For a child to be born into a staunch Gandhian family and to have grown into boyhood in the strict disciplinary ambience of an ashram run on Gandhian principles to have embraced Marxism and become a member of the Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCPI) in his late teens was a revolution in his personal life. Ours was a family of freedom fighters. My uncle, Satish Chandra Das Gupta, was known as the Gandhi of Bengal. Both my parents took part in the freedom movement. My mother, Suniti Bala Das Gupta, was arrested thrice and each time sentenced to various terms of rigorous imprisonment. When my grandfather died in 1933 at Kurigram (now in Bangladesh), my father, Kshitish Chandra Das Gupta, was in bar-fetters in the Barasat jail for having refused to do Sarkar Salaam (a practice obligatory for all prisoners to show their allegiance to the British Government).

My father and my uncle had set up an institution named Khadi Pratisthan at Sodepur in the present North 24-Parganas district of (undivided) Bengal in 1925 and donated all their money and property to the trust that ran the Khadi Pratisthan. The Khadi Pratisthan was not to take part in political activities except the freedom movement and carry out the Constructive Programme of the Mahatma. They became what Gandhiji called áparigrahis or persons without any personal property or possession. Looking back at my childhood days today, I think that unknown to myself that ambience had prepared my formative mind for eventually embracing the philosophy and world view of Marxism.

Till my early teens I was anti-communist, mainly for two reasons. The first was that the Communists had opposed the ‘Quit India’ Movement of 1942 and they were all along opposed to Gandhi. The second was that by the time I was ten (1945) I had come to know the way Stalin had executed all the tried and tested Bolshevik leaders who had taken part in the Russian Revolution of 1917. I found it intriguing that all of them had ‘confessed’ to their crime of treachery before they were shot. The so-called Moscow Trials only filled me with detestation for the Communists and the communist system.

In our ashram we had a huge library of some forty or fifty thousand books on almost every subject: art, literature, economics, science, philosophy, medicine. I was not sent to school. Close associates of the Mahatma were not supposed to send their wards to government schools. Gandhiji had started his own educational system called basic education or buniyadi shiksha. Since I was the only child in the ashram, there was no question of opening a buniyadi vidyalaya for a single pupil. The ashram library was my university.

I was put through different departments of the ashram—carpentry, blacksmithy, press, book-binding, accounts and the medical department. I spent seven years in the medical department, starting at the unbelievably tender age of fourteen, studied anatomy, physiology, bio-chemistry and medicine. We had a full-fledged medical laboratory and it was my pleasure to spend hours in it, examining samples of blood, stool, urine, sputum, etc., making a liberal use of the Leitz microscope.

One day my uncle, Satish Babu, summoned me and asked me to study the Dewey decimal system of cataloguing for reorganising our library. It was in course of re-classifying the library that I came across G. D. H. Cole’s book What Marx Really Meant. I was about fifteen then and I took up Cole’s book with a great deal of curiosity. Much of what I read I could not understand but the book left me with a vague feeling that we must not judge Marx and his ‘ism’ by looking at and judging by the activities of those around us who called themselves Communists.

By chance in another year I came across Bukharin and Preobrazhensky’s ABC of Communism. The short, one-page “Dedication” part of the book left me spell-bound. I still remember some fragments of sentences from that Dedication, like “It is a party that commands an army numbering millions and which works on its Saturdays for the resurrection of mankind.” When I learnt that Bukharin himself had been purged by Stalin in the Moscow Trials I became convinced that communism was not what I had thought it was. A vague idea was forming in my mind that equating Marxism or communism with what was taking place in the Soviet Union, which was being glorified by the official Communists all over the world, was not the same thing. Again that uneasy question began to trouble my mind: Indeed, what did Marx really mean?
Two things developed simultaneously in my mind: a strong aversion for Stalin and his misdeeds and an equally strong disapproval of the activities of his self-professed followers in India. The betrayal of the ‘Quit India’ Movement and collaboration with the British by the Communists was a sore thing for me. It was only much later that I came to know that the communist movement in India had grown by opposing British imperialism. Events like the Kanpur Bolshevik Conspiracy Case (1924), the Kakori Conspiracy Case (1925), the Peshawar Conspiracy Case (1927) and the Meerut Conspiracy Case (1933) I came to know later. One in the first batch of Communists of those early years who later left the CPI was Gopal Basak. I had the privilege of making his acquaintance in the later years of his life when he was running a printing press at Harrison Road-Mirzapur Street crossing, diagonally opposite the Purabi Cinema in Kolkata.

To go back to my story. It was during this time that met a young man, slightly older than me, Monimoy Bose. I liked his pleasant personality. Soon I learnt that he was a member of the RCPI. The RCPI, he told me, was a Communist Party which had, unlike the CPI, thrown itself fully in the ‘Quit India’ Movement, that it did not accept Stalin as the Messiah of the world communist movement and that it believed that while being a detachment of the international communist movement, the Communist Party of every country should make independent assessment of the objective conditions prevailing in that country and chart out its own course of action. Moscow was no Vatican for the Communists. In a lighter vein I may add here that my basic approach to religion never changed. It was the same before and after I became a revolutionary Communist, though for diametrically opposite reasons. Gandhi taught me that all religions are equal because all of them are equally true. Marx taught me that all religious are equal because they were equally false!

I felt attracted to the RCPI. At the age of eighteen (that was the eligibility year) I became a candidate member of the RCPI. That was in 1953. Next year, I got full membership of the party. Three years later, I left my parents in the Khadi Pratistan, got a job in a semi-government office as a typist-cum-clerk. In the party I was assigned to the trade union front.

I left my first job after three years to do a short stint in the publications department of the West Bengal Gandhi Smarak Nidhi. In 1961, I was asked by Pyarelalji (former secretary of Mahatma Gandhi) to join him and assist him in his writing of a multi-volume biography of the Mahatma. As Gandhiji used to stay at our Khadi Pratistan ashram at Sodepur whenever he visited Bengal, Pyarelalji had known me since my childhood.

After working with him for a year-and-a-half, I got a letter from Sudhin Kumar (who had become the RCPI General Secretary after Pannalal Das Gupta’s arrest in 1951) from Calcutta that Panna Babu and all our jailed comrades would be released on August 15, 1962. I immediately decided to quit my job with Pyarelalji and come back to Calcutta. I thought that after his release, Panna Babu would again lead the struggle for a socialist revolution. That was, however, not to be. That is a different story altogether and I need not go into it here.

Meanwhile, I had decided to become a journalist and on returning to Calcutta joined an English weekly as assistant editor. Two years after coming out of jail,, Panna Babu started Compass, a Bengali newsweekly, the first of its kind in Bengali language, in 1964. He had got the idea from Aruna Asaf Ali’s Link news-magazine. Arunaji and Panna Babu knew each other quite well as both of them had taken part in the ‘Quit India’ Movement while absconding. I joined the weekly and started working for him. In 1966, Panna Babu asked me to go to Nagaland, study the Naga secessionist movement led by the then London-exiled A.Z. Phizo and to make acquaintance with the Naga leaders. He got me a job as a teacher in a missionary school at Pfutsero in Nagaland. I worked there for several months and studied the Naga problem and the Naga movement at close quarters.

When I came back to Calcutta, Panna Babu told me he had arranged to give me a wider field of work in an English weekly. That weekly was Mainstream. I would work for its sister organisation, the India Press Agency (IPA) also. Thus began my long association with this magazine.

At the time I joined the RCPI, very little communist literature was available. The two books that were freely available were Sydney and Beatrice Webb’s Soviet Communism: A New Civilisation and Maurice Hindus’ Mother Russia. Neither of them was a treatise on Marxist philosophy and economics. We had a set of twelve short volumes published by Lawrence and Wishart of London, each book dealing with a specific aspect of Marxism. These were the textbooks used in party classes and study circles. It is only after Khrushchev and Bulganin’s visit to India in 1955 that Marxist literature started freely coming from Moscow.
But the flow of Marxist literature could not stem the tide of the decline of the communist movement in India. The CPI, which was the ‘official’ Communist Party recognised by the CPSU, committed a series of mistakes. One grave mistake was to oppose the ‘Quit India’ Movement. The second was the extreme Left-sectarian line taken by the party after its Calcutta Congress in 1948, when P. C. Joshi was thrown out of leadership and B. T. Ranadive became the General Secretary. Immediately, the West Bengal Government declared the CPI illegal by passing the Security Act. Under the gentle prodding of the Soviet party, the CPI changed its line and Ajoy Ghosh took over the leadership of the CPI.

The next big change came in 1967, when the Left parties of Bengal along with the Bangla Congress of Ajoy Mukherjee fought the State Assembly elections in two opposing groups—the People’s United Left Front (PULF) and the United Left Front (ULF). In spite of the division, the two Left Fronts won the elections and formed the first United Front Government in West Bengal with Ajoy Mukherjee as the Chief Minister and Jyoti Basu as his deputy. That Opposition victory was possible because the previous year (1966) had seen a massive food movement in West Bengal that isolated the Congress totally from the people. I am not going into the history of the dismissal of the two United Front Governments here. What I want to say is that it was the second time the Left had come to power through elections. (The first was the CPI’s poll victory in Kerala and the formation of the Namboodiripad Government.)

After tasting power, the attitude of the Left started changing. After the Emergency, when Assembly elections were held in West Bengal, the Left parties formed a Left Front (LF) under the CPI-M’s leadership which came to power. And with unbelievable speed, the degeneration and decline of the Left started. Smaller constituents of the LF allowed themselves to be dictated to by the CPI-M. They did not raise a murmur of protest even when the CPI-M cadres were beating them up and liquidating their mass bases. Corruption in the Left became rampant. What is inexplicable is that the other major parties in the LF, namely, the CPI, RSP and Forward Bloc, never thought of freeing themselves from the vice-like grip of the CPI-M and join hands together to carry on the Left movement, sans the CPI-M. That way, they could have prevented their own creeping irrelevance in the political life of West Bengal and salvaged some of the Left traditions of Bengal.

Here one thing needs to be mentioned: the ‘generation gap’ in the Communists. With rare exceptions like Jyoti Basu, almost all first generation communist leaders of undivided Bengal came from the freedom movement. They belong either to the Congress or to the revolutionary parties like the Jugantar or the Anushilan Samity. A whole host of Anushilan Samity members were converted to communism during their long imprisonment in the Cellular Jail in the Andamans. Leaders like Ambika Chakrabarty took part in the Chittagong Armoury Raid (1930) led by ‘Master-da’ Surya Sen.

They were a different breed of Communists. Against a few of them—if any at all—could the charge of moral turpitude be levelled. They led a life of Spartan habits. Some like Benoy Chowdhury or Provash Roy lived a life of utter simplicity. Power and paraphernalia of office had no effect on them. Latter-day Left party workers, especially those that came after the Left Front victory in 1977, proved venal and vulnerable to the temptations that power brought.

Meanwhile, the growing fear and antipathy of the people for the CPI-M-led LF Government generated by the autocratic behaviour of the CPI-M leaders and workers not only alienated the people but, what is far worse, it gave rise to strong anti-Left and anti-Communist feelings. So much so that in 2011, Mamata Banerjee, who was considered a political maverick till a few years ago, roundly defeated the Left with her newly-formed Trinamul Congres, a breakaway group of the Congress. The decline of the Left continues unabated not only in West Bengal but all over India. It is the fascist forces that are coming up fast to fill the vacuum.

As I step into the 83rd year of my life and look back on the events of the past, I am driven to the conclusion that two things have been the bane of the Left movement. The first is undoubtedly Left-sectarianism that seeks to exclude and alienate rather than attract and include various sections of the people. The second is that the leadership of the Left parties, all Left parties, have all along been in the hands of the un-declassed petty bourgeoisie, suffering from all the weaknesses and vices of the class.

The dream of an exploitation-free and egalitarian society that once made me leave my family, my parents and my old surroundings remains unfulfilled. In fact it has receded far into the horizon. The faith that sustains me is that some day that dream will become a reality.
Since I left active politics to become a journalist and since I spent nearly all my working life at Guwahati, two names need to be mentioned. One is Nikhil Chakravarty, the founder-editor of this magazine. It was Nikhil-da who licked me into shape as a professional journalist. It was he who taught me how to look at things not through the narrow prism of a partisan but objectively. A journalist has to report things as they are and not what he thinks they should be. A journalist’s loyalty has to be to his profession, to his reader, and to none else.

The second name is that of Kamala Mazumdar, a firebrand leader of our party. Her participation and her deeds during our armed struggle days in Assam earned her the epithet Asomor Agnikanya or the fiery daughter of Assam by the 1950s. That I, a Bengali from Calcutta, could establish myself so quickly in Guwahati and was accepted by all and picked up Assamese fairly quickly, is due solely to her. Kamala introduced me to all the leaders of all the political parties, to the academicians and to the middle-class Assamese intellectuals. Kamala was older than me but the age difference did not come in the way of our close bonding. Our shared values and ideas went much beyond politics.

Nikhil-da passed away in 1998. Kamala left us last year. I cherish my fond memories of both of them.

The author was a correspondent of The Hindu in Assam. He also worked in Patriot, Compass (Bengali), Mainstream. A veteran journalist, he comes from a Gandhian family and was intimately associated with the RCPI leader, Pannalal Das Gupta.

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