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**Soviet Public Diplomacy in India: Indo-Soviet Societies of Friendship in the 1950-60s.**

This paper tackles Soviet public diplomacy efforts in India and focuses on Indo-Soviet Societies of Friendship using a Cold War perspective. Indeed, to what extent history of the Third World in the 1950-60s is independent from Cold War dynamics? Federico Romero's and Prasenjit Duara's articles have discussed two opposing approaches to Third World or Indian history, the former pointed out the importance of Cold War dynamics for the region; the latter suggests that India developed independently of the superpowers confrontation. I argue that the Cold War played a major role in the history of the Third World and India after decolonization.

In the mid 1950s India chose the policy of non-alignment in the Cold War that actually opened the country for influence from both Moscow and Washington. Both superpowers applied their development strategies in India from the beginning of the 1950s. As David Engerman wrote in his book *Moscow and Washington* actually designed their development programs on the Indian case. For Americans the main focus was community development that later was realized in the "green revolution." The Soviets stressed industrial development and the state sector calling it a non-capitalist path to socialism. The USSR began building large scale industrial projects in India in 1955. By the end of the 1950s, the USSR replaced the UK as the second main trading

partner for India after the US. For Moscow India had been the main trading partner among non-Socialist countries. By mid 1960s India had about 4.500 Soviet citizens working in the country as development experts, skilled workers, and educators. In order to back up Soviet development program in India Moscow heavily invested in its Public Diplomacy (PD) campaign in India: educational exchange, cultural export, books publishing, exchange of delegations.

In this context what was the main goal for Soviet public diplomacy?

I argue that Moscow wanted to create a larger popular left front in India without emphasizing the role of the Communist Party of India (CPI). Indian civic non-governmental organization Indo-Soviet Cultural Society *ISCUS* became the vehicle for this strategy. Supposedly this policy found support among Indian leaders of the time, such as Nehru himself, because this way the Communist Party of India got deluded in a larger left-wing political movement that would not compete with the ruling Congress party. *ISCUS* also was one of the most important organizations in India for circulating Soviet media such as films, books, organization of exhibitions and meetings.

### **How was Soviet Public Diplomacy organized in India?**

In the USSR of the 1950s internal political changes known as the Thaw period (relative liberalization of political life in the Soviet Union), Cold War dynamics – idea of peaceful coexistence with capitalist West, decolonization – showed the necessity for more active Soviet involvement in influencing larger foreign public opinion. The main Soviet PD agency VOKS (est. 1925) got transformed in 1958 into Society of Friendship with Foreign Countries that officially became a Soviet civic society organization.<sup>1</sup> Moscow at the same time created a new governmental organization in 1957 the State Committee for Cultural Ties with Foreign

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<sup>1</sup> Eleonory Gilburd, *Thaw...*

Countries *GKKS* that had a power of a federal ministry. *GKKS* worked on the basis of bilateral intergovernmental agreements.

The first pro-Soviet organization in India was WWII war era “Friends of the Soviet Union” that was to promote Soviet war effort in India. This organization had following in England and the US during the war. The Communist Party of India had been legalized in 1942, supposedly for the same reasons, and CPI leadership praised the British-Soviet joint war effort putting the anticolonial Quit India agenda aside.<sup>2</sup> In 1945-1952 Soviet leadership did not pay much attention to India. Apparently, it was not Stalin’s death itself but the change of the Soviet strategy in Asia after the Korean war that put India in the center of Soviet influence campaign in the decolonizing world of the time. In 1952 Indians organized first branch of *ISCUS* in Bombay. Dr Baliga a prominent Bombay doctor and educator was the head of the organization until his death in 1964. By 1960 the organization had about 150 branches all over the country and about 1200 in 1972. Some of the branches were virtual with small number of membership while others had up to 700 members as in Calcutta in 1960. Unfortunately, I do not have numbers of the 1980s but supposedly the number was even higher making it that every Indian city had a branch of *ISCUS* by the Soviet-Afghan war period.

How did these institutions work? *SSOD* had a central office in Moscow and a representative in the Soviet embassy in Delhi. From 1952 to 1964 *ISCUS* main body the National Council *NC* of *ISCUS* was in Bombay that is why a Soviet consulate in Bombay had a *SSOD* representative to have direct contact between the National Council and *SSOD*. The National Council organized general assembly of *ISCUS* once in a few years where every *ISCUS* branch was to send their representative. *ISCUS* was never able to have representatives of all *ISCUS* branches or even the actual number of them. Many *ISUCS* organizations did not register at Bombay and worked on their own to big discontent of Soviet diplomats that always

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<sup>2</sup> Vijay Sing, 99

requested statistics numbers. In theory ISCUS was to be organized by Indian enthusiasts themselves but in practice Soviet diplomats paid large share of their work in helping Indians opening new ISCUS branches all over the country. Moreover, Indian members of National Council of ISCUS expressed their concerns over interference of SSOD representative in India in ISCUS affairs.

Several documents from SSOD show how Soviet diplomats sometimes shifted the balance of power in ISCUS to the Soviet side. Officially ISCUS was an Indian civic organization that was supposed to be financially self-sufficient. Very often ISCUS did not even have an office and was a virtual organization for a small town where ISCUS members would meet in one of the houses of their members and did not require much of funding for its activities.

One of the SSOD documents from 1960 shows a conflict between the chief SSOD representative in India Serebryakov ID that worked in Delhi and SSOD representative in Bombay Dobroselskaya MV that worked closely with the ISUCS National Council. Dobroselskaya's main activity was to "help the National Council in working with ISCUS branches, planning, work with personnel, systematic reports on the National Council's activities." Serebryakov accused Dobroselskaya in failing registration of new ISCUS branches. The conflict revealed how the Soviets helped to organize ISCUS. Dobroselskaya claimed that the head of SSOD Serebryakov took too much of responsibility in regard to ISCUS branches and became more important, central figure than the ISCUS National Council itself: "You made yourself this good uncle for them to whom they can always address their requests as if the National Council is useless..." Apparently SSOD's head in Delhi corresponded with ISCUS branches independently. On one of the occasions Serebryakov warned branches about organization of conferences in each branch that were to take place in a few months ahead of

official National Council's announcement creating the impression that the Soviet Embassy in Delhi had been more informed and organized the whole ISCUS activity. However, NC had to have a session first and then send the announcements to branches. Serebryakov complaint that NC did not do anything (они там сами ничего не делают) with the organization of conferences and that he had to take over. According to Dobrovoskaya Serebryakov never came to Bombay for long (two to three weeks periods) to work with NC and only stayed for 2-3 days. When organizing a month-long event for ISCUS Serebryakov refused to come to Bombay to work on it in close collaboration with NC because:" [Serebryakov said he] could freak out and tell unpleasant things to NC members (неровен час и [вы] можете соваться и наговорить неприятные вещи членам совета)... because they are 'bureaucrats that do nothing'... they somehow irritate you but you also know we do not have better collaborators and we have to work with what we have... new ones could be even worse." Same was for celebration of Lenin's birthday when SSOD send suggestion to ISCUS branches to organize meetings and celebrations. NC had send such suggestion well thus doubling the correspondence and making an impression that SSOD in Delhi was more important than NC in Bombay.

**ISCUS activities: meetings, exhibits, circulation of Soviet media productions.**

Apart from being the main organization for circulation of Soviet media production ISCUS was always a stopover for official top Soviet delegations. When Soviet leaders were coming to India, they purposely skipped meetings with leaders of the CPI and promoted ISCUS by visiting official ISCUS reception meetings. This was the case when Voroshilov (president of the Soviet Supreme Council), Kozlov (deputy PM), Furtseva (minister of Culture) came to India in 1960. ISCUS made a reception at an expensive hotel *Imperial* in Delhi for hundreds of people. In this context it is likely that SSOD actually paid for the reception making the

impression that ISCUS had been a financially well to do organization that could afford such big reception parties.

ISCUS arguably had most well-attended courses of the Russian language. ISCUS had about couple of thousand Indians studying Russian on irregular basis. In the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s ISCUS might have had the largest audience for Soviet films because of the specificity of Soviet film export to India. The main Soviet organization for film export was Sovexportfilm *SEF* that struggled to enter Indian foreign films market, competing with Hollywood. SEF tried to work with main Indian film distributors to show Soviet films in Indian cinemas but once a film was sold SEF did not have control over film screenings. Organization of Soviet film festivals and Soviet film weeks was the only possibility for SEF to show new Soviet features in India and be sure about the numbers of viewers. In the 1960-62 SEF showed films to about 200 000 Indian viewers per year. Whereas non-commercial public screenings of films, partially organized by ISCUS, showed Soviet films to about 2 million Indian viewers per year. The advantage ISCUS had was that it could show 16 mm films instead of 35 mm films used in ordinary cinemas. It was way easier for SSOD to provide equipment for 16 mm films to ISCUS branches that SSOD did on a regular basis. When new Soviet features came to India they had to go through censorship while 16 mm films had an easier pass through (except films for the Russian Revolution and communist figures such as Lenin). Indians naturally wanted to see new features and ISCUS could not provide this because SEF had the monopoly to show them, as well as Indian film market did not allow SEF to share new features with other organizations if the features had been already sold to Indian distributors. However, there were instances when SEF provided such films to ISCUS branches much to irritation of Indian distributing companies. Thus, ISCUS organized public screenings of Soviet films, without commercial profit, and with larger audiences than SEF.

Soviet press and books distribution had been one of the main activities for ISCUS. In mid 1950s after Sputnik many Indians sought Soviet literature on science. However, to great amusement of Soviet diplomats in India most of the books Indians could find in their libraries were American books provided by United States Information Service *USIS*. In one instance, a Soviet report said that the only two books Trivandrim public library had on the USSR were books on Soviet forced labor and concentration camps and on Soviet secret police. The Soviets took the challenge seriously and made a special program for India. According to some estimate (by Jessica Bachman) India had 40% share of Soviet books export during the Cold War. Actually, *USIS* books publishing and distribution program for India seems also to be the largest among other countries.

The Soviets funded Indian publishing company People's Publishing House *PPH* providing long term credits. *PPH* published Soviet books or books of Indian left leaning intellectuals on various aspects of Indian social life, especially on Indian economic development promoting industrialization and development of state sector economy. Ideally an *ISCUS* branch would have a reading room, a small library that would have these books. Soviet News Agency *Novosti APN* had offices in major Indian cities and also stressed publishing materials in Indian press and worked with *PPH*. By the end of the 1960s *APN* organized publishing of about 28 million items of press per year: articles, books, leaflets. By that time Indian press published about 26 million copies of newspapers and journals per year.<sup>3</sup> One of the routine placements of Soviet funded articles were "letters of Indians to editorial boards" of journals and newspapers.

### **Making *ISCUS* as all Indian left organization.**

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<sup>3</sup> Docs from *RGANI*

The question of leadership in ISCUS branches had a special attention for Soviet diplomats. Many of the ISCUS branches had been organized by Indian communists. The Soviets did not favour a situation when ISCUS would have too much affiliation to the CPI. When Indian ISCUS delegations came to the USSR it turned out that some of the branches had only communist leadership. Therefore, Moscow's SSOD decided to work to attract a larger audience and promoted invitation of ISCUS members from different social backgrounds. ISCUS in Soviet mind had to include larger left-wing Indian public and especially the left from the Congress party. A difficulty of the ISCUS membership had been a ban from the Indian government for civil servants to be part of ISCUS.<sup>4</sup> Apparently this ban concerned Indo-American Cultural Society *IACS* as well. American USIS overtly funded IACS through system of grants. There were instances and much of rumors that some heads of ISCUS had been heads of Indo-American Cultural Societies as well. It was often that a lawyer, representative of local elite in a mid-size Indian city would be a head of ISCUS for his personal promotion and head IACS for same purposes.

### **ISCUS as intermediary between Delhi and Moscow.**

Apart from Soviet diplomatic missions ISCUS became a point of reference for Indians to send their queries on the Soviet Union, especially on education in the USSR. By the end of the 1960s ISCUS prepared applications for Indians students to study in the USSR.<sup>5</sup> On higher level ISCUS was an important link when Indian leaders wanted to try a possibility of an agreement. This was the case for a sensitive topic of defence. Indian PM Nehru first addressed to ISCUS head Dr Baliga if Baliga could send the message to Soviet leaders about a possibility of Indian

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<sup>4</sup> Docs from Indian National Archives and from GARF.

<sup>5</sup> Docs from UK, Kew.



minister of defense visiting Moscow. This demand was transferred by Baliga through SSOD channels to the CPSU's Central Committee.

### **1962 – The worst year for Soviet propaganda in India.**

In 1962 a border conflict between India and Communist China broke out. The Sino-Soviet split became a reality by 1960 when all Soviet specialists left China. However, in Indian public opinion the USSR and China represented a unified communist bloc. Moscow had been seen by Indians as China's main ally, that actually was no longer the case in 1962. The USSR blamed "imperialist powers" and "imperialist circles in the Indian government" for the conflict and did not criticize China publicly for the breakout of the war. Naturally, the unclear Soviet stance on the conflict irritated Indians. There had been anti-Soviet rallies in the streets of Indian cities. Soviet personnel in India felt hostility from their Indian colleagues during Fall 1962. Thus, ISCUS found itself in an ambiguous situation. Two ISCUS branches closed down in protest against Soviet position in the war.

Dr Baliga wrote a letter to all ISCUS branches stating that: "We are deeply disturbed and Soviet position revealed misunderstanding of [our] Indian position in the conflict, possibly due to disinformation... and we hope that the Soviet Union will rethink its stance... and will help ending the conflict." CPI leaders also criticized Soviet position and many of them interpreted it as favouring China.

The pro-Mao/pro-Soviet split in CPI began in the 1950s and finally the party split in 1964 into two CPI. The pro-Mao is normally called CPI (Marxist). Some of ISCUS branches also became a place of Indian internal debates where many Indians actually leaned to the Mao type of Socialist development as more suitable to Indian case than the Soviet model. As one of Indian pro-Mao communists at the time put it: "We are with our Chinese working class brothers

against Nehru's bourgeois government."<sup>6</sup> Sino-Soviet Friendship Societies became vehicles for Maoist propaganda in the USSR in the 1960s.<sup>7</sup> And the Soviets were wary this would happen to ISCUS.

### **Conclusion.**

At the end of 1962 war did not become a major shift for Indian public opinion against the USSR. The Soviet position had been solidified by Soviet support of India in wars against Pakistan in 1965 and 1971.<sup>8</sup> Indo-Soviet Cultural Society was the main Indian organization for circulation of Soviet ideology that moved from support of communist parties to support of larger left political front. The archival data from the US reveals that Indian public opinion by the end of the 1960s favoured the Soviets more than the Americans. In the 1980s Indians believed that Soviet economic aid was more substantial than the American one.<sup>9</sup>

Both the US and the USSR created social networks of influence in India for decades through their PD campaigns and economic aid. The Indian case is specific in importance of the country for superpowers ideological confrontation in the Third World as both Moscow and Washington believed that winning in India would affect the rest of the decolonized world.

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<sup>6</sup> Interview with Leonid Alayev.

<sup>7</sup> Austin Jerslid *Sino-Soviet Alliance*

<sup>8</sup> Article "The Eisenhower Administration and Public Diplomacy in India: An Ambivalent Engagement, 1953–1960" of Sarah Ellen Graham talks about how difficult it was for Americans to find support in India when Pakistan was part of US led military alliance.

<sup>9</sup> USIS docs from 1969 and 1982.

