

Raj Narayan Arya (1926-2014)

A life devoted to the Trotskyist movement and the working class of India

By Charles Wesley Ervin

March 16, 2015

RAJ NARAYAN ARYA, a veteran of the Trotskyist movement of India, passed away in Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh, on June 9, 2014 at the age of 88. Born in a little rural village, he joined the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India (BLPI), the first all-India Trotskyist party, when he was 18, and he remained committed to revolutionary Marxism for the rest of his life. When he was just 20, he pioneered the BLPI's trade-union work in industrial Kanpur. He earned the respect of the workers through his leadership of several jute and textile unions and his role in major strikes, including an 80-day general strike in 1955. He was elected secretary of the federation of textile unions in Kanpur.

Raj Narayan was only 22 when the BLPI merged with the Socialist Party of India (SP), an ill-conceived and botched experiment in "entryism." Raj Narayan was one of the first of the former BLPI cadres to call for an exit from the SP. When his appeals to the Trotskyist leaders went unheeded, he left the SP on his own in 1950. Though isolated in Kanpur, with no resources, he resolved to start rebuilding a party.

That proved to be a long, hard struggle. He had to fight comrades who proposed opportunist schemes that required a watering down of the Trotskyist program. He became the standard bearer of "orthodox Trotskyism" in the Indian party.

Raj Narayan matured into a Trotskyist leader through these internal party struggles. He played a key role in ensuring the survival of the Trotskyist program and party in India – an achievement that has never been duly acknowledged. In this tribute I will delve into those behind-the-scenes struggles, using unpublished documentary sources, in order to wrap context around his life and give him the credit that is his due.

Although largely a self-taught Marxist, Raj Narayan made significant contributions to the Marxist understanding of India, particularly on the national question and role of caste. He produced a Trotskyist newspaper, *Mazdoor Kisan Kranti*, for ten years and published books and pamphlets. In the 1980s he started to translate Trotsky's writings into Hindi. He authored and published a three-volume biography of Trotsky, the first of its kind in Hindi.

I met Raj Narayan Arya in 1974, during a yearlong sojourn in India, when I was researching the history of Indian Trotskyism. He invited me to come to his home in Kanpur. What I had anticipated would be a single interview turned into three days of discussions. He was a warm, soft-spoken, reflective man who was always fair in his assessments, even when talking about those who had led the movement astray. He had a large archive of party documents, which he invited me to peruse. I stayed up late every night, copying extracts from the letters and internal party documents longhand into my notebook, as photocopy services were virtually non-existent in India in those days except in a few major cities.

After I returned to the US, we corresponded regularly. When I was writing my book on the BLPI in the 1990s, I sought his input often. He always answered my questions, corrected errors in my drafts, challenged some of my interpretations, and filled in gaps that no one else could.

When his health started to fail, I urged him to write his memoirs. He demurred. "My work for the movement was not that important." That was Raj Narayan – always modest to a fault. He finally relented and sent me two long, handwritten letters with his life's story. All the quotes in this tribute, unless noted otherwise, are from those letters.



Raj Narayan Arya
Photo: May 31, 2010

Upbringing in a traditional village

Raj Narayan was born in a small village in the Ghazipur District of the United Provinces, about 30 miles northeast of Varanasi, near where the Gomati flows into the Ganges. His father, Sri Prayag Lal Srivastava, was a junior clerk for the District judge at Gorakhpur. As his name indicates, the family was *Kayastha* (upper-caste). In the ancient Hindu social order Srivastavas were literate scribes who worked for the government as record keepers. But his parents followed the teachings of the Arya Samaj, one of the Hindu reform movements that rejected the caste system. "The Arya Samaj had a very deep influence on my life from childhood. Most of the people of my village were poor, lower-caste farmers, but my family treated them as equals. I had no notion of caste hierarchy."

Growing up in this typical village, Raj Narayan was oblivious to politics. Although the Arya Samajists tended to be nationalists, his father and uncles, being government employees, were loyal to the Raj. "Even the upper castes, in daily contact with cities and government officials, did not attach much importance to Congress, which was spearheading the freedom movement."

He went to the village school, where instruction was in the local vernacular languages. In 1939 he graduated at the head of his class. His parents wanted him to continue at an English-medium school, since that was the ticket to a government job. They sent him to live with an uncle in Gonda, a town in the foothills of the Himalayas, where he attended the Government High School.

Glimpse of the bigger world beyond

In high school he was exposed to politics for the first time. "I was befriended by two classmates whose families were regular readers of English newspapers. In the mid-day recess I listened eagerly to their talk about recent events." Like so many youth at the time, they worshipped Subhas Chandra Bose, the radical nationalist leader who had upstaged Gandhi and became President of the Congress in 1938. Bose saw the onset of the war in Europe as a golden opportunity to launch an all-out war for freedom. "I agreed with Subhas. I felt that *satyagraha* [Gandhian non-violent resistance] was ineffective. I no longer supported Gandhi."

In 1940 Raj Narayan first heard about Trotsky from the newspaper reports of his assassination in Mexico: "The papers gave details of the cooperation of Lenin and Trotsky, and how Stalin seized power after Lenin, exiled Trotsky, and eliminated all of Lenin's comrades in the 'thirties. At that time I was interested only in the Indian struggle for independence. But these seeds were planted in my mind."

In March, 1941 he attended a meeting of the Arya Samaj in Gonda. "Being disgusted with caste names, I dropped my caste name, Srivastava, and adopted the general name 'Arya' used by the Arya Samajists. Thus, I rejected idol-worship, caste hierarchy, and male supremacy much before I became a Marxist."

A harrowing first experience in politics

After graduating from high school with honors in 1942, he was admitted to the Kali Prasad Intermediate College in Allahabad on a scholarship. But his parents couldn't afford the room and board. An uncle secured a place for him at the Kulbhaskar Ashram, which provided free room and board for boys from poor families. The ashram was connected to the Arya Samaj and was a beehive of political discussion.

In August, 1942 the Congress passed the historic "Quit India" resolution, calling for mass civil disobedience with the goal of getting the British to set a date for independence. The government arrested Gandhi and most of Congress high command. Street protests erupted in Bombay the next day. Hearing the news, the student union in Allahabad called for a protest march to the District Magistrate's office. Raj Narayan decided to participate.

"As we approached the District Magistrate's office, I saw the District Magistrate and the Superintendent of Police on horseback facing us. A dozen policemen had their guns pointed at us. There was a bang. A student fell just in front of me. I saw blood. The student leaders shouted 'Lie down!' But the boy at the front [of the march] who was holding the Congress flag remained standing. The District Magistrate rode towards him with revolver in hand and shot him dead. That was my first experience in politics."

An unexpected rendezvous

A few days later a classmate, Keshava Prasad Lal (1925-2006), asked Raj Narayan if he wanted to meet "my leader." He led Raj Narayan to the rendezvous. There he met Onkarnath Shastri (1908-2000), one of the first Trotskyists in India and a founder-leader of the BLPI. Raj Narayan had never met a Communist, much less a Trotskyist. "Shastri gave me a leaflet, titled 'Turn this imperialist war into civil war!' I didn't understand the meaning of 'civil war' but I liked the fact that Trotskyists supported the Quit India movement, while the Communists didn't."

As the protests spread and intensified, the schools and colleges were closed indefinitely. Raj Narayan had to return to his village. When he arrived, he was astonished to find that his family, who had never taken any interest in politics, wanted to join the "Quit India" struggle. "We had a railway line near the village. We went there and cut the telegraph wire that ran along the tracks." They were all caught. His father and uncle were sentenced to 18 months in jail. "I was tried, but given my youth, I got whipped with a cane and released."

When he returned to college, he didn't know how to contact the BLPI. Onkarnath Shastri had been arrested. Raj Narayan joined the student wing of the Congress Socialist Party at the college. In June, 1944 he graduated with high marks in chemistry and physics and entered Allahabad University.

Contact with the BLPI

Shortly later, he got an unexpected visit from a young BLPI member, Sitanshu Das (1926-2010), who had been jailed for distributing subversive flyers in Jamalpur (Bihar).¹ He had heard about Raj Narayan from another young Trotskyist who landed in the same jail. "He told us more about Trotskyism and gave us pamphlets that the Calcutta BLPI comrades had published. I read them eagerly."

Not long after that, two leaders of the BLPI – the Ceylonese expatriates Colvin de Silva (1907-89) and Leslie Goonewardene (1909-83) – visited Raj Narayan and his comrade-classmate. In July, 1945 the BLPI center in Calcutta dispatched Hector Abhayavardhana (1919-2012), another Ceylonese expat, to train the two new recruits and guide their work in the Congress Socialist student group at the university. They recruited an influential student leader who helped form a BLPI group on campus.² Keshava Prasad was then dispatched to Kanpur to start a BLPI group there. And so when Abhayavardhana left three months later, Raj Narayan was left pretty much on his own.

Raj Narayan received literature from the BLPI in Calcutta from time to time - leaflets and the party's journal, *Permanent Revolution*. But that was his only link to the party. So, while he was learning his Trotskyism at a literary level, he had no real training in Leninist party organization and functioning. I have absolutely no doubt that he would have matured faster and risen to greater heights if he had the experience of working in a party organization.

Finding his calling

After earning his BSc in 1946, Raj Narayan wanted to pursue an MSc in zoology, but he couldn't get the financial support he needed from his parents. "I decided to go to Kanpur and work with the workers." He got a job as a lab technician at the Royal Ordnance Factory on the outskirts of Kanpur. "I was not in touch with the party center in Calcutta." At that point the BLPI didn't have the financial or organizational resources to send reinforcements to Kanpur or maintain a regular internal bulletin.

In 1947 the Ordnance union called a strike against layoffs. At dawn on April 8th Raj Narayan joined the picket line at the factory gate. He was one of the first to be arrested.

"In the jail I started introducing myself to all the workers. I came upon two workers, one a Socialist, the other a Communist, debating the August [Quit India] struggle. The Socialist was supporting the August Struggle, the Communist was defending the CPI for supporting the government. I asked the Communist worker how that support actually benefitted the Soviet Union. He was nonplussed. The union leaders, who were sitting nearby, wondered who I was. The Communist union leader said, 'Oh, he must be a Trotskyist.' So, for fun, he started

¹ Sitanshu Das left the BLPI in 1948 and later became a well-known journalist and author. See C.W. Ervin, "Sitanshu Das (1926-2010)," *Revolutionary History* online.

² Interview with Hector Abhayavardhana (Colombo), December 18, 1997. The student leader was Nageshwar Prasad (1929-2012), who later became a close associate of Jaya Prakash Narayan and Director of the Gandhian Institute of Studies in Varanasi.

calling me 'Trotsky'. The workers in the jail spread the word that 'the Ordnance Factory workers are following Trotsky'."

When the strike ended, he went to the factory gates twice a day to talk to workers as they were arriving and leaving. "I took up residence in the [factory workers] housing colony at Armapur Estate and began to take part in meetings of the union. I recruited several Bengali workers in my group." When the British factory managers tried to get him thrown out, the union ranks rallied to the defense of "Trotsky." He was elected to a new committee that the union had established to organize and mobilize the unemployed ordnance workers. The BLPI newspaper reported his successes.³

Raj Narayan was a born leader. Totally lacking caste and class prejudices, he could mingle and talk freely with anyone. At age 21 he had found his calling.

First national conference of the BLPI

When Raj Narayan was released from jail after the Ordnance strike, he learned that the BLPI was preparing to hold its first national conference two weeks later. Though he hadn't seen any of the pre-conference discussion bulletins, he packed his bag and took the train to Bombay to represent the Kanpur unit of the party.

Raj Narayan had never been to a party meeting before, much less a national gathering. For the next four days he listened to the party's top leaders debate critical issues facing the party. It was exhilarating but also intimidating; "I was then still raw politically." According to the minutes of the conference, he spoke only a few times and abstained on several votes. When he did vote, he followed the majority line.

The "biggest test" of his life

Just one week after he returned home from the conference, the whole political situation changed dramatically. Mountbatten announced on June 3, 1947 that India would be partitioned and the "transfer of power" would occur in *ten weeks*, not in twelve months, as formerly announced. The announcement triggered panic and more pogroms. "The biggest test that I ever had to face as a Marxist was the communal madness."

The communal poison was infecting the labor movement. In Kanpur Raj Narayan could see the ominous change at his factory. Local Hindu communalists were inciting the Hindu workers against the Muslims, saying that any Muslim worker who supported Pakistan should be expelled.

"I decided to intervene and take a public stand of class solidarity. I approached the president of the union, who was a Muslim, and got a notice signed for a public meeting at the factory gate. The Hindu communalists threatened to attack me if I held that meeting. On that day, the Muslim workers gathered around me and we walked to the gate together. I told the meeting that the Muslims who had opted for Pakistan had done nothing wrong. 'They are welcome to live with us as long as they want. Let us say good-bye to them when they go.' I reminded all the workers of our slogan, 'Workers of the World, Unite!' I said that workers everywhere are our brothers. This stand of mine calmed down the workers in the factory."

Into the slums of "Red Kanpur"

In 1948 the BLPI asked Raj Narayan to leave his job at the Ordnance Factory and move into the city to work with a group of party contacts at the J. K. Jute Mills in Darshanpurwa. He took a teacher's training course and got a job teaching science at a school, where was given a small place to live on the grounds. Every day, after he finished teaching, Raj Narayan went to the jute mill and held Marxist study classes.

The Congress ran the union. As an outsider, he couldn't intervene in the factory committee. He took a bold step. "I suggested to the workers in the mill committee that they leave the INTUC [the Congress federation] and get their committee registered as an independent union under the Trade Union Act. They did that, and I was able to start working with this committee."

After a while his father paid him a visit. He was upset that his son was spending all his time and money on political work and wasn't interested in getting married.

³ *New Spark*, June 21, 1947; *New Spark*, October 11, 1947; and *New Spark*, November 22, 1947.

"My father insisted that I marry, and so one month later I married the village girl that he had chosen for me. Her name was Kamala. She was 13 years old. He thought that with a wife, I would no longer be spending my pay on the party. He never realized the importance or significance of my political activity."

Their life was frugal. "We lived in a simple house without flush toilet facility." True to his Arya Samaj upbringing, he treated his wife as his equal. With his support, she went to school and became a nurse.

An existential crisis in the party

In 1948 Raj Narayan attended the BLPI's second national conference as delegate from Kanpur. The party was facing a new era. The mass anti-imperialist struggle was over, and the Socialist Party (SP) was pulling out of the Congress in opposition to the Nehru government. A faction in the BLPI argued that the Trotskyists should enter the SP, win over the radical workers to their program, and then exit and re-form the BLPI stronger than before.⁴ Raj Narayan supported this proposal, known as the "entry tactic."⁵

The SP leaders, not being babes in the woods, told the BLPI that they were "suspicious of this unity move."⁶ They said the SP would not tolerate any factional activities. Reporting back to the party, the BLPI leaders reassured the ranks that they would "form a secret nucleus in Bombay to guide us at every step, and if anything went wrong, they'd pull us out of the SP." And so the BLPI folded its tent and the members joined the SP as individuals with no clear plan of action.

Call to end "this fatal step"

When he joined the SP in Kanpur, he found no signs of radicalization in the ranks. In fact, he found very little political activity at all. "There was not much to do." As for guidance from the secret "nucleus" in Bombay, "I never heard from them." So he improvised. "I wrote a pamphlet in Hindi, 'Why we should have a revolutionary program,' and gave it to the Socialist activists, but I failed to get a response."

In 1950 he sent a confidential letter to the BLPI leaders in Bombay:

"It is fatal to build the SP and to create a rival... Occasional murmurs and discontents [in the SP ranks] cannot justify this fatal step. I have also mentioned the dangers of remaining within an alien class party, especially in a period of lull and for a long period... We are going to expose ourselves to the full blast of an alien class influence."⁷

Unbeknownst to him, a group of former BLPI members in Calcutta also had called for an exit from the SP.⁸ But the senior Trotskyist leaders refused to reconsider, insisting that "the struggle inside the SP will ultimately arise."⁹

In 1950 Raj Narayan resigned from the SP. About the same time the Calcutta dissidents – a group of about 20 cadres, including a number of trade unionists – also left the SP. The majority of former BLPI members, however, remained inside the SP in various stages of activity and inactivity.

Initial efforts to reunify the Trotskyists

At that point there were three Trotskyist groups functioning in India: the Calcutta group, which had just left the SP, and two small groups in Bombay. Raj Narayan decided to visit each one – a big commitment, given that he had a job, a 15-year old wife, growing trade-union responsibilities, and little money to spend on party work.

In June, 1950 he went to Calcutta for a month. He stayed with Keshav Bhattacharyya (1925-2013), one of the brainy Marxist leaders of the group of about 20 ex-BLPI members. They had revived the BLPI's newspaper, *Inquilab* [Revolution]. They were very good at Marxist theory but terrible when it came to the practical tasks of party building, like holding regular meetings and conducting study groups for their contacts. They were basically a discussion group. They didn't have even one full-time party organizer.

⁴ "Report of the C.C. [Central Committee] of the BLPI on the Special Convention," typescript, p. 3.

⁵ Raj Narayan [Arya], "S.P. Entry," *Internal Bulletin* [BLPI], vol. 3, no. 1 (March 1, 1948), p. 20.

⁶ "Report of Committee on S.P. Negotiations" (July 22, 1948), *Internal Bulletin* [BLPI], vol. 3 (August 1948), p. 4.

⁷ Quoted in letter from Raj Narayan Arya to author, March 31, 1997.

⁸ "Entryism in Bengal," unsigned document, July 9, 1949; "Bureau Draft," unsigned document [late 1949]; "On the Question of Revitalisation of the Ranks," Calcutta District Committee resolution, April 6, 1950.

⁹ "Bureau Draft," internal document from the former BLPI leaders in Bombay, 1949.

Raj Narayan next went to Bombay, where he met the leaders of the Mazdoor [Workers] Trotskyist Party and the Bolshevik Mazdoor Party. The former had never been part of the BLPI; the later was a splinter.¹⁰ They were already working towards Trotskyist unity. In June, 1952 Raj Narayan participated in the conference where they merged to form the Mazdoor Communist Party (MCP). He was elected to the Central Committee and helped write the Policy Statement.¹¹

The MCP revived the BLPI newspaper, *New Spark*, and declared in the first issue, "Only the program of revolutionary Marxism – the Fourth International program – can provide the basis for the development of a party."¹²

Defection of the old BLPI leadership

The Socialists went into the 1952 general elections with sky-high hopes. They were buried in the Congress landslide victory. Stunned, the SP leaders merged with a breakaway party of Congressmen. The Trotskyists in the SP were now free to hoist their own flag. Instead, they resolved to "hold aloft the banner of the Socialist Party" and "rebuild the party of Democratic Socialism in India."¹³

Why would *Trotskyists* pledge to rebuild a *reformist* party? Evidently, they couldn't bring themselves to abandon "entryism." The leaders of the Fourth International didn't help matters; the British, American, and Ceylonese Trotskyists *applauded* their decision to rebuild the old SP.¹⁴ This was a symptom of how they were beginning to deviate from the course that Leon Trotsky had set for the Fourth International.

In 1953 Raj Narayan went to the conference of the rump Socialist Party that was in the hands of the former BLPI leaders. He was astonished to find out that most had themselves become reformists.¹⁵

"To my surprise, I found that our leaders had become non-defencist. They ridiculed the idea of the defense of the Soviet Union as a degenerated workers state. They had lost faith in the world revolution. So there was a struggle, and they were expelled."

After the Shachtmanites departed, the remaining Trotskyists cast off the cloak of social democracy and renamed their group, "Socialist Party (Marxist)." Raj Narayan joined the SP(M) and took a place on its Executive Committee.

The lure of centrist regroupment

After the stunning Congress victory in the 1952 elections, the two largest parties to the left of the CPI - the Peasants and Workers Party (PWP) and the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) – attributed their defeats to "left disunity" and issued a joint statement calling for a merger of all "non-Stalinist and non-Socialist parties" on the basis of "the tenets of Marxism Leninism." A number of smaller parties jumped on the "left unity" bandwagon.

Raj Narayan wanted to press ahead with a Trotskyist unification. But his comrades in Bombay and Calcutta found this merger prospect enticing. "There appears in our comrades a craze for getting into some big party," he wrote. "Even if there were only two of us [Trotskyists], we should call ourselves a party and work towards that goal."¹⁶ Unfortunately, his comrades diverted their energies into this PWP-RSP merger initiative.

The PWP and RSP staged a Marxist Unity Conference in January, 1955.¹⁷ The Bombay Trotskyists (MCP), the Calcutta group (now called the Communist League), and the SP(M) participated, and Trotskyists were given six seats on

¹⁰ For background on these groups, see my book, *Tomorrow is Ours: The Trotskyist Movement in India and Ceylon, 1935-1948* (2006).

¹¹ "International Situation and Problems and Tasks before India," Policy Statement the Mazdoor Communist Party of India (Trotskyist) Passed at Trotskyist Unity Conference on 13, 14, 15th June, 1952. *New Spark*, vol. 1, no. 1 (November 7, 1952).

¹³ [Hector Abhayavardhana], *In Defense of Socialism: Why We Condemn the "Merger" with the Praja Party*, October 1952, p. 1; and Socialist Appeal [Madras] October 18-30, 1952.

¹⁴ "India's Crisis," *Labour Review*, January-February 1954, pp. 7-8; Colvin de Silva, "India Revisited," *Samasamajist*, 11 December 1952

¹⁵ Letter from Selina Perera to Socialist Workers Party (USA), August 1, 1954. Letter from Raj Narain to N.C., Burns, Ross, France, undated.

¹⁶ R. N. Arya, "On Our Future Course," *Internal Bulletin* [Socialist Party (Marxist)], vol. 1, no.1 (March 1957), p. 4.

¹⁷ "To all Party Units." SP(M) internal circular reporting on the January 27-29, 1955 conference in Bombay.

the 20-member Provisional Central Committee, tasked with "evolving a procedure for bringing about a merger of the separate parties and groups represented in the conference."¹⁸

Raj Narayan didn't get directly involved. At that point the textile mill owners in Kanpur were demanding greater productivity. The political parties that controlled the unions were at odds. Raj Narayan teamed with a senior local labor leader to bring all the textile unions into a single union – the Suti Mill Mazdoor Sabha. Raj Narayan was elected secretary. "The new union – the Sabha – called a strike for May 1st, 1955. The leaders were arrested and sent to jail. I, too, was jailed." The strike lasted 80 days and blocked, for the moment, the employer offensive.

Meanwhile, the Left Unity initiative stalled. The Provisional Central Committee spent the next *two years* trying to draft a program that would satisfy all the motley parties. In a letter to his comrades Raj Narayan argued:

*"The different parties were yet not clear about Stalinism fully, and even while criticizing Stalinism formally, followed its politics of the Government of Democratic Unity...they found large areas of agreement with the Social Democrat and the Stalinist opinions on Kashmir, Goa, Five Year Plans, India's Foreign Policy and T.U. [trade union] and peasants' movements."*¹⁹

As the 1957 elections approached, the PWP and RSP decided to field their own candidates. The merger was put on hold. The Trotskyists had wasted more than two years trying to broker what could only have been an unprincipled lash-up of centrist parties. Worse still, they had lost cadres and strength in the process. In Bombay, for example, while the Trotskyists were naively working for the merger, their "partners" were undermining them in the labor movement. "The cadre of the old MCP," one leader lamented bitterly, "has been decimated, isolated and destroyed."²⁰

A call for unity

At this point Raj Narayan stepped forward again and appealed to his comrades:

*"Let us finally make up our minds that no bigger merger is possible in the foreseeable future and hence we shall no more run after mirages...Let us tell them [the rest of the Left] that instead of running after illusions of half-baked unity just now, we are consolidating Trotskyists to contribute in clarifying our stand and laying a sound basis of Left unity if it ever comes about. Our emphasis, therefore, should not be on agitation for bigger merger but on political discussions and clarifications of our stand and opposing our policies to that of the Congress and other Lefts. We should aim at promoting understanding and not unity."*²¹

Initially the Bombay and Calcutta groups were reluctant to give up on a centrist merger.²² But when nothing materialized, they resumed the process of Trotskyist unity. Raj Narayan attended the meeting in Calcutta in November, 1957, where the representatives of the three groups – the Bombay MCP, the Calcutta Communist League, and Raj Narayan for the SP(M) - agreed to form a new party, the Revolutionary Workers Party of India (RWPI). He was elected Convenor of the Provisional Coordinating Committee, which would prepare for a unity conference in March, 1958.

At this meeting there was a debate over whether the new party should be called Trotskyist. Raj Narayan and the Bombay group were strongly in favor, while the Calcutta group was opposed. According to the minutes, "While the Committee accepted in principle the need to associate the party openly with international Trotskyist movement, it was decided to postpone the issue till the merger conference."²³

In the interim Raj Narayan was authorized to contact the Fourth International, which was then divided into two camps – the majority, following the line of the International Secretariat in Paris (IS), headed by Michel Pablo, and a minority, calling themselves the International Committee (IC).

¹⁸ *A New Marxist Party is Born. The Policy Statement of the All-India Mazdoor Kisan Party*, pp. 7-8.

¹⁹ Raj Narayan Arya, "Reply to Comrade Kolpe on his recent proposals," June 3, 1957, *Internal Bulletin* [Socialist Party (Marxist)], vol. 1, no. 4 (June 1957), Part I, p. 9.

²⁰ Comrade Mallik, "Merger of Non-Stalinist and Non-Reformist Parties," *Internal Bulletin* [Revolutionary Workers Party of India], vol. 1, no. 4 (December 1958), p. 7. Mallik Arjuna Rao was a prominent Trotskyist trade union leader in Hyderabad-Secunderabad (Telangana),

²¹ R.N. Arya, "Reply to Comrade Kolpe on his recent proposals," *ibid*.

²² "A Reply by Kailas," *Internal Bulletin* [Revolutionary Workers Party of India], vol. 1, no. 4 (December 1958), p. 9. "Kailas Chandra" was one of the pseudonyms used by Sitaram B. Kolpe.

²³ "Minutes of the Meeting of the Coordinating Committee of the SP(M), M.C.P. and C.L. Held at Calcutta from November 16 to 18, 1957." Mimeographed document, p. 3.

Contact with the Fourth International

In March, 1958 Raj Narayan sent a letter to the IS, with a copy to the British section of the IC, setting forth the position of the Provisional Coordinating Committee:

*"We deeply regret the split in the World Trotskyist movement and we shall try our best to prevent the Indian Trotskyist movement from splitting in its wake. We shall keep most friendly contact with each wing of the Trotskyist movement, individually and collectively, and we shall allow supporters of both wings within us. The merged party [RWPI] shall follow the line of either of these wings on its merit – according to its own majority view. We shall discuss the question of affiliation in due course amongst ourselves and whatever the result, we shall not allow the unity of the Indian Trotskyists to be broken up on this question."*²⁴

Two months later he sent another formal statement to the first international conference of the IC:

*"Indian comrades shall never hesitate to express their opinion on all the points of controversy, but they are not prepared to divide themselves on such points. They consider that the differences are not so fundamental that separate existence of the two wings is necessary. I, therefore, appeal to this gathering on behalf of the Indian comrades to seriously consider and find out ways and means to heal up this wound and democratic organizational safety for future."*²⁵

An Indian version of "Pabloism"

In January, 1958, while Raj Narayan was making preparations for the unity conference, the Calcutta group dropped a bombshell. They wanted to postpone the unification. They claimed they had just reached "complete agreement" on merger with a "political front" of left parties in West Bengal, and "we would not like our own unity to stand in the way of this bigger unity."²⁶ Raj Narayan fired back: "We must not postpone the actual integration of the Trotskyist parties. We must start functioning as one party, with a united centre, a united program, and a united organization."²⁷ The Calcutta group then insisted on having an internal discussion of "party perspectives."

The Calcutta comrades ridiculed the idea that *only* a Trotskyist party, fighting for the program of the Fourth International, can make a revolution.

*"The course of events, especially the international events, will more and more compel the more conscious elements [in other left parties] as well as the different honest revolutionary groupings to adopt a fundamentally Trotskyist position...let us not close the door against them by insisting that they must openly swear by Trotskyism here and now....to swallow the whole thing hook, line and sinker. ...On the contrary, by making unreasonable demands in the initial period we will be spoiling these excellent opportunities and in reality, hampering the growth of a vigorous and healthy Trotskyist movement in India."*²⁸

In other words Trotskyists should water down their program, get into a big centrist party, and eventually the objective forces of History will take care of the rest. That is pretty much what Pablo had been saying since 1950.

After four months of tortuous exchanges in the internal bulletin, Raj Narayan and the Bombay group told the Calcutta comrades that they were going ahead with or without them. The Calcutta group offered a compromise: if the new party accepts "the principle of a bigger unity," then they would "leave it to the new party to define the exact basis on which unity with such elements may be attempted in future."²⁹ Raj Narayan agreed.

²⁴ Letter from Raj Narayan Arya to Walter [Ernest Mandel], with copy to Gerry Healey, March 7, 1958.

²⁵ "An Appeal to the International Trotskyist Conference (Affiliated to the International Committee)," from R.N. Arya, Convenor, Revolutionary Workers Party, May 2, 1958.

²⁶ Letter from Basanta Mukherjee, K. Bhattacharyya, and Promode Sinharoy to Raj Narayan Arya and Sitaram B. Kolpe, January 1, 1958.

²⁷ Letter from Raj Narayan Arya to the Communist League, January 11, 1958. Raj Narayan signed the letter: "For and on behalf of SP(M) and also on behalf of the Coordinating Committee as its Convenor."

²⁸ Letter from Communist League to Raj Narayan Arya and Sitaram Kolpe, February 4, 1958 with attachment, "Minimum Basis for Unity," *Internal Bulletin* [Provisional Central Committee of the Revolutionary Workers Party of India], vol. 1, no. 3 (March 1958), p. 11. Also: Letter from Communist League to Raj Narayan Arya and Sitaram Kolpe [Mazdoor Communist Party], January 3, 1958; Letter from Keshav Bhattacharyya [Communist League] to Sitaram B. Kolpe, January 8, 1958; Letter from Acting Secretary, Communist League to Members of the P.C.C. [Provisional Central Committee], March 22, 1958.

²⁹ Letter from Acting Secretary, Communist League to members of the P.C.C. [Provisional Coordinating Committee], March 22, 1958.

A promising new beginning

The Revolutionary Workers Party of India (RWPI) was launched in May, 1958. The Statement of Policy declared that the RWP "takes its stand wholly and unreservedly" upon "Leninism-Trotskyism," but also will work for "the consolidation of all Marxist forces in India" on a three-point "basic program."³⁰

The IS in Paris sent a congratulatory message to the conference, urging the RWPI to act as "part and parcel of the World Party of Socialist Revolution which is our Fourth International." The delegates weren't ready to reciprocate. Based on his previous communications with the IS and IC, Raj Narayan proposed that the RWPI not "align ourselves with either wing [of the Fourth International] organizationally and denounce or the other. We should rather be out of both and help in uniting the two wings."³¹

Ernest Mandel of the IS wrote to Raj Narayan: "Your analysis of the split and its aftermath seems to me rather heavily weighted in favor of the International Committee and strongly one-sided."³² Raj Narayan replied:

*"We feel that real unity can proceed only when the differences have been thoroughly discussed as within a single organization. To break the present stalemate it is necessary to create a third force to start a thinking uninfluenced by the accidental association and subjectivity...The Indians are in agreement with the SWP's Militant, and not the IS, on the questions of Kerala, Tibet and the Sino-Indian border dispute. [However], no Indian comrade, including myself, has yet taken a stand on the split [of 1953]."*³³

The RWPI got off to a good start. Many former cadres scattered around India rallied enthusiastically. Party branches were formed in Bombay, Ahmedabad, Kanpur, Calcutta, Nadia, Murshidabad, Barrackpur, Madras, Sholavandan, Madurai, Thevaram, Tuticorin and Kerala. The Bombay branch produced the party's newspaper, *The Militant*, and political journal, *New Perspectives*, and staffed the small central office on Cleveland Road in Bombay. Raj Narayan contributed seminal articles on the national question in India and authored what became the party's line on the Chinese incursion into Tibet.³⁴

A disastrous "Pabloist" merger

Shortly after the founding conference the Calcutta group informed the Central Committee that they had reached "basic agreement" with the Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCPI). Given the background of this party, Raj Narayan was skeptical. The RCPI had originated in the late 1930s as a dissident Communist party that criticized aspects of Stalinism while rejecting the program of the Fourth International, in particular the Trotskyist analysis of the USSR. In 1948 the party split when a faction started what was a disastrous armed uprising in Bengal and Assam. This group, led by Sudhindra Nath Kumar, continued to use the name RCPI. This was the RCPI remnant that the Calcutta group said was in "basic agreement" with Trotskyism.

Raj Narayan suspected that the Calcutta comrades, in their eagerness for merger, were downplaying the differences: "We were very much dependent on the reports of our own comrades of Bengal on whether there would be an open-minded discussion on the question of the USSR."

In August, 1958 a delegation from the RWPI met with the RCPI in Calcutta. The RCPI proposed immediate unity; the RWPI declined, stating that the differences on the USSR would have to be overcome first.³⁵ The Calcutta comrades continued the discussions. A year later the RWPI Central Secretariat noted that "attitude toward the Soviet Union" still remained a bloc to merger.³⁶

³⁰ "Marxist Unity. For Socialism in India," Statement of Policy. Adopted at the Founding Conference of the RWPI held in Calcutta from May 31 to June 2, 1958; and *For a Workers and Peasants Government: The Programme of the Revolutionary Workers Party of India* (1958), pp. i-ii.

³¹ R.N. Arya, "On the Fourth International (A Letter to the Central Committee)," *Internal Bulletin* [RWPI], vol. 1, no. 4 (December 1958), p. 6.

³² Letter from Walter [Ernest Mandel] to Raj Narayan Arya, October 6, 1959.

³³ Letter from Raj Narayan Arya to Walter, November 13, 1959.

³⁴ *Militant* [RWPI] June 20, 1959. This article is much closer to the line of the SWP (USA) than the IS.

³⁵ "Further Unity Talks with the RCPI," *Internal Bulletin* [RWPI], vol. 2, no. 3 (September-October 1958), p. 4.

³⁶ "Extracts from Minutes of the Central Secretariat Meeting, Bombay, October 28-30, 1959," *Internal Bulletin* [RWPI], vol. 3, no. 1 (December 1959).

In December, 1959 the RWPI and RCPI announced that they had reached agreement on a unity program.³⁷ Raj Narayan, who had not been involved in the discussions, suspected that the Calcutta group had pushed through this deal. Whether or not that was the case, the IS in Paris hailed this unity of "revolutionary Marxists."³⁸ That is not surprising. The unity program could have been written by Pablo himself. On the key question of Stalinism, the unity program pledged to support "those efforts of the leading parties of the Workers States" that were "ensuring continued better living conditions and wider democracy for the masses, wider socialization and complete elimination of bureaucracy."³⁹ That was a call for Khrushchevite reform, not political revolution to oust the Khrushchevs in Moscow, Peking, and Belgrade.

The RCPI blows up

The merged RCPI was an unstable bloc between the two sides. The Trotskyists kept their newspaper, the *Militant*, while the RCPI continued *Janasadharan* [Common People]. The *Militant* talked about permanent revolution; *Janasadharan* talked about "peaceful co-existence with capitalism" and "socialism in one country." Before long the RCPI majority in the Political Bureau demanded that the *Militant* stop being a mouthpiece for Trotskyism.

The differences came to a head during the India-China border war in 1962. The Nehru government whipped up jingoist feelings towards the "aggressor" China. The *Militant* came out solidly for the defense of People's China. The principal historic leader of the RCPI publicly supported the Nehru government. The Trotskyists demanded that the RCPI Political Bureau repudiate his stand. When they refused to do so, the Trotskyists protested and resigned.

This merger was an unmitigated disaster. The Trotskyists hadn't recruited anyone from the RCPI ranks and ended up losing a number of their own cadres. "They [the Indian Trotskyists] were disorganized," Raj Narayan later wrote. "They maintained contacts among themselves but they had no formal organization."⁴⁰

Struggle over future course

In June, 1964 a meeting of Trotskyists was held in Bombay "to evolve the future organizational perspective."⁴¹ Raj Narayan stood for the immediate formation of a full-fledged Trotskyist party. The majority of Trotskyists who participated in the conference took the same position.

Despite the fiasco with the RCPI, the Bengal Trotskyists wanted to continue entryism. This time around they set their sights on the new pro-Peking faction in the Communist Party, which they claimed was going to either "crystallize as a whole into a genuine revolutionary party or provide the necessary cadres for forging such an organization."⁴² Therefore, they called for "total entry into the CP" and integration with this faction.

Raj Narayan rejected the Calcutta proposal: "once the two groups [in the CPI] split, they will become homogenous again and only the fools can think of making entry."⁴³ But he also differed with those comrades "who put the blame for the failure of the Trotskyist movement in India on the entry tactic," which is "one of the great contributions of Trotsky to Marxism." Raj Narayan urged his comrades to re-think why the Trotskyist movement had made such little progress. In his view they had failed to apply the approach that Trotsky had set forth in the foundational document of the Fourth International - the "Transitional Program."

"At the best, we put this item [transitional demands] in our party programs and let it remain there as a piece of adornment. Those of us who engaged in mass fronts and organizations busied themselves with day-to-day economic problems and struggles. Our trade unionists also contested cases of dismissal, permanency, promotion, bonus, wage increase and the like or led struggles on these issues. All that they can claim for themselves is that they were more militant, less compromising, and carried on their activity in a spirit of class struggle rather than that of class collaboration..."

³⁷ "On the RCPI-RWPI Merger – Central Committee Decisions," *Internal Bulletin* [RWPI], vol. 3, no. 2 (January 1960), pp. 2-5; "Merger Announced," *Militant* [RWPI], March 5, 1960, p. 1.

³⁸ "FI on RCP-RWP Merger," *Militant* [RWPI], March 5, 1960, p. 4.

³⁹ "RCPI-RWPI Merger" (editorial) and "Basis of Merger of RCPI-RWPI," *Militant* [RWPI], February 5, 1960, p. 2.

⁴⁰ Raj Narayan Arya, "The History of Trotskyism in India," unpublished manuscript, n.d., pp. 24-25.

⁴¹ "On the Bombay Conference," *Internal Bulletin* [Ad Hoc Committee of Trotskyists in India], no. 4 (July 1964), p. 1.

⁴² "On Organizational Perspective," *Internal Bulletin*, no. 4 (July 1964), p. 5.

⁴³ R.N. [Raj Narayan Arya], "A Letter to the India Trotskyists," *Internal Bulletin*, no. 4 (July 1964), pp. 5-9.

We preached Trotskyism, pure Marxism, and presented brilliant analyses of national and international situations, and in this also we were nothing different from the rest. Here also we followed the traditional political practice. We did nothing by way of organizing movements on the basis of the Transitional Program. The result was, as visualized by the founders of the Fourth International, a complete failure. We failed because we had not grasped the essence of Trotskyism...

We can grow only through mass movements and the only movements which can grow today are movements based on Transitional demands...and such movements can be organized only when we act as an independent group."

The departure of the Calcutta entrists

While this debate was bubbling, the Communist Party split, and the pro-Peking faction became the CP(Marxist). The Paris secretariat of the Fourth International (the two wings had reunited in 1963) thought the CP(M) was more "left" than the official CP. They dispatched a senior representative to India.⁴⁴ His advice: "all comrades who can do it should, in my view, enter the Left CP. The Left CP will be the real force in the left for a whole period, and we should make all our best [efforts] to work in it, or to associate or build it where it does not exist."⁴⁵

With that stab in the back, the Bombay group, with the support of Raj Narayan, issued a call for a Trotskyist unity conference one month later.⁴⁶ The Calcutta group bid them farewell and applied for membership in the CP(M).⁴⁷ The CP(M) leaders, being savvy Stalinists, admitted only the Trotskyist trade unionists, who had mass bases in Titagarh and Baranagar. Left hanging, the remaining Trotskyist intellectuals started a journal, *Jana Ganatantra* ("Peoples Democracy"), in an attempt to influence the CP(M) and later the Maoist split. The group soon became moribund.

The Socialist Workers Party

Raj Narayan attended the founding conference of the Socialist Workers Party of India (SWPI) in August 1965. He was elected to the Central Committee and helped write the new program, which was based on the original BLPI program of 1942.⁴⁸ He started to contribute regularly to the SWP's new journal, *Marxist Outlook*.

At the founding conference the delegates voted to seek affiliation with the newly re-united Fourth International. Raj Narayan supported that decision but on the condition that the SWP also call for an international discussion and resolution of all those issues that had separated the two wings since 1953, *i.e.*, the policy of "deep entryism," the supposed "decline" of Stalinism, the Sino-Soviet split, the lessons of Algeria, the character of the Cuban revolution, etc. The result was a five-page letter to the United Secretariat that read more like a polemic than an application.⁴⁹

The new FI leadership, however, preferred to sweep all the "old differences" under the rug. So, as Raj Narayan realized, the seeds for future discord were there from the start. In affiliating to the United Secretariat the SWP was opening itself up to revisionist neo-Pabloist politics and renewed factionalism that would corrupt and eventually destroy the organization.

The nemesis of the old Indian Trotskyists

In 1967 the SWP recruited an energetic former youth leader of the CP(M), Magan Desai, who had a following in Baroda (Gujarat). He became the SWP's first and only full-time party worker.

"At the next national conference of the SWP, Kolpe made the mistake of making him [Magan Desai] the General Secretary. He had not been in the party long enough to be known well. Then he started to take over the party. He forced out Murlidhar Parija, who had been the general secretary first of the RWPI then the SWPI. He moved the party office from Bombay to Baroda. He took control of Marxist Outlook and then applied to the

⁴⁴ Letter from Gilbert Dalgalian to the author, April 11, 2009. Dalgalian was a French Trotskyist who supported the IS. He lived in India from September 1963 to September 1965, working at the French Embassy in India. He became a member of the Calcutta group, which he recalled "had very good analysis but almost no political action."

⁴⁵ Letter from P[ierre Frank] to Bombay Trotskyists, July 10, 1964.

⁴⁶ "Statement from the Convenor, the Trotskyist Group of Bombay," July 10, 1965.

⁴⁷ Letter from G.C. [Guiding Committee] of West Bengal Trotskyist Group to Bombay Trotskyists, July 9, 1965.

⁴⁸ "The Program of the Socialist Workers Party (Indian Section of the Fourth International)," *Marxist Outlook*, May 1968, pp. 5-88.

⁴⁹ Letter from M.D. Parija, Secretary, Organizing Committee, SWP to United Secretariat, November 22, 1965, *Internal Bulletin* [SWP], no. 3, 1965, p. 1.

government authorities in Baroda to change the name to Red Spark under his ownership. He insisted on changing the party name to Communist League. He then started a vilification campaign against Kolpe. He [Kolpe] left the party. The older members of the party began to doubt his bona fides.

I met Magan Desai in Baroda in 1973 and can attest to this assessment. Desai denigrated veteran cadres like Raj Narayan as "worn out" and "parasites."⁵⁰ He was completely enamored with the American SWP. As I looked around his party headquarters, I could see that there was more than politics involved in this relationship. The SWP was sending large quantities of books, pamphlets, and newspapers for him to sell. Desai was using the proceeds to support himself and finance the party. In a party with a meager dues base these funds gave him power.⁵¹

Raj Narayan subsequently saw for himself: "I was persuaded to attend a party conference in Baroda in 1976, where I witnessed his cliquish ways." The following year, "I too was expelled."

Using the Transitional Program as his guide for trade union work

In 1978 Raj Narayan took a leading role in another landmark strike. The workers at the Swadeshi Cotton Mill were agitating for payment of overdue wages. About 150 were arrested, and the management closed the mill. The union leaders at the mill refused to organize support for the families of the jailed workers.

"I mobilized worker activists of all political parties and unions of the Swadeshi Mill and organized a committee. In this work I was pitted against the entire trade union bureaucracy. But they could not find even a dozen workers to stand against our Mill Committee. We not only provided relief to the families, we also led delegations to the state and Central government offices demanding that the mill be re-opened and all the mills of that employer be nationalized."

Raj Narayan, following the Transitional Program, organized democratic workers committees. "In my functioning as a trade unionist, I always went beyond the Executive Committee and discussed every question publically in open meetings, to which all activists, even ordinary workers, were invited."

During this time, he earned a doctorate so he could teach at a higher level. He wrote his dissertation on "Marxist Critics of Shakespeare (1950-75)". He subsequently became a senior lecturer in English at the Pandit Prithi Nath College, which was affiliated to Kanpur University.

Forming a new party in Kanpur

In 1980 he joined the Kanpur branch of the Revolutionary Socialist Party. He had good working relationships with these militants going as far back as 1946. He joined on the condition that he could freely voice his Trotskyist views and still publish the *Mazdoor Kisan Kranti*. He contributed articles to the RSP paper, *Krantiyug* [Revolutionary Age]. He eventually won over the local RSP leader and most of the cadres.

In 1991, when the RSP gave electoral support to the Janata Dal, a bourgeois party, he and his recruits split and took the name RSP(Marxist). They took an openly Trotskyist position. The RSP(M) functioned for ten years but folded when its local leader of longstanding died.

Translating Trotsky into the vernacular

In 1984 Raj Narayan embarked on an ambitious new project - translating Trotsky's key writings into Hindi. He wrapped up *Mazdoor Kisan Kranti*, retired from his teaching job at the P. P. N. College, and resigned from the Suti Mill Mazdoor Sabha. He started a publishing house, Socialist Prakashan, to publish these in Hindi and Urdu.

Raj Narayan produced a three-volume biography of Trotsky in Hindi – the first of its kind – modeled after the classic trilogy by Isaac Deutscher.⁵² He also wrote a history of the Russian Revolution and a summary of the first four congresses of the Comintern in Hindi.

⁵⁰ Interview with Magan Desai (Baroda), December 21, 1974.

⁵¹ For an insider's account of how Magan Desai wrecked the organization, see Kunal Chattopadhyay, "Magan Desai, 1929-2012," *Radical Socialist*, May 13, 2012.

⁵² Raj Narayan Arya, *Mahan Krantikari Leon Tratski, 1879-1920* [The Great Revolutionary Leon Trotsky]; *Stalini Pratikranti aur Tratski, 1921-28* [Stalinist Reaction and Trotsky]; and *Nirvasit Tratski ka athak Krantikari Abhiyan, 1929-1940* [The Tireless Revolutionary Trotsky].

In this period he delved deeply into the origins and role of the caste system – a subject that had interested him since his youth. "In the 1980s I got a book by the Marxist historian, Ram Sharam Sharma, who documented the formation of the castes in ancient India. Later still, I found a thesis of the Fourth Congress of the Comintern on the Negro question and my view on the caste system became final." He subsequently published two studies: *Caste System Through History and Present Tasks: A Marxist View* (1997) and *Brahmin and Brahmanism: A Historical Survey* (2001).

Personal setbacks

In 1997 his wife died from cancer. It was a huge emotional blow. He wrote and published a book of poems in her memory. Then, in December, 2001 he had to return to Allahabad for a medical operation.

In 2003 Raj Narayan reached out to an old Trotskyist comrade, Somendra Kumar (1926-2006), who lived in Samastipur (Bihar) and had developed his own local Trotskyist group. Together they started a newsletter, *News and Views*. But enthusiasm and dedication don't deter Father Time. In 2007 he wrote, "I am almost 82 and almost immobile." Somendra Kumar died that same year.

As his health continued to deteriorate, he moved in with his younger son, Sunil Kumar Srivastava, in Allahabad. Unfortunately, he had to jettison his archive – an irreplaceable loss of documentary history.

Raj Narayan spent what energy he had on mentoring several younger trade-union militants in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. "I am trying to catch younger people to pass on my experience. Anyway, we have to begin anew...I am trying to form a Coordination Committee of Trotskyists. The move is entirely in the hands of the younger generation. I am acting as a guide." Raj Narayan sent them all his unpublished books and articles in Hindi with hopes that they'd publish them.

In 2011 he wrote, "I am nearly a physical wreck. I can't read even old and familiar books, nor write a few pages." By 2013 he was lamenting, "It is not possible for me now either to read something for an hour or write anything, even one page." When he could no longer hold a pen, he started dictating his letters to his grandson, who keyed them into email messages to me. Modern capitalist technology had come to our rescue!

Despite all his infirmities and political setbacks, his messages always were positive. He liked to say, "Hum honge kamyab ek din!" [We will succeed some day!].

"I hope the tender plant will grow strong"

In March of last year I received what turned out to be his last email.

"I am not well. Very freezing cold since December 13th, right up to the first week of March. I developed chest congestion, dry cough, shook me badly for three weeks. I am weak both physically and mentally."

Then, in his typical way, he changed the subject and spoke hopefully of the trade-union militants he had been mentoring.

"I have tried to train and educate these young men on a firm political basis. They have already published my Hindi translation of Trotsky's Transitional Program for the Fourth International. I hope the tender plant will grow strong."

In his letters he had always used the old Indian communist salutation, "Lal Salaam" (Red Salute). This is my Lal Salaam to a remarkable man who dedicated his life to the working class and the fight for a socialist revolution.

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