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Emergence of Communism in India

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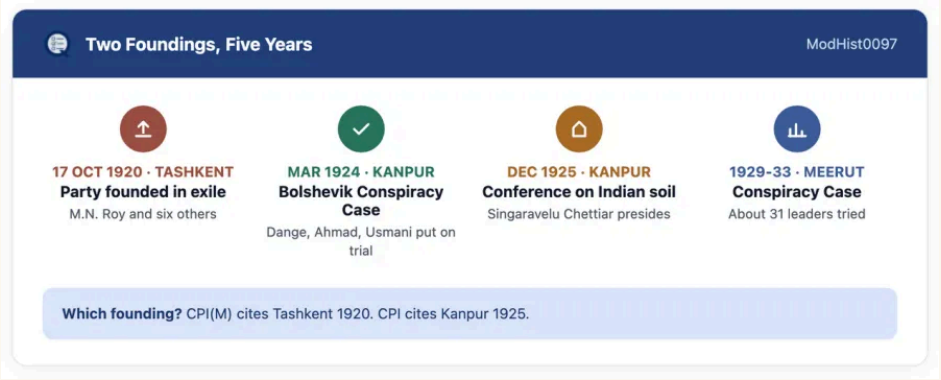
Emergence of Communism in India

India’s communist movement was born twice. It began once abroad, in exile, and again years later on Indian soil.

This lesson covers the founding in Tashkent, the Kanpur Conference, the conspiracy cases, and the party’s uneasy relationship with Congress. It ends with where the movement later governed and where it turned armed.



M.N. Roy (1887 to 1954), born Narendra Nath Bhattacharya. Photograph from the 1930s. Public domain in India, via Wikimedia Commons.



Two foundings, five years apart. Each trial then drew public sympathy to the accused.

> **17 Oct 1920.** M.N. Roy founds the party at Tashkent, in exile.
> **Mar 1924.** Kanpur Bolshevik Conspiracy Case is filed.
> **Dec 1925.** Kanpur Conference organises the party on Indian soil.
> **1929 to 1933.** Meerut Conspiracy Case. About 31 leaders tried.
> **1942.** The “People’s War” line keeps the CPI out of Quit India.
> **1964.** The party splits into CPI and CPI(M).

Comintern: the Communist International, a Moscow-led body that guided communist parties worldwide.

Muhajirs: Indian Muslim migrants who crossed into Soviet territory around 1920. Some trained at Tashkent.

People’s War: the CPI’s name for the Second World War after Germany attacked the USSR in June 1941.

1 Where and when was the party founded?

There are two answers, and a question can point to either.

- M.N. Roy founded the Communist Party of India on **17 October 1920** at Tashkent, in exile from British India.

- He founded it with six others: Evelyn Trent Roy, Abani Mukherji, M.P.T. Acharya, Mohammad Shafiq Siddiqui, Mohammad Ali and Rosa Fitingof.
- At the Comintern's Second Congress in 1920, Roy had helped shape policy on colonial revolutions in Asia.
- Roy was also the first Indian member of the Communist International.
- The party organised formally on Indian soil only in **December 1925**, at a conference in Kanpur.
- Singaravelu Chettiar presided. The conference elected a central executive committee and adopted a constitution.
- S.A. Dange and Muzaffar Ahmad had already spent the early 1920s building the movement inside India, mostly through trade unions.
- The dispute is live. **CPI(M)** traces its origin to Tashkent, 1920. **CPI** traces its founding to Kanpur, 1925.
- If a question says "founded" without a place, check which party's history it means.

> **Quick check 1.** M.N. Roy founded the Communist Party of India at Tashkent in 1920. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

2 What were the conspiracy cases?

Three trial series tried to crush the movement. Each built sympathy for the accused.

- Around 200 muhajirs had crossed into Soviet territory around 1920. Some 40 to 50 trained at the Tashkent political-military school.
- The first trained men reached Peshawar on 3 June 1921. British intelligence saw their return as a serious threat.

- Five **Peshawar Conspiracy Cases** ran between 1922 and 1927. The first, Crown vs Akbar Qureshi and Others, was India's first communist conspiracy trial.
- The **Kanpur Bolshevik Conspiracy Case** was filed in March 1924, before the party had formally organised in India.
- It charged S.A. Dange, Muzaffar Ahmad, Nalini Gupta and Shaukat Usmani with plotting to overthrow British rule by force.
- M.N. Roy was also named, but he stayed abroad and was never arrested.
- Ahmad, Usmani and Dange were each sentenced to four years.
- The **Meerut Conspiracy Case** ran from March 1929 to January 1933. About 31 communist and trade-union leaders were tried.
- They included Ahmad and Dange again, plus British communists Philip Spratt and Ben Bradley.
- Muzaffar Ahmad was sentenced to transportation for life. Most others got 12-year terms, cut sharply on appeal.

3 How did the party deal with Congress?

The relationship was uneasy, not a simple alliance.

- Congress built a broad, non-class nationalist coalition. The CPI argued for class struggle instead. See The Indian National Congress: Founding and the Moderate-Extremist Phase.
- By 1928 the communists had broken from Gandhi's mainstream agitations. In 1931 they left the AITUC to form the Red Trade Union Congress.
- After Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, the CPI recast the war as a **"People's War"** against fascism.
- That line kept the CPI out of the **1942 Quit India Movement**.
- The stance cost the party real nationalist credibility. Its own founders had earlier been jailed by the same British government.
- In 1964, the CPI split into the CPI and the CPI(M). The causes were the Sino-Soviet split and disagreement over the 1962 border war with China.

> **Quick check 2.** The CPI joined the 1942 Quit India Movement after Germany attacked the Soviet Union. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

4 Where did the movement govern?

Mainly in Bengal and Kerala.

- The CPI(M)-led **Left Front** governed West Bengal for 34 years, from 1977 to 2011.
- Jyoti Basu was Chief Minister for the first five terms. Buddhadeb Bhattacharya served the last two.

- The Trinamool Congress ended that rule in the 2011 state election.
- In Kerala, communist-led governments came to power in 1957 under E.M.S. Namboodiripad. Left and Congress-led fronts have alternated since.
- Bengal and Kerala were where organised communist politics won and held power, not just contested elections.
- For the peasant side of the story, see The Telangana Peasant Uprising, 1946 to 1951.

5 Where did the movement turn armed?

A radical wing rejected elections for armed struggle.

- The **Naxalbari uprising** of 1967 in West Bengal gave the movement its name.
- Its leaders were radical communists who rejected parliamentary politics.
- The uprising later spread to other states, including Bihar, where it mobilised landless labourers against landlords.
- The Communist Party of India (Maoist) formed in 2004, merging the People's War Group and the Maoist Communist Centre.
- Punjab had its own separate left roots. Ghadar Party veterans returned from North America in the late 1910s.
- Sohan Singh Josh founded the Kirti Kisan Sabha at a Lyallpur conference in September 1928. This ran parallel to the Tashkent-Kanpur line.

> **Quick check 3.** The Left Front governed West Bengal from 1977 to 1991. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Remember: 17 Oct 1920 Tashkent (Roy, seven founders). Dec 1925 Kanpur (Singaravelu Chettiar). 1924 Kanpur Bolshevik case. 1929 to 1933 Meerut case. 1942 People's War line. 1964 split. 1967 Naxalbari.

> **Think it through:** Why did the trials leave the British weaker rather than stronger?
>
> Open trials gave the accused a public stage. Newspapers carried their statements. The Meerut trial dragged on for years and drew sympathy even from outside the movement. The cases publicised the cause they meant to crush.

Practice MCQs

1. Who founded the Communist Party of India in 1920, in Tashkent?

A. Muzaffar Ahmad

B. Shaukat Usmani

C. S.A. Dange

D. M.N. Roy

See answer ↓

2. In which year did the Communist Party of India formally organise on Indian soil, at a conference in Kanpur?

A. 1925

B. 1924

C. 1920

D. 1929

See answer ↓

3. What was the Kanpur Bolshevik Conspiracy Case of 1924?

A. The trial that formally founded the CPI in India

B. A labour dispute between mill owners and workers

C. A British prosecution of early communist organisers, before the party had even formally organised in India

D. The case that led to the 1964 CPI split

See answer ↓

4. The Kanpur Bolshevik Conspiracy Case of 1924 resulted in the prosecution of early Indian communist organisers including Muzaffar Ahmad and which other prominent early Communist Party figure?

A. Chandrasekhar Azad

B. S.A. Dange

C. Bhagat Singh

D. Ram Prasad Bismil

See answer ↓

5. The Meerut Conspiracy Case of 1929, a significant colonial-era prosecution, primarily targeted individuals associated with which political movement?

A. The Communist and trade union movement

B. The Muslim League

C. The Swaraj Party

D. The Hindu Mahasabha

See answer ↓

6. M.N. Roy holds the distinction of being the first Indian to?

A. Lead the All India Trade Union Congress

B. Found the Bombay Mill Hands Association

C. Lead the Bardoli Satyagraha

D. Become a member of the Communist International (Comintern)

See answer ↓

7. The 1942 Quit India Movement notably saw the Communist Party of India adopt a distinctive political stance compared to the mainstream Congress-led agitation, choosing to?

A. Support the movement enthusiastically alongside the Congress

B. Lead the movement's most violent revolutionary actions

C. Merge entirely with the Congress leadership

D. Not support the movement, instead prioritising the Allied war effort against fascism following Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union

See answer ↓

8. In which year did the Communist Party of India split into the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPI(M)?

A. 1964

B. 1966

C. 1969

D. 1962

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **D.** M.N. Roy founded the Communist Party of India in 1920, in exile in Tashkent, and later became the first Indian member of the Comintern. ↑ Q1
2. **A.** The party organised formally on Indian soil in December 1925, electing a central executive committee and adopting a constitution. ↑ Q2
3. **C.** British authorities prosecuted early organisers like Muzaffar Ahmad and S.A. Dange in 1924, a full year before the party formally organised in India. ↑ Q3
4. **B.** The Kanpur case targeted early pioneers of the Indian Communist movement, including S.A. Dange (among the founders of the Communist Party of India) and Muzaffar Ahmad, prosecuted for allegedly conspiring to establish a Soviet-style Communist government in India through revolutionary means. This case predates the larger, more internationally publicised Meerut Conspiracy Case by several years, marking an earlier phase in the colonial state's systematic surveillance and suppression of India's nascent Communist and labour organising movement. Together, the Kanpur and Meerut cases illustrate the sustained, decade-long colonial effort to contain the growing influence of Marxist political ideas among India's industrial working class during the interwar period. ↑ Q4
5. **A.** The Meerut Conspiracy Case saw the colonial government prosecute a large group of trade unionists and communist activists on charges of conspiring to overthrow British rule through organised labour agitation, reflecting the colonial administration's escalating concern over the growing influence of Communist and left-wing organising within India's expanding industrial workforce during the late 1920s. The lengthy, high-profile trial, though intended to suppress the movement, instead generated substantial international attention and sympathy, including support from prominent British intellectuals and Labour Party figures critical of the prosecution's heavy-handedness. The case represents a significant, distinct strand of the wider anti-colonial resistance during this period -- rooted in labour and class politics rather than the more familiar Congress-led constitutional or Gandhian mass-movement traditions. ↑ Q5

6. **D.** Roy's involvement with international Communist organisations, including playing a founding role in setting up a Communist Party of India-oriented group at Tashkent in 1920, marked the beginning of organised Communist political activity connected to India. His membership in the Comintern's leadership placed him at the centre of international Communist strategic debates concerning colonial and anti-imperialist movements. Roy's trajectory -- from revolutionary nationalist to international Communist theorist and eventually to his own distinct 'Radical Humanism' -- reflects the complex ideological currents within early 20th-century Indian left politics. ↑ Q6
7. **D.** The Communist Party of India's decision not to support Quit India reflected its adherence to the international Communist movement's shifted wartime line, which prioritised supporting the Allied war effort against fascism following Nazi Germany's 1941 invasion of the Soviet Union, a strategic calculation that placed the CPI in an unusual and controversial position relative to the mainstream nationalist movement it otherwise generally aligned with. This stance generated significant criticism from other nationalist quarters, who viewed the CPI's wartime cooperation with British authorities (even if motivated by anti-fascist rather than pro-colonial sentiment) as a betrayal of the immediate national cause. The episode illustrates how international ideological alignments could, at critical moments, create significant strategic divergence even among generally allied anti-colonial political currents within India's broader nationalist landscape. ↑ Q7
8. **A.** The Communist Party of India split in 1964, forming the separate Communist Party of India (Marxist). ↑ Q8

Quick-check answers

1. **True.** ↑ 1
2. **False.** ↑ 2
3. **False.** ↑ 3

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