossed over to Russia during the Russian Civil War and the War of Intervention (1918-20). The authors were recruited by M N Roy in Tashkent for the Indian Communist Party in 1920 and had no experience of Communism or Marxism before they left India. Their aim had been to assist Ottoman forces in their struggle with the allies: but difficulties with the Afghan Emir led them to Soviet territory and recruitment by Roy on behalf of the Bolsheviks. In their memoirs, they point to the wonder of their new discovery of Communist ideas: their great joy at the experience of existence under the Soviet state.

> *When Usmani discusses the famine that was ravaging South Russia... it is the creation of an unjust war thrust on Bolshevik Russia by world capitalism*

Shaukat Usmani's memoirs are typical. Beginning with the trek of his group from Peshawar to Jalalabad, Jabal-us-Siraj and Balkh in Afghan-istan, Usmani recounts the mixture of hospitality and hardship he and his comrades faced in Afghan country before their arrival in Central Asia. Thereafter, along with details of movement and habitation, the reader is provided with an unending paean to the "Soviet Land". Hence, following their arrival in Soviet territory:

"Our life seemed to be changing in its entirety. We had no more need to contribute to our common fund so perilously maintained during our Afghan trip. Now we were the guests of honour of a vast republic. We were provided with clothes and shoes and new horizons opened before us."

And again, concerning the sight that confronted them in Tirmiz, the first city they encountered in Central Asia:

"For the first time in our lives we were seeing Europeans mixing freely with Asians. On seeing the Russians mingling freely with the rest of the people of the country we were convinced that we had come to a land of real equality."

For Usmani, the Soviet state could do no wrong. When he discusses the

famine that was ravaging South Russia at this time, it is the creation of an unjust war thrust on Bolshevik Russia by world capitalism. The "counter-revolutionaries" in Central Asia, to his mind, were cruel, superstitious and ignorant fools; while the revolutionaries were noble, generous and elevated in their thinking. The benefits of the October Revolution were self-evident among the people of the land:

"We saw freedom in its true light. In spite of their poverty, imposed by the counter-revolutionaries and the imperialists, the people were more jovial and satisfied than ever before. The revolution had instilled confidence and fearlessness in them. The real brotherhood of mankind would be seen here among these people of fifty different nationalities. No barriers of caste or religion hindered them from mixing freely with one another. Every soul was transformed into an orator. One could see a worker, a peasant or a soldier haranguing like a professional lecturer."

Other accounts followed a similar tone: the short personal biography of Zakharia (Rehmat Ali of Lahore, who became a firm member of the Communist group in 1920); and the reminiscences which Muzaffar Ahmed was to draw on for some of his own writing. M N Roy's memoirs, written long after his disillusionment with Communism, pay more attention to the outright squalor and poverty of Russia in 1920 (when he arrived). But these descriptions have no bearing on Roy's state of mind in the 1920s and the enthusiasm he communicated to others. He himself talks of his response: "The idea that at last I was in Moscow was so very overwhelming as to make me walk as if in a dream."

The latter-day radical humanist reflected at a later date: "It was good that the keenness of my perception was for the moment blinded by the elation of having reached the journey's end. Otherwise I might be disappointed and disillusioned by the experienced reality of disorder, dirt and drabness."

Fellow revolutionaries who encountered Roy during this period speak of his passion for Communism — and this is clear from his correspondence of the period.

* * *

Notably, in memoirs and documents, criticism of Soviet policy coincides with full-throated adulation. Usmani himself is contemptuous of Soviet Russia's nurture of the many "Guptas and Senguptas" that he met in Moscow. Abdur Rabb and Acharya, once displaced by M N Roy in the favours of the Comintern, were critical of Soviet "friends". Abani Mukherji and M N Roy were critical of Soviet policy on occasion — as was Virendranath Chattopadhyaya. Confidential Comintern documents of the late 1930s speak of discontent in India, among members of the CPI, when the Comintern fed agents into Northern India. Since such carping was not uncommon, it is unusual that elsewhere an unqualified "rosy" picture of the Soviet Union was supplied by the same "revolutionaries" for public consumption.

Rahul Sanskrityayana: literature devoid of balanced and speculative quality

Certainly, political benefit accrued from this sleight of hand and this cannot be ignored. The icon of the Soviet state reinforced the status of the revolutionary, even if he was inclined to quibble about the justice of Soviet agents. There is more to this, though, since many of the "revolutionaries" were poor at keeping a balance sheet of political profitability. It is more likely that no contradiction was apparent. The experience of revolutionary life itself was limiting: few knew Russian, so few knew more than what they were told. However discontented, revolutionaries sensed a utopia, whether they saw it or not. Their existence itself forestalled anything more.

Descriptions of the lives of active revolutionaries who lived in Soviet Russia are a record of rapid journeys and a "ghetto" existence with fellow Indians and fellow "colonials" in the "India House" in Tashkent or the Hotel de Luxe in Moscow. heated discussions concerning the colonial question — or the perversity of their own comrades — took up much of their time. M N Roy's memoirs are full of quick meetings, journeys and documents. Pritam Singh (a pro-Soviet Gadr activist) provides a similar report on his revolutionary activities: movement on the Trans-Siberian, and quick passage into China. Usmani was unwell in Soviet territory: so there is the odd description of the Soviet hospital train and Black Sea sanatoria. The revolutionaries were not great readers: and their written language reflects poor grammar and prose style. This precluded learning of the state of the USSR from the relatively under-censored press of the NEP. M N Roy himself came to write with some elegance only later in his career: his early notes are full of shoddy prose.

* * *

In the 1930s, an extreme level of "confidentiality" was attached to the presence of the Indians who came to Russia for education and training: individuals who were eventually to carry home their impressions of the wonders of the Socialist Motherland and contribute to the making of the Soviet icon

for India. At a time of great unrest and turmoil in the USSR, during Collectivisation and the Great Purges, Indian students were even more isolated than before and their ignorance of the world around them deepened. These were mainly Gadr recruits who were barely literate and who had already had a disturbed and unsettled existence, wandering from Punjab to the USA to Latin America and other countries before they were in their mid-20s. Eventually, they were to return to India and form the core of the Communist movement in Punjab. Their studies were conducted at the Communist University of the Workers of the East (KUTV), where a regime of extreme secrecy was explicit in a "confidentiality code".

The code's first point was: "Students do not have the right to mention their real names, or to speak in precise terms about where they were born, where they have worked, where they have been imprisoned (!), for what reasons etc — except to the representative of their sections in the Executive Committee of the Comintern, the head of the Cadres' Section of the Eastern Secretariat and the head of the Cadres' Section at the 'school'."

Students were forbidden to converse with anyone outside "the school". They were forbidden to carry out any correspondence. One batch was forbidden to speak to another batch, and all meals were organised separately.

With such conditions of extreme isolation, Indians were given a diet of Communism and Russian studies by scholars of Indian culture of the old regime, such as Oldenburg or Scherbatskoi (if they attended courses in Leningrad) or scholars of contemporary Indian politics: Snesarev, Reisner, Balabushevich, Diakov, Goldberg, Mel'man and others (the standard teachers of the KUTV). Here the Russians themselves functioned within major constraints. In almost all cases, they had no personal experience of India, or how to handle Indians. In the case of the scholars of the old regime, they were on their guard and tight-lipped, since they were fighting a losing battle against "Communist" invasion of the Academy of Sciences and the old universities. In the case of young scholars, teachers were chosen for their simplicity and lack of guile (as in the case of Balabushevich) to deal with Indian affairs; or they had been selected for their extreme loyalty — thinking (in the case of Reisner) or unthinking (as in the case of Kozlov). For the Indianist Diakov, who came from an old gentry revolutionary family, his work was directed by the Party and he did what he was told: originally a doctor, who rose to the status of Komissar for health in Central Asia, the Party apportioned him work as an Oriental Studies scholar and teacher in the mid-1930s, and he followed his instructions.

A rigorous system of supervision existed throughout the process of interaction and learning for both master and student. Members of the "Confidential Section" of Soviet institutions kept a close eye on their Russian and Indian charges. Unusual behaviour and the odd loose word were quickly noted and arrests followed, as in the case of Abani Mukherji and some of whom we only know by name ("Ali", "Wafi", "Nisar"). A long stay in Soviet territory, acquaintance with Russian and eventual marriage could eventually breach barriers of isolation (as in the case of Virendranath Chattopadhyay, for instance); but by then Party discipline and anxiety to play a role in Soviet policy-making compelled silence.

* * *

In India, literature from Soviet Russia was seized by British officials and movements to Soviet Russia were very strictly monitored. A Bolshevik Intelligence Service is known to have been established for keeping an eye on movements to the USSR. Indians, therefore, came home from Russia with little intimate knowledge of the country where they had been; and in India itself they found a similar ignorance. The polemic and propaganda distributed through CPSU literature became standard currency for Partyspeak in the circumstances; and doubt, or contradiction, however slight or innocent, was noted as the mark of the Imperialist or the reactionary.

The upshot of such circumstances was hard popular work by Indian Communist organisations (often described in rigorous financial and numerical detail in reports to the Comintern) in the name of a utopia associated with a country with which they had marginal acquaintance. Hence the confusion ultimately in Left ranks when a moment of crisis arrived, as it did in 1941, and a choice had to be made between the needs of the nation and its classes and the requirements of the ideal. When the USSR and Britain found themselves on the same side against Hitler, Indian Communists were thrown into understandable confusion.

The Friends of the Soviet Union organisation brought together a number of Left intellectuals who supported the War effort, despite Nationalist opposition. They rallied around Soviet posters, Soviet slogans, periodicals such as The People's War and The Bombay Chronicle, which belong to the genre of hagiographic literature described above. In the localities, lower level workers for whom the utopia meant less and the struggle meant more were often at odds with the "Party line". Most tragically, after the 20th party Congress (1956), and Krushchev's denunciation of Stalin, "Left" intellectuals were to know that ideals and reality had been a real variance in the Stalin era.

This was the most vivid example of the curse that the Soviet icon would visit on the Indian left movement, whatever material and emotional benefits imparted by the Soviet connection. Like most icons, the power of the Soviet icon would be compelling emotionally, based on poor foundations and ultimately doomed to disillusion those whom it captivated. The problem was that since it was based on poor experience and a form of self-censorship, when the seamier side of the icon ultimately appeared (as it did in 1956 and later during Perestroika), the effect was devastating.