

S.S. MIRAJKAR and S.V. Ghate were among the small band of activists who founded the Communist Party of India (CPI). Both were close to S.A. Dange. Both were trade unionists, both were convicted in the Meerut Conspiracy case. Mirajkar was Municipal Corporator, besides. Ghate became the party's treasurer.

They were interviewed as part of the Oral History Project of the Nehru Memorial Museum & Library (NMML) in New Delhi, to which this writer is much indebted, not least for the transcripts of such interviews. They were closely questioned by Dr Hari Dev Sharma, sometimes with a prosecutor's zeal. One noticed the first Director B.R. Nanda's uneasiness when the interviewee said things that were not to his liking. This establishment figure fancied himself rather as the defender of the faith. Socialist leaders such as Asoka Mehta, Purshottam Trikamdas and Prem Bhasin were interviewed. One waits in vain for interviews with leaders of the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS), the Jana Sangh and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). How about asking Lal Krishna Advani? Congress leaders of the front rank were also exempted from close scrutiny. H.D. Sharma's interview of the communist leader and man of letters Sajjad Zaheer, on which more later, was shoddy.

India's communist movement is rich in controversies – over its place and date of birth; its disastrous link-up and break with the Congress Socialist Party; its stand on the Second World War, the Quit India Movement and Pakistan; the Ranadive line at the second party congress in Calcutta (now Kolkata) in February 1948 and its reversal in 1950; its stand on Jawaharlal Nehru and the like. There was a continuous debate on the dangers of “reformism” and “sectarianism” (the extreme left line). In 1940-41, veterans like Dange and Mirajkar were interned at the Deoli Detention Camp in Ajmer-Merwara. The underground party outside was led by P.C. Joshi. The “Deoli Thesis” on the “People's War” was smuggled out to instruct those underground. Some Congress Socialists were also detained in Deoli. Stalin was to scold the CPI for its stand on the War.

Mirajkar and Ghate were extremely frank in their interviews to the NMML. Mirajkar said: “The Congress policy was not to have anything to do with the communists and the workers' movement and so on. The Mahatma had already, in 1928, told us, which I have recorded, that he would not allow a single paise to be paid to the strikers led by the communists in Bombay. So that was the attitude. And had we been outside, we would not have behaved in a sectarian manner, as this leadership did in that period.... However, I think, as we also then thought, that mistakes were being committed, and I think we had committed a great mistake in coming into conflict with the 1930 movement. In our own way, [we should have started] some kind of movement which would have run parallel but not in clash and would have ultimately led us together somewhere.

Sharma: Do you think this attitude of the communist leaders who were outside in anyway affected the prospects of the party?

PHOTOGRAPHS: THE HINDU ARCHIVES



At a meeting of the polit bureau of the Communist Party of India in 1945 in Bombay, (from left) B.T. Ranadive, G. Adhikari and P.C. Joshi.

Mirajkar: Yes, it did. For a long time as a result of this sectarian attitude and the attitude which was adopted by that leadership came in our way and created many difficulties for us in the later period. Subsequently, it was corrected. But, while correcting one mistake, we made another mistake. We went to the other extreme of going right. This has been unfortunately the trouble with the Communist Party and its leadership, that they either committed a mistake of going extreme right or extreme left, and the result was that the party suffered, and the party had to pay a big price. For instance, we confessed that we did a wrong thing. However the international situation might demand, the attitude we had adopted was very wrong.

Sharma: Besides [B.T.] Ranadive, who were the other leaders?

Mirajkar: Ranadive and Deshpande were together for some time. Both were brilliant scholars. Ranadive was a first class first in M.A. and comrade Deshpande stood first in the matriculation in those days and had a first class career. He was a non-cooperating student and after non-cooperation, when it was over, he graduated himself from outside. He was a very able teacher. Thus, both were quite brilliant. But, at the same time, they had their idiosyncrasies and this sectarian attitude, which made us to pay a big price.

Sharma: So in your absence, Deshpande and Ranadive controlled the party apparatus?

Mirajkar: Yes. In the beginning they were in the party apparatus. But when we came out Deshpande was not there, Ranadive was there. He was in the party apparatus. He was a member of the polit bureau as well as central committee.

Sharma: After you came out, did you try to tell them that they had done a wrong thing?

Mirajkar: Yes, by that time Deshpande and Ranadive had developed differences. Deshpande controlled the party, whatever it was, a small party. It had one hundred or two hundred members. So they had a split in the party, and Deshpande started the Bolshevik party."

Central committee

Sharma asked, "When was the first central committee of the Communist Party formed?
Mirajkar: In the beginning of 1926. But after our release in 1933 it was reorganised and it started functioning after 1933. P.C. Joshi became its general secretary. At that time Adhikari, P.C. Joshi and other comrades were underground. We were doing most of the work like reorganising and reuniting textile workers and their organisations. When Ghate was taken away, Adhikari became secretary. When Adhikari was taken away, I was made secretary and I continued for some time till I disappeared from the scene. In the meanwhile, it had already started to reorganise and P.C. Joshi became the general secretary.

Sharma: And he continued till 1948?

Mirajkar: He continued till 1948.

Joint front

Sharma: Do you recall under what circumstances the policy of the Communist Party was changed to make a joint front with the Congress and other nationalist parties?

Mirajkar: I cannot tell you in detail because I was cut off more or less. I was not able to follow those years because of my internment. So I would not be able to speak about those developments. Generally, of course, I knew about it. The Faizpur Congress took place. In the meanwhile, comrade Dange was in the AICC [All India Congress Committee] and then led the peasant march. And in the Faizpur Congress our comrades participated in the discussions because Dange was in the AICC. Generally I followed all these developments, but I was not connected with it actively. When I was secretary I had just begun talks with the Congress Socialists and other groups for a united front, but in the meanwhile I was arrested, so the united front tactics were actually carried on by other people in my absence, when I was in internment in Yerwada Jail.



New Delhi, 1958: Members of the Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti headed by S.S. Mirajkar (facing the camera, third from right), then the Mayor of Bombay,

demonstrating before Parliament House.

Sharma: When you started this move for a joint front, what was the basis on which you wanted to have such a front?

Mirajkar: We said that we could do mock warfare, for instance, we could cooperate in training in war. Then we could have some kind of programme jointly, and on that basis we could come to some understanding about the programme to be followed by the united front. These were the only talks that were going on. And for the very same purpose I met Jayaprakash Narayan, Minoo Masani, Asoka Mehta and Yusuf Meherally."

As for the Deoli camp, "In Camp No. II, where Class II prisoners were lodged, Ghate was the leader of that camp. There were about 200 prisoners, mostly Sikh, but there were some from Delhi also. There were about 150 or 160 communists and 25 or 30 socialists – followers of Jayaprakash Narayan. Jayaprakash himself was there."

There were police informers in the camp, as also advocates of violence against the jailors. B.T. Ranadive (BTR), Dange and Soli Batlivala were transferred. "When the time for transfer came, some of BTR's supporters like Rajni Patel, B.P.L. Bedi, a friend of mine, then Patkar who died – there were about twenty people in the crowd of 150 or 160 – proposed that there should be resistance. There was also a proposal (BTR's proposal) that if there would be any transfer, they would resist it in the same way as the action was proposed; throwing stone, shouting, demonstration, etc., and then there would be firing and some people would be killed. So they proposed that there should be resistance next day. I said: I will take votes from our camp committee members because they are the supreme authority which we have formed here. If they vote for 'resistance' or 'no resistance', I will carry out the decision. So I took the votes. The barracks were locked and we could not meet but I counted the votes across the barracks, just away from the electric wires. Seven people out of nine voted for 'no resistance' and two people voted for 'resistance'." In the 1970s, Rajni Patel emerged as Indira Gandhi's ace fund collector with a reputation for "high living" – miles away from his BTR days.

"No party member was instructed, according to the best of my knowledge, to go and join the Congress Socialist Party. We would never do that. We could not ask our members to go and join the party unless there was a special reason for it. We had given permission to certain people, after they had left the party, to join the Congress. But so far as the Congress Socialist Party was concerned, we had some friendly relations with its members and we made no such attempt of planting our members inside. There were some members of the Congress Socialist Party who had begun to think in terms of communism, communists and communist politics, and if such people decided and expressed their desire to join the Communist Party, how were we to help it? For instance, the whole group of members of the Congress Socialist Party in Kerala expressed their desire to join the Communist Party headed by E.M.S. Namboodiripad, A.K. Gopalan and others. So we said: Yes, you are welcome, and they joined our party. In this way, many people joined our party, and that was a shock to Jayaprakash Narayan and Masani in those days that so many people were joining our party, but we did not plant anybody there. And subsequently, as a result of our policies – our policy convinced them that ours was the correct political line – if they said that they wanted to join our party, should we have refused them? We did not refuse them. We told them: All right, join our party. And a large number of them came, and this was interpreted as an attempt to disrupt their party." In truth, there was never any surfeit of trust between the CSP and the CPI.

"Sharma: How far the policies of the Communist Party in India were influenced or directed by the Communist International?

Mirajkar: We were part of the Communist International as long as it functioned. We do not hide this fact but that does not mean that every time, every day we got a telegram from the Communist International to do this or to do that. General directions were there for the communist movement because the communist movement is an international movement. The general directions for colonial people were laid down in the Colonial Thesis. We worked according to the general directions laid down by the Congress of the Communist International but that does not mean that every day the Communist International used to interfere in our affairs and directed us to do this, meet Jayaprakash Narayan and agree with J.P.; nothing of the kind. All the national policies were drawn in the general directions of the Communist International and within those general directions we worked. So we and our central committee were responsible for all the national policies that we pursued in our country and it was so with regard to all other countries and communist parties.

People's war thesis

Sharma: For example, was the People's War Thesis a result of their own thinking or direction of...?

Mirajkar: It was the result of their own thinking. It was a wrong thinking. BTR was in discussion with Dange and others. They discussed it and BTR moved it in Ajmer Jail. After that they came back from Ajmer to the Deoli Camp Jail. When we were together again, we were likely to discuss it. He was drafting the thesis and all. And subsequently, when he came back, our committee discussed it inside the jail.

Sharma: So the first draft was made by BTR?

Mirajkar : Yes, BTR and then subsequently it was taken up when we were released in 1942. Perhaps he placed it before the central committee and the committee accepted it after discussions. But it was a wrong thing.

Sharma: Now, before the resolution, before he came out of jail, were there discussions on the thesis in Deoli Camp? What were the opinions of the other members?

Mirajkar: You see, generally other members agreed. I think one or two dissented. I was also not in hundred per cent agreement. And I expressed my dissent also to some extent.

Sharma: Who were the others holding a different opinion?

Mirajkar: I think Ajoy Ghosh and Ghate. So three of us had some doubts, but ultimately it became a party policy. Therefore, we had to carry it out if we had to remain in the party. We did not want to leave the party.

Sharma: Then it was discussed in the central committee?

Mirajkar: Yes, subsequently, it was discussed in the central committee and became the party thesis and the sole guide of all our actions until it was reversed.

Sharma: Now, looking back, do you think it was a right line for the party to take?

Mirajkar: I think it was a wrong line. Frankly speaking, I felt doubtful then also and now I am confirmed that it was a very wrong line taken up by the party. At that time the party either should have turned it down or should have [adopted] a separate anti-imperialist programme and action but along with the Congress or side by side with the Congress or parallel to the Congress, that would have been much better. Although there were some international considerations also, those considerations should not have weighed with us. They were quite strong enough to take care of themselves. We should have taken care of ourselves and the situation that existed in our country before and on the 9th of August.

Sharma: The only advantage which you got from this was that the Communist Party was made legal.

Mirajkar: Yes. The Communist Party was made legal, and for some time we got all freedom to do whatever we liked, which was not there before.

Sharma: Mr Mirajkar, in what ways did the Communist Party of India cooperate with the government in its People's War effort?

Mirajkar: You see there were various forms of our alleged cooperation. We did cooperate to some extent, I must say now, for instance, we offered our squad led by girls to go and entertain the fighting forces. The government had offered us facilities for training a few people and they were sent for training; guerilla fighting and so on. Then they wanted us, as I told you, the Police Commissioner wanted us to find out the people who were working against them, and, of course, I refused. I said: Nothing doing. We are not your informers. We cooperated with you insofar as the war effort was concerned but we are not your informers to get them arrested. We will not do that and we never did that. We did many other things at that time, for instance, our writings – mainly. Then our whole advocacy was for the war effort. So these were some of the forms of cooperation with the government, but it did not last very long. Of course, it lasted some time but not very long. And ultimately, later on our policy was also changed. For instance, when Leaders' Conference took place and some of the big leaders wanted that the national leaders and the members of the Congress Working Committee should be released, and Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru, and M.R. Jayakar were trying to bring about some settlement and release of those people, in that conference our representative was also present. BTR was sent there to represent the Communist Party. At the same time it is also true that in 1942-43, we did cooperate in many ways in the war effort of the government.

Sharma: Did the government render some financial assistance to the party during this period?

Mirajkar: I do not think so. I do not know. I do not think any money or anything of the kind was received. It was openly received by M.N. Roy. He had started a separate trade union organisation and it was being paid openly."

Wavell's Journal as well as the Transfer of Power documents reveal that Roy asked for Rs.10,000 per month plus a seat on the Viceroy's Executive Council. It prompted Wavell to remark that he was a Viceroy not Vice-Roy. One is not aware of any Royist censuring this after the disclosure.

"Sharma: What were the other ways in which the party cooperated?

Mirajkar: Mainly the ideological ways, that is all. The whole damn thing was to do propaganda openly. We were against strikes in that period, we were against the movement that was going on or was led by the Congress, and the Congress Socialists and we were against those people. So, we were carrying on propaganda actively against these things. This is the form of cooperation we gave.

The 1942 movement

Sharma: In what ways did you oppose the 1942 movement?

Mirajkar: In 1942, what happened was we had collected some members of the central committee on the 9th of August. There I was asked to go and stop the strike that had taken place. I refused. I said: Well, I am not going there. I cannot go. I cannot do that. So I was against it. But later on, we did carry out also because we had to carry out the decisions of the majority of the party. I was their spokesman in Bombay. Although my heart was not in it, I used to go and do this and that and negotiate with them.



Lahore, 1939: Mahatma Gandhi (circled) on a train at the railway station on his way to meet Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan and other nationalist Muslim leaders following Mohammad Ali Jinnah's demand for a separate state for Muslims. Mirajkar says: "I think it was a sad mistake on our part and on the part of the Communist Party too to have supported the idea [of Pakistan]... the Communist Party had made a mistake in... supporting the League... so far as the idea of Pakistan was concerned."

Sharma: Another idea which was taken up by the CPI was, of the Pakistan thesis as propounded by Dr Adhikari. Now, looking back, what do you think was the opinion of the other members of the party then?

Mirajkar: At that time, of course, we did not pay much attention to it. We all agreed and we supported it. At that time we did not pay serious attention. I do not think we opposed it. At least, I did not oppose much. But looking back and thinking seriously about the whole question, I think it was a sad mistake on our part and on the part of the Communist Party too to have supported the idea. We were here cooperating with the League leaders, the big leaders in Bombay. Jinnah was in Bombay at that time but now I think it was very wrong on our part and we should not have done that. That thesis itself was wrong and the Communist Party had made a mistake in saying and supporting the League at that time, so far as the idea of Pakistan was concerned.

Sharma: What was the norm of cooperation with the League?

Mirajkar: They were not very active in the norms of the cooperation, but we held meetings.

Sharma: Joint meetings?

Mirajkar: No, no joint meeting was ever held. But we held our own meetings and supported it. Whether they wanted our support or not that is a different matter altogether but we held public meetings supporting their idea which perhaps was not liked by the people, naturally. Now, looking back, that was, of course a black chapter in our history. I should say."

P.C. Joshi wrote a brilliant pamphlet after the failure of the Gandhi-Jinnah talks in 1944 entitled "They Must Meet Again". This writer will be most grateful to any reader who provides a copy of the pamphlet or its photocopy.

"Sharma: One more question about the party's attitude towards Mahatma Gandhi. You know this has changed quite frequently from dubbing him as an agent of the bourgeoisie and the capitalist class to a great leader of mass awakening. Why this change has taken place in the

party's attitude towards him from time to time?

Gandhi's line

Mirajkar: You see, so far as Gandhiji's political line was concerned, I do think even now that he was a spokesman of the capitalist class. So far as the awakening that he had brought about since the Non-cooperation Movement and the Satyagraha in 1930 is concerned, and to some extent the anti-imperialist role he played, was a correct thing; but, on the whole, if you take Gandhiji's general political line, it was in support of capitalism and he did not want anything else but freedom and freedom for capitalists in this country, that is my firm view. But so far as dubbing him as an agent of imperialism and all that it concerned, this is going too far, which we had done. We had done many good things, many bad things; and this may be one of the bad things certainly. But generally his political thinking was in favour of capitalism and not of socialism. And the same policy and the same line was followed by Nehru also in all these sixteen years or seventeen years which people have witnessed. Even now Indira Gandhi is also carrying out the same policy. After splitting the Congress, for some time hopes were roused that something new was coming, but I do not think there is much new in it and she is also following the same line. Nehru built up capitalism during all these years in this country and it has become monopoly capitalism. The same line is being pursued with little change in talks, in words, during his daughter's regime. This is what I think about Mahatma Gandhi generally.

Sharma: As the years rolled by, you know, your assessment of him has changed. The use of strong words and other things have become a little softer now than before. How do you account for this change?

Mirajkar: That is because in those days we were young and did not weigh the things correctly, see things correctly. Then there were some people amongst us who even now also say and support the same thing. But on the whole, the party has grown, matured, and after maturity the party certainly weighs words while characterising any individual for his actions. And therefore its softening – that is true – in words, etc., is the result of maturity of the Communist Party and communist movement in this country.

Sharma: And the evaluation is also different from what it used to be at one time?

Mirajkar: The main point of the evaluation is there. There I would not compromise. But then other evaluations, that we made sometimes, were childish. We have behaved in a childish fashion sometimes. So that is not to be taken very seriously which was wrong, of course, no doubt. People said many things about Gandhiji and some of our sectarians have said the worst thing."

As Mirajkar recalled, "The Ranadive period began in 1942 with the People's War Thesis and he went to the extreme. And in all party (meetings) discussions began to take place with regard to the line pursued by P.C. Joshi. It was characterised very definitely as the reformist line and there is no doubt that it was a reformist line but that did not mean, however, that we should go to the other extreme, which Ranadive pursued. The central committee agreed with BTR's line then and P.C. Joshi's line was characterised as a reformist line. Everybody agreed, including Dr Adhikari, who supported Ranadive's line quite actively, Ghate and myself. And while such discussion was going on, it was decided to hold the party congress in Calcutta in 1948, where Ranadive's thesis was accepted. And the Telengana [issue] became the main job because immediately after the congress, the speech which Ranadive made at St. Thomas Mount was on Telengana, Telengana and Telengana – it again carried us to the other extreme."...

It was a reaction to P.C. Joshi's "reformist" line – a line which, if pursued, would have made the CPI a powerful force in the 1950s. To reverse it, "we met in Calcutta at the second

conference of our party, to correct it. At that time, our foreign friends had also come. For instance, the Burmese leader Than Tun had come. Then the Australian leader and the Yugoslavian leader had also come. Recently, the Yugoslav people asked me a question and took a long statement as to what advice the Yugoslavian leader had given us at the congress at that time. So I made a long statement and sent that to Yugoslavia. And as a result of that action had been taken against him in Yugoslavia. So while correcting one mistake, we went to the other extreme under Ranadive's leadership. Thus, the party was again banned and several people went underground for about two or three years. And while underground it became impossible to hold meetings. Then we – Ghate, Dange, Ajoy Ghosh and myself – were arrested immediately and were all sent to prison. So during these years, considerable amount of sectarian mistakes were committed.

"Huge writings used to come to jail which meant nothing. So we wrote many letters to him (i.e., BTR) and said: These mistakes have been committed, they ought to be corrected. But he would not take any notice. Everybody said 'yes' to his point of view in that period. Even my friend Jyoti Basu who subsequently recanted, who is now with him once again, agreed with us. And not only that, you see, in the trade union field also Ranadive interfered too much. He expelled N.M. Joshi as general secretary of the AITUC and appointed his brother-in-law, one Rangnekar, the general secretary of the Trade Union Congress. Several things had happened in that period. The Railwaymen's Federation was formed separately. There were no followers."

