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THE INDIAN NATIONAL CONGRESS AND THE CAPITALIST CLASS: A SYMBIOTIC ALLIANCE OR COMPRADOR CAPITALISM?

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Abstract: *This paper investigates the complex and calculated collaboration between the Indian National Congress (INC) and the home-based capitalist class during the anti-colonial era in India. Rejecting the notion of the comprador bourgeoisie, which proposes that indigenous capitalists were simply imperialist collaborators, it maintains that the Indian capitalist class arrived at the state of national bourgeoisie as a self-sufficient group. They viewed British imperialism with structural antagonism because of their diverging economic interests on issues of tariffs, exchange rates, and foreign investment. In order to manage the vagueness of their position, capitalists employed the Pressure-Compromise-Pressure (P-C-P) tactic to use Congress-led mass movements to secure colonial concessions while additionally offering the necessary financial patronage required to keep the organisational machinery of the INC afloat. This economic dependency allowed business elites notable policy leeway by which they were often successful in curbing the rise of labour radicalism, as is exemplified by the Bombay Trade Disputes Act 1938 and in stigmatising members of the leadership of the socialist radical movement. Finally, the article concludes that this co-evolutionary connection not only guided India towards a non-revolutionary route to independence but also set another milestone by defining the structure of independent, post-1947, state-sponsored, autonomous, capitalist development.*

Key Words: *Indian National Congress, Comprador, Capitalist, Bourgeoisie, Pressure-Compromise-Pressure.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between the Indian National Congress (INC) and the Indian capitalist class was a complex, strategic, and evolving symbiosis of mutual advantage exerting profound effects on both the anti-colonial movement and the architecture of the post-independence Indian state. This connection was neither mere patronage nor complete ideological coherence, but a dynamic interaction in which the capitalist class, signifier of an independent national bourgeoisie, sought to harness the nationalist movement to promote its economic goals more generally, and the Congress relied upon this class for vital monetary support. A scrutiny of this dependence elucidates that although the Indian capitalist class arose inside the colonial system, it was not a comprador class but a mature and conscious national bourgeoisie with its own specific vision for autonomous capitalist development (Mukherjee & Mukherjee, 1988).

2. THE COMPRADOR VERSUS NATIONAL BOURGEOISIE DEBATE

A salient question in the construction of the Indian capitalist class is about their respective role as a comprador bourgeoisie that functioned as a subordinate partner of imperialist capital, or as a national bourgeoisie eager to achieve its own autonomous goals.

To be sure, the conception of comprador character is staunchly propounded by scholars such as Suniti Kumar Ghosh (1988). By his assessment, the Indian capitalist class was internally divided, and the large industrial groups like the Tatas and Birlas basically represented comprador interests. The core accumulation of their capital, as per Ghosh, stemmed not from independent entrepreneurship, but from their engagement within British-dominant markets, as intermediaries, traders, contractors, and speculators who traded in such commodities as opium and cotton. The nature of their industrial enterprises was heavily dependent on imported technology and foreign expertise, while their political aspirations were confined to a decent place within the colonial establishment, instead of total independence from it.

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Ghosh stresses this with a contrast to a comparatively minor but a genuinely national bourgeoisie consisting of scientists and professionals who founded ventures such as Bengal Chemical based on indigenous knowledge and limited resources.

In contrast, a more convincing argument put forward by historians such as Bipan Chandra and Aditya Mukherjee puts the comprador conception into doubt. Chandra (1979) offers a more sophisticated reading, arguing that the domestic industrialist class assumed a long-term contradiction with imperialism, while maintaining a short-term dependence and accommodation with it. Mukherjee (1988) adds to this perspective by showing that Indian capitalism grew autonomously, and often in contrast to foreign capital.

A number of considerations corroborate with the interpretation of the Indian capitalist class as a national bourgeoisie:

1. Self-Strengthening Foundations: The development of the Indian capitalist class was not primarily as subordinate partners of British capital. The early entrepreneurs, like the Tatas and nineteenth-century traders, from the outset, leaned largely on their own resources and enterprise, often pitted directly against the British commercial and industrial companies.
2. Countering Imperialism: The Indian capitalists constantly found themselves at odds with imperialism on pivot zones of policy. They stood up commonly for tariff protection against foreign and especially Lancashire products, protested actions against the artificially overvalued level of the exchange between rupee and sterling, which was favourable for imports, and defied British dominance in key sectors like in banking, insurance and shipping.
3. Opposing Foreign Capital: The Indian bourgeoisie adhered to a strong resistance to foreign investments, particularly the expanding international offshoots (Unilever and ICI) in the 1930s. Perceived as attacks on their sovereign expansion, they pressed the “Indian control of Indian industries” slogan, moving the state to take measures that encouraged discrimination against foreign companies.
4. Development from a Nationalist Perspective: Indian industrialists unmistakably understood the need for their continuing growth in the existence of a sovereign nation-state that would afford them economic protection, financial incentives, and investment in heavy industries and infrastructure (Bagchi, 2008; Mukherjee & Mukherjee, 1988).

The argument that capitalist nationalism stemmed mainly from economic self-interest gets an additional impetus from Manali Chakrabarti’s (2009) interpretation of European industrialists in Kanpur. This group produced domestic productions like cotton textiles, called for protectionism and mobilised against free-trade policies for the importers of British products, just like the Indian entrepreneurs. Their position was in sharp contrast with the European mercantile elites within port cities who profited from colonial free trade. Such a comparison underscores that it was the economic structure, not the race or per se patriotism, that dictated the political orientation of a group of businesses. Therefore, the Indians capitalists were national because their class interests converged with the formation of an autonomous national economy that was freed from the constraints of imperialism.

3. A STRATEGIC ALLIANCE WITH THE INDIAN NATIONAL CONGRESS

As perceiving their sustained antagonism with imperialism, but constantly aware of their short-lived weakness vis-à-vis the colonial establishment, the Indian capitalist class came to adopt an intricate and calculated posture of dealing with the Indian National Congress. Instead of directly controlling the nationalist movement, they aimed at indirectly steering its course through back-room manipulations.

4. THE PRESSURE-COMPROMISE-PRESSURE (P-C-P) TACTIC

According to Bipan Chandra (1979), the capitalists deployed a Pressure-Comprising-Pressure (P-C-P) strategy as the key to their political involvement. They viewed the mass movements led by Congress as good mechanisms for creating pressure upon the colonial establishment—inducing concessions and forcing negotiations. However, they were reluctant to go for a sustained confrontation, which could disturb the commercial stability and, more importantly, radicalise the working classes and increase the influence of leftism. They preferred a rhythm in the shape of limited agitations, followed by compromise and a period of institutional or constitutional politics for securing the consolidation of previous achievements before repeating the pressure.

The case of the 1920–22 Swadeshi movement, studied by S. Bhattacharya (1976), finds an exemplification of this logic. While many merchants participated in the boycott of foreign textiles, this was primarily motivated by the unfavourable rupee–sterling exchange rate, making the imported products economically costly. Thus, the appeal among the nationalists coincided with their economic interests and allowed them to resist colonial policy without harming their capital.

5. FINANCIAL PATRONAGE AND POLICY LEVERAGE

The Indian National Congress, conversely, relied on financial support from the capitalist class for sustaining campaigns, activists and networks of organisations. The existence of this dependency allowed the business elite a decisive influence upon Congress's decision-making. Claude Markovits' (1981) study on the Congress provincial ministries of 1937–39 offers a graphic picture of this situation. At first, some Congress governments, especially in the United Provinces, adopted a pro-union policy during industrial disputes, which led to tensions with capitalists because they considered that their patronage was inadequately valued.

These initial experiments with a pro-union policy soon transformed into a more conciliatory approach to business interests. Under pressure from industrialists as well as fearing the transfer of investment to princely territories, Congress governments restructured their policies. The most prominent example is the Bombay Trade Disputes Act of 1938, implemented by the Congress ministry in Bombay. Called by the labour unions a Black Act, it greatly curtailed strike rights by setting mandatory waiting periods and penalties for illegal strikes, certainly favouring the employers. This incident showed how Congress, under the constraint of capitalist influence and its own right- wing factions, gave priority to industrial harmony and confidence to the businesses over labour demands (Markovits, 1981).

6.CONTAINING THE LEFT: HANDLING A TWO-FRONT STRUGGLE

For the capitalist group, the major peril was not that of imperialism, which they thought could be somehow bargained at last, but of the social revolution led by the left wing. The appearance of militant, communally mobilised trade unions such as Girni Kamgar Union during the 1928 – 29 Bombay textile strike was seen as a potential attack on the stability of capitalism (Bhattacharya, 1981).

Their counter tactic was to remain in a dual position, in continuance with their support for the nationalist cause, but assuring their leadership is fully rooted in the conservative, pro- capital wing of the Congress. But it was not correct for the industrialists to openly criticise socialism, as G.D. Birla brilliantly said. They should, instead, strengthen the hands of the leaders like Vallabhbhai Patel and Bhulabhai, who were already opposing socialist tendencies within.

This was evident during Jawaharlal Nehru's left- wing phase in 1933-36. Although some conservative businessmen loudly criticised his socialist rhetoric, mindful men like Birla and Purshottamdas Thakurdas followed a subtler approach, and they tried to nurture and restrain Nehru, assuring that the Congress organisation remained firmly in the hands of right-wing forces (Mukherjee & Mukherjee, 1988). By channelling financial and moral support to the Gandhian leadership, they ensured that although its language was socialist, the Congress never approved any program that was fundamentally dangerous to the sanctity of private property.

7.CONCLUSION

The association between the Indian capitalist group and the Indian National Congress was inherently symbiotic, underlain by reciprocal dependence and intentional plans of strategic design. The capitalist class acted as a self- standing national bourgeoisie with long- term goals that were structurally in opposition to imperialism. They perceived the Congress as the most suitable tool for bringing up a self- standing nation state that would protect and promote their economic interests, exerting the influence of funds to direct the movement to a path that was demonstrably anti-imperialist, but clearly non- socialist in sentiment.

On its part, the Congress, while mobilising great numbers of people from peasants and workers, was financially dependent on the capitalist elites for keeping its political and organisational apparatus going. This economic dependence forced its leadership to make a compromise with business interests that kept labour agitation restrained and refrained from an authentic radical change of the socio- economic order. Therefore, the national struggle came to be under the ideological dominance of the bourgeoisie. This historical association not only dictated the non-revolutionary path of freedom for India but also predetermined the form of the post- 1947 Indian state that engaged in a model of autonomous, state- aided capitalist development.

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