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Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das (1870-1925): A Tribute on Death Centenary

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Abstract:

Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das was one of the most powerful leaders of the Indian Freedom Movement. But unfortunately, his active political life spanned only for eight years. He possessed such a magnetic personality that almost all the later day leaders of Bengal started their political career as his followers. He was the first to suggest an amicable solution of Hindu-Muslim rivalries by proposing the Bengal Pact and wanted to get it accepted by the AICC. He not only proposed but also implemented the provisions of the Bengal Pact through the Calcutta Municipal Corporation when he became its first elected Mayor. He was also the most important leader of the Swarajya Dal, a new party within the Congress. The Swarajya Dal, under his able leadership, made impressive performance in the 1923 Central and Provincial Council elections which were held almost immediately after the formation of the Party. The basic purpose of participating the Council elections was to create obstructions in the effective functioning of the British-controlled Councils. He was the most revered leader of the time. His death at a very early age of his active political life berefts the country from an able leadership who could have saved the country from the tragic partition. This article is a humble attempt to delineate some of the striking features of Deshbandhu's political activities which shaped the politics of Bengal in the twenties of the twentieth century, if not more.

Keywords: AICC, BPCC, The Bengal Pact, Swarajya Dal, Coconada Session, Gaya Session, Council Elections, Calcutta Municipal Corporation, First Elected Mayor, Sirajganj BPCC Session, Faridpur BPCC Session, Step-Aside.

1. Introduction:

Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das was the National Leader, and he was involved in active nationalist politics only for eight years, 1917-1925. But it was not that he has no connection with the nationalist movement before that. He was a renowned Barrister of the Calcutta High Court at that time. He acted as the chief lawyer for the national revolutionaries who were arrested in the Maniktala Conspiracy Case in the wake of Kshudiram and Prafulla Chaki's heroic assassination attempt against Kingsford, a British magistrate. Deshbandhu almost single-handedly fought for the release of Sri Aurobindo and others from the British jails. He even sacrificed his lucrative legal



profession for fighting the case of Sri Aurobinda and his compatriots. He was such a great patriot, indeed!

During the short span of his involvement in active politics, Deshbandhu left indelible footprint upon the nationalist politics of India that could never be denigrated. He possessed such a powerful personality that could draw around him a good number of youths with bright career to jump into the nationalist movement by leaving aside their prosperous career. Subhashchandra after deciding to refuse the coveted ICS wrote to Deshbandhu from England that he was ready to join the nationalist struggle; just waiting for the order of Deshbandhu to join the movement ([Letter written on 16/02/2021](#))¹.

All the stalwarts of the then Bengal Politics from Hindu community, *viz.*, Jatindramohan Sengupta, Birendranath Sasmal, Naliniranjan Sarkar, Kiransankar Roy, Dr. Bidhanchandra Roy, Hemendranath Dasgupta, Pratapchandra Guharoy, Basantakumar Mazumder etc. were assembled around Deshbandhu. Not only the Hindus, even the leaders of the Muslim community from Bengal like Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy (Later day Prime Minister of Pakistan) and Abdul Rashid Khan and others also worked under Deshbandhu's leadership. He was a great advocate for the Hindu-Muslim unity in the country. As a result, people from all walks of life and from all the communities assembled under the leadership of Deshbandhu. This was a great achievement in a country which had seen a number of communal riots between the two major communities time and again. He genuinely tried for unity of the Hindu-Muslims through '*The Bengal Pact*' and tried to get it accepted even by the All-India Congress Committee (AICC) meeting held at *Coconada* (presently, Kakinada, AP) from December 28, 1923 to January 01, 1924. Unfortunately, Das's proposal was lost by a small margin of votes.

After Deshbandhu's untimely death on June 16, 1925, the country bereft herself from such a wise leader who could have solved the Hindu-Muslim animosity by implementing '*The Bengal Pact*' at the national level too. We must remember that at the time of his untimely expiry, Deshbandhu was the leader of the largest single party (*The Swarajya Party*) in the *Bengal Legislative Council* and the *first elected Mayor of Calcutta Municipal Corporation*. So, if he was alive for few more years, the objective situation might have been conducive for him to try for implementing the provisions of *the Bengal Pact*.

The Bengal Pact might not have been an ideal solution. Nevertheless, the Pact was a bold and generous step which decided to give all that was due to the Muslims and tried to create better

¹ Bose, Sugata, 2018. Deshnayak- Subhashchandra Bose O Bharater Mukti Sangram (in Bengali). Kolkata: Ananda. P 326.



understanding between the two communities. Tulsi Goswami, an associate of C R Das observed later: *Subsequent events seem to indicate that a settlement on some such lines in 1924 and 1925 might have strengthened Indian solidarity and we would in all probability not have heard of Pakistan and the Two-Nation Theory.* (Goswami, 1971: 374-75)².

The overthrow of the Bengal Pact left a bitter feeling among the Muslim Community. They were rudely awakened to the limitations of the post-C R Das Bengal Hindu Leadership. It was not without reason that the *Mussalman* regarded the hasty and unceremonious rejection of the *Pact* by the Cocanada Congress as 'the worst blunder in the history of the Congress movement'. (*The Mussalman*, 4 January, 1924, 4 quoted in Mukherjee, 2001) For discontent and ill-feeling that came in the wake of the *Pact*, C R Das blamed *Suddhi* and *Sangathan School*, *No-changers* and the *ministerial party*, and alleged that it only 'helped to give a handle to the bureaucracy', which wanted friction between Hindus and Muslims. (*Forward*, 4 June, 1924, 5 quoted in Mukherjee, 2001)³

2. Contribution of Dinabandhu as the National Leader:

Deshbandhu started active political work since the Calcutta Congress held in December 1917. He participated in all the Eleven Congress Sessions from 1917 Calcutta Session to Belgaum Session held in December 26-27, 1924. He became the President of the All-India Congress Committee Twice, Ahmedabad (1921) and Gaya (1922). In Ahmedabad Congress he could not remain present as he was then jailed for six months in the Alipore Central Jail along with Subhash and others for participation in the Non-cooperation Movement. He left the presidentship of the INC after the Gaya Congress when his proposal for Central and Legislative Council entries was lost in voting. The general Congressmen voted for the no-changers. They got 1740 votes as against 890 for the pro-changers. The verdict of the Congress was against council entry by contesting the elections to be held in 1923 under the provisions of the *Government of India Act, 1919*⁴. Since this decision was against the proposal placed by C R Das, considering this as no-confidence to his leadership, he resigned from the post of Congress presidentship.

The pro-changers (C R Das, Motilal Nehru, Ajmal Khan, Vithalbhai Patel and their followers) were defeated but not demoralised. They realised that a fairly large section of Congressmen was in favour of council entry. Therefore, immediately after the Gaya Congress, they convened a meeting of their supporters and *decided to form a new party within the Congress*.

² Goswami, Tulsi Chandra, 1971. *Footprints of Liberty*, Selection from the Speeches and Writings of Tulsi Chandra Goswami. Calcutta. Pp 374-75

³ Mukherjee, Manju Gopal, 2001. 'C.R. DAS and the Bengal Pact'. IHC: Proceedings, 61st (Millennium) Session, 2001, pp. 739-746. Indian History Congress. Stable URL <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44148149>

⁴ Ibid; see Footnote -2



2.1 The Swarajya Party:

The **Swarajya Party**, established as the Congress-Khilafat Swarajya Party, was formed on January 01, 1923. C R Das was elected the president and Motilal Nehru the general secretary of the new party. The formation of a new group within the Congress created an atmosphere of mutual suspicion. The possibility of a split within Congress became quite imminent. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, the new president of the Congress, tried to bring about unity between the two groups but did not succeed. In early 1924, the British government released Gandhi on account of his deteriorating health. Gandhi was initially completely opposed to the pro-changers and he refused to treat council-entry as part of the Congress programme of non-cooperation. Gradually however, a compromise was worked out between Gandhi and Chittaranjan Das at the Belgaum session of the Congress in 1924 which was held under the presidentship of Gandhi. As per the new agreement, the Congress leadership agreed to treat 'Swarajism' as the official part of the Congress programme. In return, the Swarajists agreed that only those who spun Khadi could be members of the Congress. A split in the Congress was thus averted. However, prior to that, even in the Coconada AICC session the party accepted the Swarajist proposition of Council entry and contesting the elections.

The naming of the Swarajya Party (Congress Khilafat Swarajya Party) was done with a great deal of thought. At the time of its formation, many people within the Congress had misgivings about the party. They considered it as anti-Congress and pro-British. The first task of the party after its formation was to remove these misunderstandings. They had full agreement with Congress-Khilafat alliance and they also did not project their party as an alternative to Congress. Rather they emphasised the Congress connection by considering their Swarajist experiment to be a part of Congress programme. Probably the earliest justification for the existence of Swarajya Party was provided by Motilal Nehru in a statement. He argued that, under changed circumstances, the boycott of legislatures had become obsolete and, therefore, the policy of boycott should be changed.

2.2 The Programme of the Swarajya Party (*as accepted in 1923*):

2.2.1 Destructive Aspects:

(1) Boycott of the Government controlled Schools and Colleges. (2) Boycott law of Courts. (3) *Wrecking of the Councils*. (4) Picketing at the gates of liquor shops. (5) Boycott of foreign cloth, in particular of British goods, and if necessary, picketing to be resorted to.

2.2.2 Constructive Aspects:

(1) Establishment of National Schools and Colleges, (2) Establishment of arbitration courts. (3) Establishment of Congress Committees on a broad foundation so as to make the Congress a truly



national organization. (4) Elevation of the moral life of the nation and increase of temperance societies, (5) Khaddar production and revival of cottage industries.

2.2.3 National Regeneration:

(1) Formation of Labour Unions. (2) Formation of Peasants' Unions. (3) Asiatic Federation. (4) Establishment of branches of the Congress in all countries so as to cement a bond of union between all liberty-loving peoples.

2.2.4 The Final Blow:

Resort to Wholesale Non-cooperation: (1) A long-continued Hartal on a nation-wide scale. (2) Renunciation of Government posts by all people all over the country. (3) Non-payment of taxes. (4) Drafting of a Constitution. (5) The relations between different classes and communities under Swaraj Government.

(Quoted from *Forward*, 27 March, 1927, 17 in Dey, 1987: 262-63)⁵

2.3 The Swarajya Party's First Experiment with the Election:

Elections were held under the [Government of India Act \(1919\)](#)⁶ first in 1920 and then in 1923. The 1920 elections were unanimously boycotted by Congress as part of the official programme of boycott. Swarajya Party contested the elections first in 1923. The 1923 elections were held almost immediately after the formation of the Party and the Party got very little time to take preparation for contesting the election. The elections were scheduled to be held in November 1923 and it was not before October that Party was able to start its preparations for the elections. The election offices were opened in the provinces and districts. Volunteers were mobilised.

The lists of candidates were prepared. The manifesto of the party was released in October. It declared *Swaraj* as the ultimate aim of the Party. Making of the own Constitution by the Indians themselves was projected as the major objective towards the fulfilment of the aim of Swarajya Party. It was made clear that a Constitution for India could only be made keeping in mind the specificity of Indian conditions. Therefore, an alien government sitting in England was not competent to make a Constitution for India suitable for Indian conditions. Swarajya Party demanded in its manifesto categorically that the Indian people should have the right to frame their own Constitution. The Party manifesto stressed that the act of constitution making will eventually take India to *Swaraj*.

⁵ Dey, Amalendu, 1987. *Bangali Buddhijibi O Bichhinnatabad* (in Bengali). Kolkata, WB State Book Board. Pp 262-263

⁶ Ibid; See Footnote- 2



The demand of making one's own Constitution was both novel and important. This indeed was a new idea introduced in the nationalist politics. The British had ruled India with the help of certain Acts passed by the British parliament from time to time. The moderate nationalist leadership used to generally demand better laws or an improvement in the existing ones. But it did not question the 'right' of the British government to make laws for India. By asserting their right to make their own Constitution, the Swarajists added a new dimension to nationalist politics. The politics of Council entry was not to be an end in itself, but only the first step. Eventually this was to culminate in full-fledged constitutionalism, i.e., Constitution making by Indians themselves. In the years to come, particularly in the 1930s, the demand for a Constituent Assembly became a central demand of the national movement. In this way, Swarajism went beyond the moderate politics and provided the connecting bridge between the constitutional politics practiced by the moderates and demand for a Constituent Assembly.

The Swarajists were instructed not to accept any office in the Councils and the Assembly. The membership of the party was confined only to Congressmen. The members of the party were instructed to behave as Congressmen in the legislatures and uphold the dignity and prestige of Congress. It is important to recognise that this was the first time the nationalist leaders were going to participate in the elections. They did not have any experience of electoral politics. For an effective management of the election activities leaders like C.R. Das (for Bengal, Central provinces and Madras presidency), Motilal Nehru (for United Provinces) and Vithalbhai Patel (for Bombay Presidency) took it upon themselves to organise the elections both in the provinces and at the centre. In the 1923 elections, the party performed well but well below its own expectations.

Table-1: The performance of the Swarajya Party at the 1923 Polls⁷

| Assembly and Councils | Total Elected Seats | Seats won by Swarajya Party |
|------------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------|
| Central Legislative Assembly | 105 | 42 |
| Madras Council | 98 | 14 |
| Bombay Council | 86 | 23 |
| Bengal Council | 111 | 47 |
| UP Council | 101 | 31 |
| Central Provinces Council | 54 | 40 |
| Punjab Council | 71 | 12 |
| Bihar and Orissa Council | 73 | 12 |
| Assam Council | 39 | 13 |

Source of the Data⁷

The party acquired a majority in CP and emerged as the largest single party in the Central Assembly, Bombay and Bengal. In UP it registered an impressive presence but in other places the performance of the party was generally disappointing. On the whole the party won 234 seats (42

⁷ Misra, Salil: Resistance within and outside the Councils. eGyanKosh. Pp 58-59



at the centre and 192 in the provinces). Given the lack of time for preparations this was an impressive performance. It was thus from 1923 that the Swarajya Party began its politics in the legislatures.

2.4 The Swarajya Party in the Councils:

The GOI Act of 1919 had introduced the scheme of Dyarchy. Under this scheme, the ministerial responsibilities were divided between reserved subjects (directly under the British Governor General) and the transferred subjects (brought under the control of the elected representatives). Land revenue administration, Police, judiciary, press, and irrigation were reserved subjects. Local self-government, medical administration, education and agriculture were brought under transferred subjects. When the Swarajya Party legislators were asked (particularly in CP and Bengal where they had a sizable presence) to take over the transferred subjects, they refused. C.R. Das, the leader in the Bengal council, said: *All the members of the Swarajya Party are determined, not to run Dyarchy, but to end it.*

It can be said that the Swarajist activities constituted an important intervention in the nationalist politics of the time. But this type of politics had its own limitations. Motilal Nehru admitted in 1926 that the Swarajist politics had not been able to take the country forward towards Swaraj. Even within the Assembly the government was able to override the opposition of the Swarajya Party. The Viceroy could always use his special powers, granted by the Act of 1919, to have all the government proposals passed. The government proposals could thus become the 'Act' without needing the support of the majority of the house.

Here, we can cite an example: The way the Bengal Criminal Law Amendment Ordinance of 1924 had been enacted into a law in 1925 overriding the objections of the majority of the Council members may be cited here. The year 1923 saw string of national revolutionary activities which included murders of police witnesses and informers, culminating in the attempt to assassinate Charles Tegart by Gopinath Saha, leading to the mistaken killing of another European. In response, following a number of requests from the Governor of Bengal, the ordinance was enacted extending the extraordinary powers of the Regulation III of 1818. It removed rights of *Habeas corpus*, reintroduced measures of indefinite and arbitrary detentions and trials by tribunal without jury and without right of appeal. Almost One hundred and fifty nationalists were detained under the ordinance, including notable detainees like *Subhas Chandra Bose*, the chief executive of the Calcutta Corporation; *Anilbaran Roy*, BPCC Secretary and *Satyendrachandra Mitra*, Secretary of Bengal Swarajya Party: all the trusted associates of Deshbandhu. The arrest and the ordinance made Deshbandhu very much furious. The government trying to turn the ordinance into an act convened a meeting of the Bengal Provincial Legislative Council on January 07, 2025. Deshbandhu



was seriously ill during that time. However, for the sake of Bengal nationalists who were arbitrarily detained with the help of this draconian ordinance, Deshbandhu even ignoring the advice of his doctors, attended the Council session in a stretcher. Such was his love for his followers; such was his determination for the cause of nationalists! His presence in the session created an electrifying effect among the members present. Cutting across the party lines, the members voted against the government motion. The government proposal lost by a margin of 66-57 votes which was quite unexpected for the Bengal government. However, by applying his special power, the Governor enacted the bill into an act. ([Aparna Debi, July 1954: 313-314](#))⁸

So, gradually it appeared to all that the opposition by the Swarajya Party had no substantive value in the Assembly. However, by this time, Deshbandhu was no more alive. The excessive pressure of work undertaken by C R Das had made its toll and within a very short time, by June 16, 2025 we lost this great leader which our country has seen so few. After his expiry only at the age of 55, many party members started doubting the efficacy of obstructionism in the legislatures. Some members even began to advocate the alternative politics of 'Responsive Cooperation' in the legislatures. M.R. Jayakar and N.C. Kelkar were some of the major exponents of this policy. As a part of this policy many Swarajist members accepted office in the Legislatures. Vithalbhai Patel accepted the office of the president of the Central Assembly. All this was against the official and declared policy of the Swarajya Party. ([Misra: 'Resistance within and outside the Councils'. eGyanKosh, 62](#))⁹

3. C R Das and the Bengal Pact:

Another bold step of C R Das was his all-out efforts in solving the Hindu-Muslim communal disharmony by mootting a proposal known popularly as '*Bengal Pact, 1923*'. C R Das could easily understand the causes behind this deep seating division among the two major communities of Bengal and tried to solve this with all his might even by going against the then all-India leadership of the INC. He had that courage and strength of conviction. It's very unfortunate that he breathed so early after his involvement in direct political activity started in 1917. No nationalist leader after his demise could enjoy the confidence of both the communities so much. So, what had been possible for C R Das to keep the communal hatred under wrap couldn't be achieved by no other leader of Bengal in his absence and Bengal had once again been engulfed under the shadow of communal hatred, animosity and riots. A look at the Bengal Pact is necessary at this point.

⁸ Aparna Debi, 1361 BS (1954). Manush Chittaranjan. Calcutta. Indian Associated Publishing Company. <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.267013/page/n5/mode/2up> . Pp 313-314

⁹ Misra, Salil: Resistance within and outside the Councils. eGyanKosh. P 62



As already noted, Deshbandhu tried to build a political structure in Bengal for which an alliance with the Muslims and the Hindus was essential. The Bengal Pact was an important step in that direction. According to the Census Report¹⁰, in 1921 Bengal, Muslims comprised 54% and the Hindus 44% of the total population. In spite of their numerical majority, the Muslims could not hold more than 33% of the Government posts. Further, Bengal Muslims had inadequate representation in the Legislative Council and local bodies. They had grievances against the Lucknow Pact, 1916 as they alleged that it did injustice to the Muslims. These were the main sources of Muslim discontent. (Mukherjee, 2001: 739)¹¹

Against this backdrop Das was determined to bring the Muslims within his scheme and give a fillip to their economic development by the allocation of proportionate share in public services. With this intention, Das framed the Bengal Pact in collaboration with the Muslim leaders of Bengal in December 1923. The Bengal Provincial Swarajya Party Committee accepted the Pact in its meeting on 18 December, 1923. (De, 1987: 229; Bose, 2018: 55)¹² The Pact, as Das explained was based on two principles, religious toleration and political and administrative right. It provided, once full responsible government was established, representation in the legislative council on the population basis with separate electorates, representation in local bodies in proportion of 60 percent for the majority community and 40 percent for the minority community, 55 percent of government posts for the Muslims and 80 percent for the time being to make up the deficiency. As regards issues relating to the religious sensitivities of the two communities the Pact did not allow music before mosque and interference with cow-killing for religious sacrifices. No legislation on religious matters affecting a community could be passed without the consent of 75 percent of the members of that community. (Dey, 1987. 229)¹³

C R Das and his associates placed the draft pact for its acceptance by the INC in its special session in Coconada on December 28, 1923 in which session Gandhi couldn't remain present as he was in jail during this time. In spite of Das's very emphatic emotional speech for recognising the *due and proper* rights of both the Hindus and the Muslims, the amendment for deletion of the Bengal Pact from the Congress resolution was carried by a majority, the vote being 678 for deletion and 458 against it. The House again divided on the resolution as amended, that is for consideration of the Draft of the Indian National Pact (similar proposal for the whole of the country). This division

¹⁰ Census Of India 1921 Vol.1 India Pt.1 (report): Marten,J.t. <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.55980/page/n11/mode/2up>

¹¹ Mukherjee, Manju Gopal, 2001. 'C.R. DAS and the Bengal Pact'. IHC: Proceedings, 61st (Millennium) Session, 2001, Indian History Congress. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44148149> P 739

¹² Dey, Amalendu, 1987. Bangali Buddhijibi O Bichhinnatabad (in Bengali). Kolkata, WB State Book Board. P 229. Bose, Sugata, 2018. Deshnayak- Subhashchandra Bose O Bharater Mukti Sangram (in Bengali). Kolkata: Ananda. P 55

¹³ Dey, Amalendu, 1987. Bangali Buddhijibi O Bichhinnatabad (in Bengali). Kolkata, WB State Book Board. P 229.



resulted in the amended resolution being carried by an overwhelming majority. The voting being 775 for and 205 against. (Mitra, 1924: 127)¹⁴

However, without being dejected Das worked ceaselessly to work out his principles as enshrined in the Bengal Pact. The implementation of some of the provisions of the Bengal Pact through the enactments of the Bengal Legislative Council increased the prestige of the Swarajya Party among the ordinary public to a great extent. However, criticism against the Pact was severe. On the one hand, the 'Hindu Press' and a section of the Congress Central Leadership were opposing the pact; on the other hand, some of the influential Muslim leaders were very much active against the Bengal Pact. In any case, by defeating both these forces, Das succeeded in getting the Bengal Pact passed in the Sirajganj Conference of BPCC held in May 1924¹. With the help of his supporters from both the communities, Das was able to make the system of dyarchy unworkable. The agenda of the Swarajya Party, thus, could be implemented to some extent in Bengal. (Tripathi, 1991: 125)¹⁵

However, as noted already, there were not a single leader in the Bengal Congress who could carry forward the dream of Das in maintaining communal amity and fraternal feelings among the two major communities of Bengal (Subhashchandra was then in Jail in Mandalay, Burma when his mentor Deshbandhu expired). After Das's untimely and unexpected sudden demise, the Krishnagar Session of BPCC 1926¹⁶ was held under the presidentship of Birendranath Sasmal. This conference rejected the Bengal Pact and most of the Muslim leaders became suspicious with the Congress party and in the election of the Calcutta Corporation of 1927 Muslims fought separately signaling the end of the Bengal Pact.

In this context, Aparna Debi, daughter of Chittaranjan Das lamented: *If the country would have advanced along with the path indicated by my father at Faridpur Conference (held in April 30-May 04, 1925) we would have obtained complete independence long ago and India would not have been partitioned in getting her independence.* (Aparna Debi, 1954: 324-325)¹⁷

¹⁴ Mitra, H N, 1924. The Indian Annual Register 1923, Vol. II. Calcutta. The Annual register Office. https://ia902905.us.archive.org/7/items/in.ernet.dli.2015.101692/2015.101692.The-Indian-Annual-Register-1923_text.pdf P 127

¹⁵ Tripathi, Amalesh, 1398 BS (1991). Swadhinata Sangrame Bharater Jatiya Congress (in Bengali). Kolkata, Ananda. P 125

¹⁶ The 1926 Krishnagar Session of the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee (BPCC) was a pivotal event presided over by Birendra Nath Sasmal. This session marked a significant shift in Bengal politics and the beginning of the end of bonhomie between Muslim leaders and the Congress party.

¹⁷ Aparna Debi, 1361 BS (1954). Manush Chittaranjan. Calcutta. Indian Associated Publishing Company. <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.267013/page/n5/mode/2up> Pp 324-325



4. C R Das and the Calcutta Municipal Corporation:

According to the amended Calcutta Municipal Act (1923), a creation of *Rashtraguru* Surendranath Bandyopadhyay, the first election for the city corporation was held in March 1924. The Swarajya Party was in a high mood after their spectacular performance in the Bengal Council election. They started looking for representatives to contest the elections, as this was the votes of the largest municipality in India. In the end, they captured the majority of the seats of the CMC. Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das was elected the first Mayor of Calcutta, and a young Muslim politician, Hussain Shahid Suhrawardy, became Deputy Mayor. Sarat Chandra Bose was elected an Alderman. And twenty-seven-year-old Subhash was appointed by Chittaranjan as the Chief Executive Officer of the entire municipal administration. Abdul Rashid khan of Noakhali was made the Deputy Chief Executive Officer.

The new CMC authorities paid special attention to education and health, established many primary schools throughout the city and set up health centers in every locality. The CEC, Subhash, also planned a weekly newspaper called the *Calcutta Municipal Gazette*, the first issue of which was published towards the end of that year. His active enthusiasm was evident in the construction of infrastructure - water, electricity, roads - and in all these civil administrations, he tried to prove that Indians were very capable of running their own government. But even more important than this nationalist victory was the Hindu-Muslim unity behind the victory. Despite the fact that more than 50 percent of Bengal's population is Muslim, they lag far behind Hindus in terms of power and opportunities in education, professional life, government jobs, etc. It was Chittaranjan Das's vow to remove this inequality. He brought a pact or agreement with the aim of distributing among the Hindus and the Muslims the power and representation that the nationalists had managed to wrest from the British. Subhash started implementing the proposal of his leader. He had given jobs to a disproportionate number of Muslims in the Calcutta Corporation, which had angered the conservative Bengali Hindu community.

In response to criticism, he said that in the past Hindus had established 'almost absolute rights' in these jobs, now there was nothing to be done even if the Hindus were angry, he would support the 'just rights' of Muslims, Christians and people belonging to the backward classes in any way he could. Both Chittaranjan Das and Gandhiji quickly supported him. Gandhi wrote in the pages of *Young India*: *I see that quite a lot of aggressive criticism is being levelled at the Chief Executive Officer of the Calcutta Corporation, because he has given twenty-five out of thirty-three posts to Muslims. I have read the statement of the Chief Executive Officer. It must be said that it has been a*



commendable job. If Hindus want to make India independent, they will have to make a lot of sacrifices for the Muslims and other fraternal societies. (Quoted in Bose, 2018: 56)¹⁸

The British Government became very much disturbed at the success of the Deshbandhu led Corporation. They tried to wreck the system of administration. On October 25, 1924 they arrested Subhash along with others leaders under the most notorious Bengal Criminal Ordinance against which the fight of Das has already been discussed. The Swarajya Party refused to join the government even after elected to Councils as part of their political strategy. But, the victory in the CMC gave Deshbandhu the opportunity to prove to the countrymen how a pro-people, pro-communal amity administration could be run by the Indians if they were given the actual authority. Herein lies the novelty and uniqueness of Deshbandhu's leadership.

5. The Last Days of Deshbandhu:

December 31, 1924. Chittaranjan returned to Kolkata from Belgaum Congress with a tired body. His illness began to worsen. But he called his family and said, 'I have to go to the council on January 7th. Tell the doctors to relieve my pain'. Although suffering from pain, he was becoming more and more restless thinking about not being able to go to the council. Because, that day, the proposal for the Bengal Ordinance Bill was to be presented in the Legislative Council meeting. Morphia injections relieved the pain to some extent, but his body gradually became weak due to fever, and the doctors told him to take complete rest. On January 7th, he became so weak that he could hardly speak. He called everyone and said, 'Today I have to go, my duty comes before my body. Even if I die, I will not listen to anyone's objection'. He said, 'Today, the golden sons of my country are being exiled without trial, and will I give the bureaucracy a chance to accept that proposal through the country's representative because of my insignificant physical pain? I won't let that happen'. After the Council meeting, he could not get respite. He had to leave for Faridpur on April 30, 1925 to attend the BPCC Conference.

Chittaranjan became even more ill due to excessive work in Faridpur. No matter how much his illness worsened, there was no end in sight. He was always engrossed in discussions on various issues. Due to excessive physical and mental exertion, his diabetes worsened. As a result, his body broke down. Although the doctors advised him to rest, he could not take rest. Finally, when his body could not function at all, he decided to go to Darjeeling for rest. He reached Darjeeling on May 16. He stayed in a bungalow called *Step-Aside* just beneath the Darjeeling Mall. But even there, his political activities did not decrease. Mrs. Annie Besant, Mahatma Gandhi and other

¹⁸ Bose, Sugata, 2018. Deshnayak- Subhashchandra Bose O Bharater Mukti Sangram (in Bengali). Kolkata: Ananda. P 56



dignitaries came to meet and discuss with him in Darjeeling. Gandhi left Darjeeling on 9th June. In the meantime, Deshbandhu's body had already broken down. On June 14, he developed a high fever. Despite this, he walked to Darjeeling to meet all his friends. *He died at his home in Darjeeling at 5 pm on June 16*. Mahatma Gandhi was in Khulna in East Bengal at that time.

On hearing this news, he rushed to Kolkata. His mortal remains were brought to Siliguri Town Station from Darjeeling by a special carriage. Then, Deshbandhu was taken to Sealdah by Darjeeling Mail. His body was decorated with flowers in a carriage van. The mail was moving slowly at every station so that the countrymen could pay last respects to their beloved leader and friend. On June 18, Mahatma Gandhi along with Satish Ranjan Das, Aparna, Sudhir Ranjan Roy went to Barrackpore to receive the earthly remains of Chittaranjan. As soon as the mail reached the station, the sky was filled with the sound of *Vande Mataram*. When the train reached Sealdah, a huge gathering of people from all the communities- Bengalis, non-Bengalis, rich and poor were seen on the road. Almost four lakh people participated in this last journey of Deshbandhu. The Mahatma asked the crowd to remain calm. The vast sea of people remained silent in shock. Lakhs of silent people bid him farewell with inexpressible cries. Such a bad day has probably come very rarely in the life of Bengalis. (Aparna Debi, 1954: 326-337)¹⁹

Not only the entire Indian people were saddened by Deshbandhu's death; even the leaders of the international communist movement, with whom he had no direct contact, joined the bereaved Indian people in expressing their deep condolences and respect for him. In a message sent to the Central Committee of the Swarajya Dal in August 1925, the Peasant International (*Krestintern*)²⁰ paid its obituary to the memories of the late leader:

*'Central Committee of the Swarajya Party, Kolkata, India,
Dear friends and brothers,*

The Presidium of the Krestintern has learned that the founder and president of your party and the leading hero of India's freedom movement, C. R. Das, is no more. On this day of deep loss and mourning for you and for the freedom movement of India, we also express our condolences to you and through you to the countless people of India - for whom you are the spokespersons... We declare that the ideal- the economic, political and cultural liberation of the crores of people of India- for which your great leader sacrificed his life is ours too and it is our firm belief that you will remain steadfast in that struggle even at this moment of mourning... In the memory of your great leader, we take an oath in the name of the organized farmers of the world that we will give you

¹⁹ Aparna Debi, 1361 BS (1954). *Manush Chittaranjan*. Calcutta. Indian Associated Publishing Company. <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.267013/page/n5/mode/2up> Pp 326-337

²⁰ Pls see Note 3



every possible help in achieving your ultimate goal....' (Quoted in Chattopadhyay, 1970: 14-15: Translation ours)²¹

Deshbandhu's death, thus, has been mourned by the exploited and oppressed people, not only of the country, but also of the subjugated countries all around the world. The untimely death of C R Das berefts the people from the leadership of a great fighter against colonialism.

Rabindranath epitomised the death of Deshbandhu:

*You brought with you an immortal life,
and in death, you bequeathed it.*

(ଏନେହିଲେ ସାଥେ କରେ
ମୃତ୍ୟୁହୀନ ପ୍ରାଣ/
ମରଣେ ତାହାଇ ତୁମି
କରେ ଗେଲ ଦାନା।)

5. Concluding Notes:

Not only the passing of the Bengal Pact resolution; the Sirajganj conference of the Bengal Provincial Congress had another important significance. In the words of Amlesh Tripathi, 'Das dropped another bombshell at the provincial conference in Sirajganj (for the no-changers of the Congress – author) by getting the resolution on the heroism and patriotism of the revolutionary Gopinath Saha passed'. (Tripathi, 1991: 127)²² Gandhi saw in this a hidden attack on the principle of non-violence. At the Ahmedabad AICC (June 1924), Gandhi moved a resolution condemning Gopinath Saha for (accidentally) killing Mr. Day. That is, the Sirajganj counter-resolution. Das strongly objected and moved the Sirajganj counter-resolution. Regarding Gandhi's resolution, he said, 'Gopinath is above everything. Wouldn't a little sympathy be called for him, even if it is not praiseworthy, according to the religion of humanity'? But Das's amendment was defeated by a margin of 70 in favour and 78 against, i.e. by only eight votes. Gandhi shed tears openly. He considered victory by such a narrow margin to be a moral defeat. According to the Intelligence Bureau, 'from a seeming victory Gandhi has been forced into a retreat'. As a result, Das and Motilal Nehru gained dominance over public opinion. Gandhi was a pragmatist. Recognizing the changed situation, he suspended all boycott policies except foreign cloth. Gandhi now gave **emphasis** upon the habit of thread cutting, maintenance of communal harmony and eradication of

²¹ Chattopadhyay, Gautam, 1970. 'Deshbandhu's Swaraj Sadhana and Communist Movement' in Calcutta Municipal Corporation. C. R. Das Birth Centenary-The Calcutta Municipal Gazette- Supplement Issue. Calcutta. Pp 14-15

²² Tripathi, Amalesh, 1398 BS (1991). Swadhinata Sangrame Bharater Jatiya Congress (in Bengali). Kolkata, Ananda. P 127



the practices of untouchability. He also, though reluctantly, accepted the policy of working in the Central and Provincial Councils as espoused by the Swarajya Party.

The Government of India Act, 1919: The Government of India Act, 1919 introduced several new elements in the constitutional history of the country: (1) demarcation of central and provincial subjects of administration, thus inaugurating a trend towards federation; (2) a bicameral legislature at the Centre; (3) direct election of representatives, though on a very restricted franchise; (4) more powers to the provincial legislatures under a system of *dyarchy*. The Act made provisions for the provincial governments to be independent, to a large measure, of the Central government and to be responsible, in some measure, to popular representatives. At the Centre, the erstwhile Legislative Council was replaced by a bicameral legislature consisting of a Council of State (Upper House) and a Legislative Assembly (Lower House). Though some nominated members were retained following the 1909 Act, each House was to have an elected majority. The Upper House was to have 26 nominated and 34 elected members, while the Legislative Assembly was to have 41 nominated members in a House of 144. The elected members of both Houses were to be chosen by direct election, but on a very much restricted franchise. The electoral qualifications were based on communal affiliation and residence and property credentials. The normal term of the Council was five years and that of the Assembly three. The Governor-General could dissolve either House before the expiry of its full term. Thus, the Central Legislature was made more representative than the previous Legislative Councils and was endowed, for the first time, with power to vote on government proposals.

However, the most novel feature of the Act of 1919 was the introduction of the system of dyarchy in eight major provinces. The Provincial Legislative Councils were enlarged and the majority of their members were to be elected. The provincial governments were given more powers through demarcation of subjects between Central and Provincial Governments under a system of Dyarchy, which literally means double government.

Under this system some of the Provincial subjects, such as finance and law and order, were called reserved subjects and remained under the direct control of the Governor; others such as education, public health and local self-governments were called transferred subjects and were to be controlled by ministers responsible to the legislatures. This also meant that while some of the spending departments were transferred, the Governor retained complete control over the finances. Dyarchy thus entailed double administration: the administration of the reserved subjects by the members of the Governor's Executive Council who were selected by the Governor and responsible to him who, in turn, was responsible to the Governor-General and through him to the British Crown on the one hand, and the administration of the transferred subjects by ministers



chosen from and accountable to the Legislative Council for their proper administration. The Governor was empowered to appoint ministers and to be guided by their advice, though such advice was not binding. The ministers held office during the Governor's pleasure and at the same time were to enjoy the confidence of the Legislative Council.

The elections for the Central & Provincial Councils were held first in 1920 and subsequent elections were held in 1923, 1926, 1930, 1934 etc. The Congress boycotted the election of 1920 but as an offshoot of the INC, Swarajya Party, contested the election first in 1923.

The Peasant International known most commonly by its Russian abbreviation Krestintern, was an international peasants' organization formed by the Communist International (Comintern) in a meeting held in Moscow from 10–16 October 1923. The gathering was attended by 158 delegates, hailing from 40 countries, with a majority of participants representing countries in Eastern Europe and Asia. The organization attempted to build up a united front among the radical peasant parties of those countries. The Red Peasant International was formally dissolved in 1939.

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