

# On the Maoist Party

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## The Maoist Party

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What should be the qualities of an organisation to become the vanguard of a new society and humans, what should be the methods of party building corresponding to this, what should be the position of the party within the dictatorship of the proletariat? Can a proletarian party retain its communist qualities today without becoming a Maoist party? Is the Maoist party just another name for communist party? Or does it contain something new, in its very nature and methods of work?

In the capitalist age, classes (or sections within them) express and realise their interests mainly through the instrument of political party (a social organisation). Marx posed the necessity for the proletariat to form its own party in order to achieve its aims, contending with enemy classes. This was developed as a scientific theory, verified and established through practice, by Lenin. The core of the Leninist party concept are professional revolutionaries; those who devote themselves completely to revolutionary activity, who make this their profession. It has been criticised that this leads to an elite who lord over the proletariat. Further, Lenin's viewpoint that workers cannot, on their own, arrive at the ideology guiding their liberation, his proposition that it must be reached to them from outside, have been remarked as a celebration of elitism. The Leninist party concept is accused of being the concrete expression of this mindset, one that undervalues the potential of the workers. Some argue that while the evils of this party concept were held in check by Lenin's personal qualities so long as he was alive, they broke out in a monstrous death dance under Stalin. (Pearson, Mathrubhumi - 87/3, March 29, 2009)

Let us first acquaint ourselves with the ideological struggles that took place on this issue, during the period in which the Leninist party concept took form. Its starting point was the debate in the Second Congress of the undivided Russian Communist Party (then known as the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party) on the matter of the party constitution. The Rightists (Trotsky too was part of this) accused Lenin's draft statutes of promoting ultra-centralisation. Even his insistence on membership criteria that made it mandatory to join a party committee and participate in its practice was, in their view, an example of unwanted centralisation. Their counter-proposal would allow anyone who helped the party be its member. They would thus make it a loose organisation of spare-time activists. This was the crux of the difference between Lenin and his adversaries.

Lenin clearly realised the need for an organisation of those prepared to be frontline activists in a revolutionary movement aimed at seizing power, those who devoted their whole lives to this task and thus acquired the necessary leadership qualities and skills. His party concept evolved from this vision. The specific situation in Czarist Russia, which ruled out all open activity and made it imperative to constantly evade the secret police, certainly was a major influencing factor in this. The weight of such specificities can be seen in Lenin's insistence on the total centralisation to be enjoyed by the party's leading body and the strict division of tasks - almost like the division of labour in a modern factory - among different party committees and members of the committees. But it must also be noted that a departure from the 2<sup>nd</sup> International's party concept was implicit in this approach, though the immediate context it addressed was the Russian situation. This is where Lenin separates from his contemporaries on the party question. Leaving aside diehard Rightist attacks, let us elaborate this by getting into the criticisms made by Rosa Luxemburg, and also Trotsky (who was in the revolutionary camp for a while).

Luxemburg characterised Lenin as the representative of the 'ultra-centralist' tendency within the Russian revolutionary movement. This criticism was grounded in her view on the relation between the revolutionary mass movement and the party. Luxemburg argued that, "Centralism in the socialist sense is not an absolute thing applicable to any phase whatsoever of the labor movement. It is a *tendency*, which becomes real in proportion to the development and political training acquired by the working masses in the course of their struggle."; "The fact is that the Social Democracy is not *joined* to the organisation of the proletariat. It is itself the proletariat. And because of this, Social Democratic centralism is essentially different from Blanquist centralism ... It is, so to speak, the "self-centralism" of the advanced sectors of the proletariat. It is the rule of the majority within its own party." ('Organisational Problems of Russian Social Democracy', emphasis in original) This narration, with its emphasis on the voluntary nature of a Communist Party's centralisation, more or less negates the difference between the class and its advanced elements, between the party and the broad revolutionary movement. Though the word Luxemburg uses is '*self-centralism*', in effect it becomes synonymous to '*spontaneous*'. The thinning out of this demarcation is also visible in Trotsky's contestation, "If the division of labour can be considered as an *organisational principle*, it can only be in a factory, but never in a political party of any kind, still less in ours - is it not obvious to us that the "principle" of the division of labour is in no way characteristic of the organisation which has made it its task to develop the class consciousness of the proletariat?" ('Our Political Tasks - Part 3, Organisational Questions', emphasis in original)

Lenin did not deny the voluntary nature of party centralisation. It is not imposed, but voluntarily acceded to; consciously taken up by all with the interests of revolution in mind. This is Lenin's concept of voluntary centralisation. Contrary to Luxemburg's 'tendency', which must be realised through the course of struggles, for Lenin, the methods of a centralised party, including its division of tasks, is something to be consciously established and trained in from the very beginning. Yet this does not negate

the positiveness of revolutionary spontaneity.

To repeat, Lenin's point of departure was the type of organisation needed to organise and carry out revolution. He arrived at a solution by assessing the concrete situation of the enemy and the people, rather than starting out from some preconceived notion of revolution, or of the proletariat and its development. Thus, during the revolutionary upheaval of 1905, in place of the strictest centralisation and guarded recruitment he had been favouring till then, Lenin argued for forms of organisation capable of incorporating the greatest number of militant working class masses. (New Tasks and New Forces, Volume 8, pages 209-220)

This was not a case of Lenin going against Leninism, it WAS Leninism. In this instance, he was guided by the assessment that the revolutionary zeal of the masses, seen in that situation, would to a large extent make up for their ideological, political weaknesses. This displayed deep faith in the masses and a dialectical grasp of the relation between conscious steps and spontaneity within a revolutionary movement. Without doubt, Leninist centralisation and organisational principles are not some absolutes meant to be implemented 'regardless of the stage'. Its work division does not abandon the task of raising the consciousness of the whole party membership and the widest possible mass.

Did the later day international communist movement lose Lenin's exemplary, dialectical, handling of the vanguard concept and organisational methods formulated by him? It would be far more profitable to pay attention to such differences rather than running after individual traits of leaders as Pearson does. Lenin was concerned about the dangers posed by universalising Bolshevik party statutes, regardless of time and place. In a report to the Communist International (Comintern), Lenin observed that its organisational principles have a strong Russian flavor, and doubted whether comrades from other countries would be able to grasp it properly (Report to the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, Volume 33, pages 415-432). In those days of haste to rupture from the loose organisational methods of the 2<sup>nd</sup> International this concern didn't draw attention. Meanwhile, stricter centralisation was demanded of the Russian Communist Party, which had by this time become a ruling party. The iron unity of the party was of critical importance for the very existence of the revolutionary state. This was the context in which the 10<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Russian party decided to end all groups within the party and their publications, departing from its existent practice. Later it became part of the foundations of communist party organisational principles.

Throughout this period, Lenin, the Russian Party and the Comintern were of the view that a revolutionary advance was imminent in Western Europe. Political developments in various countries testified to this. The immediacy of this situation must certainly have influenced the formulation of organisational principles. However, the revolutionary situation that was forming up dissipated. At this point Lenin drew attention to the need for a thorough evaluation in order to work out future steps, in the situation of ebb. But before he could grapple with this he was bedridden by an assassin's bullets and died. It

is not known whether the party concept and its organisational principles were among the issues he had in mind for review. At any rate this is not what was seen later. Statutes and methods of work adopted in a particular situation were later theorised in a very mechanical manner.

Stalin's concept of monolithic party was prominent among his mechanical errors. This was the model followed by the international communist movement - till it was criticised by Mao. An outlook of worshipping the party as a power that could not be questioned and was always correct got strengthened. The influence of mechanical thinking, which denied internal contradictions and class struggle in socialism, was evident in Stalin's party concept. It was not grasped as a space of active contradictions, as an organic entity which must continually renew its leadership position and relevance in society by grappling with external and internal contradictions. Ideological struggle became formal. Democratic centralism froze up into relations of domination and subservience. As could be expected, there was a difference in this between parties in power and those struggling for it. In the latter case, the necessities of sustaining under enemy suppression compelled greater reliance on the people. Self-criticism, rectification and ideological struggles over such issues livened up the atmosphere in the party. Yet, the constrictions of the monolithic party concept were ever present. Purging of membership gained prominence, compared to ideological rectification. So long as the party maintained its Marxist-Leninist orientation this usually meant removal of those who had lost their communist qualities. But even then, ideology took a back seat in the whole process; the organisational aspect stood out.

Mao broke away from this negative tradition and the mechanical thinking underlying it. This was literally a re-construction of the vanguard concept. And it opened up the way to a deeper, richer, understanding of the proletariat's leading role and the Leninist party. Mao's departure from existent thinking on the party concept can be seen right from the very beginning. His report on the Hunan peasant movement, written in 1927, observed that any revolutionary party failing to give leadership to the insurgent peasantry would be rejected. This statement, that the peasants - seen as backward in Marxist theory till then - will test and determine the revolutionary character of a proletarian party, was nothing but a daring subversion of absolutist thinking on the leading role of the communist party. It provided space to problematise the proletariat's historical leading role and the vanguard concept.

Though other classes and social sections will be important partners in the historical movement to destroy capitalism (its highest stage of imperialism) they cannot provide leadership. In each instance the issue of liberation is specific - land in the case of landless peasants, caste oppression for Dalits, male chauvinism for women, ethnic oppression for Adivasis, national oppression for oppressed people, religious persecution for minorities and so on. Being specific they are also partial, in the context of the whole revolutionary project. But this is not the situation of the proletariat. Capitalist bondage is different from earlier exploiting systems like caste-feudalism. It imposes no other

compulsion on the workers other than the pangs of hunger. And since, in principle, they are free, there can be no specific liberation suiting them. Every form of exploitation and oppression must be ended. Thus the emancipation of the whole of humanity becomes a precondition for the liberation of this class. The leading role of the proletariat derives from this objective social position. It obliges the proletariat to continue the revolution all the way up till realising a world rid of exploitation.

If this Marxist understanding of proletarian leadership is absolutised it would certainly lead to reification. (Sandeepan, Munnaniporali, 131) Both the history and present of the international communist movement illustrate how this emerges with mechanical equations, where proletariat = revolution and communist party = vanguard. On the other hand, economist impulses often seen in the upper strata of the proletariat, social passivity engendered by revisionist, reformist politics that strengthen this economism, and changes seen in the nature of labour and work places, have given rise to views that abandon the proletarian leadership concept. Carried away in the tide of identity politics, they believe that, in future, these movements will give leadership to social change.

Thus we have the two. At one end, reification of the proletariat and the communist party, selfishness that hoists this banner to justify fleeting necessities as common interests. At the other, the lethargic plea to reduce our sights to the partial, to abandon the noble task of an exploitation free world since it is a mere myth. Maoism cuts through this vicious circle. The leading role of the proletariat and the vanguard position of its communist party are potentialities contained in historical circumstances. They can only be realised through creative intervention in the historical moment of a specific society. Similar to other phenomena, this too is a unity of opposites. This was the import of Mao's warning in the Hunan report.

One sees the continuity with this in Mao's observation, made some 50 years later, "the bourgeoisie is within the party itself". He arrived at this conclusion through the experiences of the restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union and the Cultural Revolution unleashed in China to prevent it. This is something that cannot be grasped with Stalin's monolithic party concept. The bourgeois presence Mao called attention to was different from the possible infiltration of bourgeois agents and their corruption of party members. This was what Lenin and Stalin sought to check through purges. Mao was speaking about a new bourgeoisie. It is the product of residual capitalist production relations such as bourgeois right and the political/ruling leading role of the communist party in the dictatorship of the proletariat; an inevitable element of socialism. The decisive factor in the struggle against this will be the correct ideological-political line dealing with the multiple tasks of continuing the revolution and its further development. If a revisionist line seizes leadership the bourgeoisie will become dominant in the party. The colour of the party and the state will change.

This poses yet another dialectic of the communist party's position as vanguard. The main source of the potential hazard we saw above does not lie with external influences. It is

contained in the revolution it led, in the society thus created, in other words, in the emergent unity of opposites brought up by its successful venture of being a vanguard. This potential is the mirror opposite of that of leading the advance to communism. Which of them will be realised in a given socialist society is a matter to be settled by the class struggle taking place within the party and society in each concrete historical moment. Grasping the party as a unity of opposites - this is the point of rupture to firmly establish the Maoist party concept in both theory and practice.

Taking lessons from the Chinese revolution and the international communist movement Mao elaborated a number of propositions on the party. One theme consistently stressed throughout is that of firmly building up the communist consciousness of serving the people, by checking attitudes of superiority in the relations between the party and the people, and leadership and ranks. This does not deny the role or importance of leadership. Mao was contradicting an outlook that absolutised leadership, and made the masses and ranks into disciples, passive instruments. He reminded communists that no matter how necessary cadres are, it is the masses that carry out things and therefore it wouldn't do to exaggerate the role of cadres. He persists with this in the relation between the central committee and lower committees and that between the socialist state and the people. In the absence of information from the lower levels the central leadership cannot arrive at correct decisions. At times a solution may be arrived at in the lower level itself, in which case the task of the central committee is to propagate this throughout the country. Such observations of Mao topple any idea of infallible leadership. They also helped in bringing out the relation between the organisation principle of democratic centralism and the Marxist theory of knowledge. Mao pointed out that the struggle against the bourgeoisie was not the only element in class struggle under socialism. It included contradictions between the socialist state and people, and between the party and the people. Right in the 1950s itself he warned that the people would teach those who thought they could lord over them, now that power was seized. He advocated the right of the people to strike and protest saying that the communist party needs to learn a lesson. ('Combat Bourgeois Ideas in the Party', 'Speech at the Second Plenary Session of the Eighth Central Committee of the Communist Party of China', Volume 5, Selected Works)

What is striking here is the importance he placed on struggle from below, the spontaneous initiative of the people. This grasp of the dialectical relation between conscious intervention from above and spontaneous pressure from below, this Leninist understanding lost by the international communist movement in the interregnum, was not just retaken by Mao. He took it to a new height by applying it in the Cultural Revolution, in the struggle against the danger of capitalist restoration. Mao thus developed the party concept and established it on new foundations; not on some individual behavioural traits, but solid ideological-political principles.

To what extent could the Communist Party of China led by Mao imbibe this newness? This is a relevant question. It serves as an entry for assessing the extent to which the

international movement that emerged in the 1960s inspired by Mao Tsetung Thought, or the Maoists who laid claim to deeper clarity in the 1990s, have incorporated and actualised the Maoist party concept. The Chinese party was forged in the Cominternist mould. This aspect, as well as its background of having functioned for long with its methods and style, must be kept in mind while seeking an answer to our question. As we noted, Mao had started to break away from this model from the very beginning. But his new approach would really be established only through the Cultural Revolution. In fact, Mao's teachings on the party were systematically compiled only in 1973, in the Shanghai text, "A Basic Understanding of the Communist Party of China". (Three years later the banning of this book was one of the first acts of the capitalist roaders who usurped power!) One can then conclude that the Chinese party was one undergoing reforging in accordance with the Maoist approach, yet with a lot of unevenness in this very process itself. In fact this new approach had developed by leading revolutionary practice, all the while ingesting new insights from its experiences.

But it wouldn't be enough to mark this limit imposed by conditions. There is also the matter of an incomplete rupture from the Comintern approach. Among them, the cult built up around Mao deserves special attention. This business of personality cult was initiated by Stalin in total opposition to Lenin's outlook. When the then Soviet leader Khrushchev prepared ideological grounds for capitalist restoration by negating Stalin totally, under the guise of rejecting this cult, Mao took up the defence of Stalin. But this was done with Marxist criticism on Stalin's errors, differentiating between what is to be adopted and what rejected. We need to think over whether this was complete. Personality cults can never be justified in Marxism. But instead of totally rejecting them Mao limited himself to criticising their extreme manifestations. Though this is sought to be justified by appealing to the complex situation of the class struggle in China, it is unacceptable in principle itself. The issue is not the extent of praise, or even whether somebody deserves to be praised. Such cults foster a consciousness of infallibility of an individual, a leadership and indirectly of that party; something rejected by the Maoist party concept but seen in the Chinese party's adjective, "always correct". Contemporary examples, of Maoist parties justifying their leadership cults by citing Mao, draw attention to the need to achieve clarity in this matter.

In general, how far have the Maoists succeeded in rupturing from the Cominternist party concept? How much Maoist are the parties they are building up and leading? Though no one would theorise, and thus legitimise, a shift from staying with the masses and serving them to lording over them, this can already be seen in a number of instances. Blind faith in the party in the place of party loyalty centered on politics, blind belief in the infallibility of the leadership and cult worship, intolerance of opposition and criticism, pragmatism that sanctions any method if they are "for the party and revolution" – such Cominternist influences are commonly seen in methods of work and approach. The term Cominternist is used because these were not errors of Stalin alone. Moreover, they contain problems of a whole period in the history of the international communist movement. We must

add, there were problems of outlook *and* growth. Because this was a time in which communist ideology was spread throughout the world, formation of communist parties was promoted, and a truly international revolutionary proletarian movement was given form to. One of the great leaps achieved by Maoism is its rupture from bad traditions of the Comintern period, without in the least minimising its positive role. This must be further deepened. Today's Maoist parties are, without doubt, continuators of yesteryear communist parties. But their foundations must be the heights attained by Maoism in the vanguard concept, not the outlook or methods of their past.

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