

Satyendranath Majumdar Memorial Lecture 2014

**100 YEARS OF
THE FIRST WORLD WAR**

Sitaram Yechury



All India Peace & Solidarity Organisation
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PREFACE

The 'Satyendranath Majumdar Memorial Lecture' was instituted by the All India Peace and Solidarity Organisation (AIPSO) West Bengal State Committee in 2014 with an objective to initiate public debate on issues related to peace and solidarity movement in the present context.

The lecture is named after a legendary journalist, editor and author Satyendranath Majumdar (1991-1954), who truly symbolizes the glorious tradition of our anti-imperialist peace movement.

We thank Mr. Sitaram Yechury, honourable member of the Rajya Sabha and member of the Presidium, AIPSO All India Committee for his kind consent to deliver the First Satyendranath Majumdar Memorial Lecture on the subject proposed---'100 Years of the First World War'.

The programme was held on Monday, 29 December 2014 at the State Youth Centre, Moulali, Kolkata. Prof. Ashok Nath Basu, former Vice Chancellor of Jadavpur University and Chairman, AIPSO State Committee Presidium, presided over the function. The programme started with an inaugural song by Mr. Santwan Chattopadhyay. Mr. Utpal Dutta, AIPSO Secretariat member moderated the programme. Prof. Anjan Bera, General Secretary (Coordinator) AIPSO State Committee delivered the welcome address.

Mr. Rabin Deb, on behalf of the AIPSO State Committee, presented a memento to Mr. Yechury.

Mr. Jayanta Kumar Mukherjee, AIPSO State Secretariat member, delivered the vote of thanks.

The auditorium was packed full-- people from all walks of life joined the programme enthusiastically.

We would like to thank Ms. Sanjukta Choudhury for her help in transcribing the speech.

100 Years of the First World War

I am very honoured to deliver this first Satyendra Nath Mazumdar Memorial Lecture. The topic of today's lecture is Hundred Years of the World War I. Satyendranath Nath Mazumdar was a pioneer of the peace movement and the topic that has been chosen today for the lecture is also a period he lived through. He was actively living his life during the time of the World War I. He was one of the founders of the Peace Movement in Bengal. He also served, I think, as the President or Secretary of the Friends of the Soviet Union, for a long time. But most of all he was a freedom fighter and a journalist and worked along with Chittaranjan Das, started his journalistic career in the Ananda bazar Patrika. He left Anandabazar Patrika and today you know why he left Anandabazar Patrika when you see the news they print or create about us and then of course he was a prolific writer. He was not eclectic in the sense that he wrote a biography on Swami Vivekananda and then wrote a biography of Joseph Stalin. He translated Jawaharlal Nehru's Discovery of India in Bengali. This combination, in its sense, will make people of this generation think that he was very eclectic but he was very knowledgeable and he knew who the personalities are who have shaped the psychology, the psyche and the consciousness of the people. In that sense I would call him a person who in a holistic way represented what we call the idea of India. The diversity in our country - cultural, literary, religious, linguistic - he encompassed it all. He brought lot of people into journalism and into radical thinking. Among them, Comrade Nripen Chakraborty was one who he drafted as a journalist. Nripen Chakraborty later became a member of the Polit Bureau of the CPI (M) and served as the Chief Minister of Tripura. He was

described in the obituary columns as a "Communist rishi". But the central fact is that he lived through and experienced the World War I which, of course, we cannot today recreate. A century later what does that mean. I would like to concentrate on a few aspects which I think continue to be very relevant and which are connected with that war.

The first point which must be recognised is, the World War I was described, universally, as a war to end all future wars. Contrary to all the claims, we not only had the World War II, narrow dimensional wars are still continuing where the loss of life is much larger than the cumulative loss of World War I. In the World War I nine million combat people of all services of the armed forces died and seven million civilian. That was the human toll. Prof. Basu has raised a pertinent question - how much was the cost of the World War I. Now that is something no one really attempted. Maybe it would be a great idea to ask Joseph Stiglitz to do that and compare it with the price tag of the present day wars. The first point we need to understand is that the ending of the World War I was actually a beginning of a period of perpetual conflict. Of all the people who anticipated the arrival of the World War I was Lenin when he wrote his famous treatise "Imperialism the highest stage of Capitalism", where he said the global developments in capitalism has reached a stage where inter-imperialist rivalries have no other way of being resolved except through wars. Imperialism being the fallout of capitalism, taking capitalism as a global system, it has to be a global war. And if we look back now that is what defines World War I. At the time of rise of industrial capital, the countries which moved towards industrial capital required a huge amount of resources, which they could not accumulate either through trade or through straight forward plunder or through colonial plunder like in the case of Britain in India. They needed accumulation of and control over resources at a faster pace. They required, what is now familiar but at that time a very novel concept in the world, a drawing up of the world map into spheres of influence - areas under either German, French or English

influence - that contending rivalries between various powers who had already embarked and were trying to consolidate the industrial revolution. These are the powers that came into conflict with each other. That drawing up was necessary because two major empires were confronted in Europe. On one hand there was the Ottoman Empire, which actually extended far east into areas near the border of China, and on the other hand there was the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which virtually encompassed the whole of then developed and enlightened Europe. All our music Mozart, Beethoven, Germans are now claiming him much more, fine arts and everything else in Europe was in the Austro-Hungarian empire. These feudal monarchies were inhibiting the accumulation of capital required for the consolidation of industrial capital. So how to break up these empires and once having broken those up how do you exercise your spheres of influence so that you can appropriate their resources for your industrial capital consolidation. That is what led to the World War I and to the Treaty of Versailles with which the war ended whereby this map of re-partitioning of the world was drawn. The Ottoman Empire was defeated and then it virtually disintegrated. The Austro-Hungarian Empire was likewise disintegrated. The Austro-Hungarian Empire at that time was ruling over fifty million people. But the point Lenin was making before the World War I - because of uneven development it will necessarily lead to a newer re-partition of the world. And that newer re-partition came with the World War II. With World War II and re-colonisation that followed many of the areas of primitive accumulation of capital that were available to the advanced capitalist countries ceased. That was one situation. The USA was not a party to the post World War I re-partitioning of the world, due to which the Ottoman Empire and the Austro-Hungarian Empire collapsed and the Balfour Declaration sowed the seeds of the crisis in the Middle-east continuing even today. USA again was not a major partner in the re-drawing of the world after the World War II. So how will another re-partitioning of the world now happen since USA has become the supreme economic power

in the world that replaced England before World War I and Germany before World War II? How will United States America acquire its global domination through the partitioning of the world? Once again going to another world war was no longer possible. Why? Because of the invention and existence of nuclear weapons. Once the nuclear counter balancing force arrived from Soviet Union then there was no longer a possibility of a world war because in that world war there will be no winner left. There will be complete devastation of the planet. So the re-partitioning of the world is now taking place without the world war. One of the instruments that was used subsequently was the cold war. Hiroshima Nagasaki was no longer necessary for the Second World War but they were necessary for beginning the cold war. For beginning the cold war and through the cold war the re-partitioning of the world was exactly what we have seen in the 20th century till the collapse of the Soviet Union. But this is digression into history.

What impact has the World War I left? The re-drawing of the map of northern Africa and the Middle-East is actually an effort by the United States of America now to re-draw these maps and carve out its own areas of influence. So the war in Iraq, the attempt to create their own sphere of influence in Syria and the overthrowing of Gaddafi. When Gaddafi was killed, I don't know if you remember, immediately after that Sarkozy came out on a national broadcast in France to say the French killed Gaddafi and liberated Libya. While the CNN and the BBC were reporting that the USA had targeted and its drone has killed Gaddafi. The French were reminding USA that North Africa is my zone of influence do not interfere there.

Wherever the British have left their colonial rule they have divided that country and left behind problems which continue to plague even today. The Balfour Declaration leading to the Israel-Palestinian unsolved problem, India's independence, the partition of the country - constant thing of tension, Cyprus remains divided even today into two - The Republic of Cyprus and The Turkish

Republic of Northern Cyprus. The re-partitioning of the world that is happening today is the impact of World War I, which was fought a century ago. The reason the World War I began still continues to operate but not through the manifestation of a world war because of the existence of nuclear weapons but through the manifestations of local wars. During cold war period the slogan was global fight against communism - interventions in Vietnam, interventions in Korea, then virtual economic re-colonisation of south-east Asia and south Asia. So the concept of neo-colonialism emerges at that point of time which was the US effort to re-carve the world / re-carve the spheres of influence. Therefore, the conflicts that are taking place today in the Middle-East essentially are again related to the same reasons that led to the World War I that is today the United States of America requires the control of economic resources globally in order to exercise its hegemony. This control of economic resources means either the direct ownership of economic resources or the control of these resources, mainly the oil resources. So we have these conflicts in west Asia and the lynchpin there is Israel and Palestinian conflict and the US support to Israel. Afghanistan becomes the crux of this problem. As you must be aware, a huge mass of natural gas has now been discovered in central Asia or the former Soviet Republic. World's largest reservoir of natural gas is believed to be there. Oil and natural gas can only be transported through a pipeline. The Suez Canal is too narrow. If profits have to be made the gas has to be transported through a pipeline to reach a shore of the sea. From Central Asia the closest point to reach is the Arabian Sea through Afghanistan. Control of Afghanistan is now very crucial for the United States for the consolidation of its global hegemony. These are exactly the reasons why we had the World War I. Today the methods are different but the objectives remain the same. Therefore Afghanistan becomes the crux of their point and that is something they are unable to control. I used to tell the American diplomats, in a lighter vein, whenever I had chance meetings with them, why are you obsessed with Afghanistan, have you not learnt from

history. I remember also that United States of America obliterated all history before Columbus discovered America. Before that there was no history in that continent, they have no sense of history anyway. Anything older than five hundred years they do not understand. To them I said even Chengiz Khan, who plundered the world, finally bypassed Afghanistan because they are a race who cannot be controlled. Timur or Tamerlane bypassed Afghanistan and established his empire in Central Asia. This is where the Mughal emperor Babur's lineage comes from. Akbar thought his forefathers came from Afghanistan and therefore he too should go there and establish his authority. Akbar built Fatehpur Sikri but he wanted to rule over Afghanistan so he moved to Lahore, built the Lahore Red Fort and stayed there for twelve years. In the meantime all the nobility and the rich men who had moved to Fatehpur Sikri abandoned the city. Even after spending twelve years in Lahore Akbar could not govern Afghanistan. He came back defeated. The British came to India and tried to control Afghanistan. Three Indo-Afghan wars were fought. They, too, finally abandoned the idea. After that the Soviet Union helped them, radicalised them. At least women were going to colleges, wearing jeans and T-shirts, unknown in that part of the world. But even they could not establish any control over them. The Taliban was created by the Americans, Osama bin Laden and his generation were fed by the Americans to overthrow the Soviets and then when the Soviets were overthrown the Americans could not tame Afghanistan. So till date in history, from Chengiz Khan downward to now nobody could establish control over Afghanistan. I don't think anybody can. The tribal setup should be allowed to remain the way they are. As long as they wish to remain this way you cannot do a thing. They have their own method of democracy. They have their own loya jirga, which is a traditional assembly of leaders that make decisions by consensus and according to the teachings of Islam. The Americans destroyed all that and tried to establish their control over the land because the natural gas pipeline has to pass through this country. They want the security of the

pipeline. The reason why all this is happening today is again the same motivation that led to the World War I. The problems are kept simmering in the world in order to discount the value of the oil-rich West Asian countries. USA started its alternative in shale oil production and then it manipulated its oil prices to fall by nearly fifty percent of what they were and that is one thing this Modi government has been very lucky about. It was \$ 150 a barrel when they came to power and it is now \$ 68 or close to \$ 70 a barrel. But you and I have not benefited from it although we are supposed to due to fall in petroleum prices. The Finance Minister told the Parliament that the government was not getting enough revenue so they have increased the excise duty to collect the extra money. The Government of India today is collecting Rs. 70,000 crores due to the fall in the oil prices in the international market. That is a different story. USA wants to reduce world's dependence on Middle East oil so while on one hand they will have regimes controlling the resources there and on the other its shale oil production will dominate the world. Once the domination happens then the prices will again go up to their normal level. And then the US will want to consolidate its hegemony over the world. So the replication of the same motivation of what led to the World War I is what is happening in a different manner in different localized wars. I am afraid this situation will continue as long as USA is not confident that its hegemony over the world is absolute and complete. And that can never be. Latin America has already moved out of its orbit. Many European countries, as I said earlier, are protesting slogans are being raised. Resistance towards America is growing in many places. That is why we have entered into a stage where, I would categorise, after World War I that it was not a war to end all wars but that was the war that set in motion many wars which continue to plague all of us. Marx said history repeats itself, first as tragedy, second as farce. When history repeats itself it is not the exact replication but the consequences will be worse and that is what is happening in the world today. We, too, are unfortunately drawn into the battle. There are today various

commemorations being made by various Indians. Many well-meaning films about how the bulk of the soldiers in World War I were drafted from India and how so many Indian soldiers, then part of the British force, actually played an important role in the war. All that is fine. But politically and significantly what does it mean to peace in the world today? We have to understand what the lasting impact that the war left behind was. As I said it was a war that heralded the era of perpetual wars. According to Prof. Stiglitz the full cost of the Iraq war is \$ 3 trillion. Cumulatively if one looks at the World War II, the cold war, all the localized wars, the cost is exponentially multiple of the \$ 3 trillion. Unfortunately in India we are also party to this. We are the largest buyers of Israeli arms and weapons today in the world. We are thus financing Israel's inhuman crimes against the Palestinians. The Communists have been yelling at the Government of India to at least suspend the arms purchase to express solidarity with the Palestinians. Indian government issued contradictory statements. On one hand they verbally clarified that India has not given up on its solidarity with the Palestinians. But then what is the meaning of this solidarity if you are going to finance Israel against Palestinians. The Palestinian problem is a hangover from World War I. The conflicts in the Middle East, in West Asia, in Northern Africa are all the hangovers of World War I. And all these problems instead of being resolved are being accentuated by the US to consolidate its global hegemony.

Today six times more money is being spent on armament than was spent at the time of cold war. If that money was spent on the poor of the world and this is the illogic of capitalism, on building social infrastructure, like education, health etc, for people's welfare the purchasing power of the poor people of the world would have increased and that increased purchasing power would have increased demand and that increase in demand would have led to expansion in production in capitalism and that would have led to greater profits of the capitalists themselves. That is the illogic of capitalism as Lenin would say. The World War I demonstrated that illogic of capitalism. Today a century later we are

demonstrating the illogic of capitalism in a much more enlarged way. To give an example back home; every year for the last five years for which statistics are available we are giving Rs 5 lakh crores as tax benefits to the rich corporate in India. Government says much of this is tax litigation. If you could add up the tax benefits there is no fiscal deficit in India. Last year the tax concession given was Rs 5 lakh 62 thousand crores. The fiscal deficit was Rs 5 lakh 29 thousand crores. So there is no fiscal deficit. The fiscal deficit is there because of the concession given to the rich. And what do these rich do? They are now saying we are unable to invest, unable to produce. Why? Because there is no domestic demand in India, people do not have money to buy their goods, automobile sale are down by twelve percent. This Dussehra and Diwali all consumer goods sale have fallen 15-20 percent because people do not have the money to buy. So the capitalists who have got the concessions have more money but they are not investing because they can't sell what they produce and therefore cannot make their profit. So what do they do with their money? They buy gold, gold prices are going up, they buy foreign exchange because they have no confidence in the Indian rupee, so the value of rupee falls. They invest in real estate and that is why when there is zero economic growth, the prices of real estate rises and their sensex soars. Economic growth is zero, industrial growth is negative but sensex and real estate prices are rising. This is the illogic of capitalism. This money could have been used for public investment, for building public toilets, schools in every habitat, to open primary health centres in every village. Give our youth health, education and jobs and a new India is created. In that new India people will have more money in their hands to buy and thus the capitalists will make more profit. The World War I was the first war of world wide dimension which was the creation of the illogic of capital. What is happening today is the same quest for global hegemony. All these are building up piecemeal with greater dangers of war-like situation in various parts of the globe. Which means that though the cold war has ended what I would define as 'hot

peace' has descended upon the world. There is a peaceful world without the possibility of another world war- but it is a "hot peaceful" world where you have points of tension in various places and these points of tension are becoming into conflagration. That I think is the important lesson one must draw from World War I. There is a lot of diplomacy involved, statecraft, finesse developed leading up to the war and subsequently. We in India have been caught in the vortex of the global wars. We must therefore be careful. The lesson for us to learn is that India's position in the world lies in being a country where it should maintain its independence in foreign policy as well as its sovereignty in its economic self-reliance. Once we give that up we become a party to one localised conflict or another. That is precisely what USA would want. What Obama says there should be an engagement with China but actually the strategy in black and white in the strategy document is containment. And in US efforts to contain China India should not decide its position based on that but on its own enlightened self-interest.

These are the lessons to be learnt from these wars. We were drawn into these wars, our people were drawn but we have to safeguard our independence in our own interest not at the behest of some super power.



Mr. Sitaram Yechury is delivering the Satyendranath Majumdar Memorial Lecture 2014.



Mr. Rabin Deb is presenting a memento to Mr. Sitaram Yechury in presence of Prof. Ashok Nath Basu.

Satyendranath Majumdar (1891-1954)



Satyendranath Majumdar was a legendary journalist, editor and author. As a newspaper editor, he was one of the giants in Bengali language journalism.

Unforgettable also Satyendranath's pioneering role in the Anti-Fascist Movement in Bengal during the 1940s. He was one of the founders of the 'Friends of the Soviet Union' (1941) and the 'Anti-Fascist Writers and Artists Association' (1942).

After the end of the Second World War, Satyendranath was among the key figures who took initiative to form an all India platform of the peace activists. Thus, in 1950, the All India Peace Council (AIPC) was founded, the fore- runner of today's AIPSO.

In 1951, Satyendranath also took active interest in founding the 'India-China Friendship Association'.

Satyendranath Majumdar truly symbolizes the glorious tradition of our anti-imperialist peace movement.

