

BOOK EXCERPT

Introduction to the forthcoming book “The Phoenix Moment: Challenges Confronting the Indian Left”

Thursday 9 July 2015, by [BIDWAI Praful](#) (Date first published: 27 June 2015).

First read: Praful Bidwai’s final book examines whether the Left can rise again in India. Excerpted from *The Phoenix Moment: Challenges Confronting the Indian Left*, Praful Bidwai. To be published by HarperCollins India in October 2015.

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Praful Bidwai

India has long been a social-political oddity: a country with widespread poverty and wretched deprivation, but where the underprivileged find no voice in most political parties; one of the world’s fastest growing economies, where less than a tenth of the population has regular jobs and where a quarter-million farmers have recently committed suicide; a democracy with largely free and fair elections, which has failed to establish the rule of law and where human-rights violations are rampant amidst caste- and religion- driven hatred and vicious discrimination against women.

A pertinent question is why left-wing politics has not flourished in India as a vital source of legitimacy for parties to the extent that might be expected in a society with a million injustices and growing inequalities, recently worsened by Hindutva and neoliberal capitalism. Historically, left politics in India has shrunk in range and variety.

It was once a rainbow comprised of breathtakingly different currents, including Parliamentary and non-Parliamentary communist parties; socialists of different hues ranging from the Congress Socialist Party to the Gandhians, to followers of the viscerally anti-Congress Ram Manohar Lohia. It also encompassed anti-caste movements with radical agendas associated with Ambedkar’s Republican Party of India or later with the Dalit Panthers; and Maoists and Marxist-Leninist parties which believe in an insurrectionary seizure of power.

There also used to be independent groups such as the Peasants’ and Workers’ Party and Lal Nishan Party in Maharashtra or the Revolutionary Communist Party of India in West Bengal and Assam which set regionally limited agendas; there were currents like the Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha of Shankar Guha Niyogi which aimed to create embryos of workers’ and peasants’ republics; and there were many smaller progressive currents which aimed to rescue revolutionary Marxist politics from its ‘distortions’, active not just within the intelligentsia, but also in unions and other formations.

The rainbow has contracted in size and lost some of its hues. Many political currents have shrunk in variety and waned, while a few new ones have taken root.

The socialists have long ceased to have a coherent organisational expression (barring the largely caste- and community-based, family-driven Samajwadi Party). But groupings like Samajwadi Samagam have grown. The once-strong PWP is now a feeble force. The CMM has split irrevocably. Liberal social democracy, always weak in India, which found expression in the Congress and other centrist parties, no longer exists as a force.

New differentiations have appeared within the Left spectrum, the most important of which is the division between the party Left and non-party political Left, the latter comprised of 'people's movement' structures and federations of civil society groups like the National Alliance of People's Movements, National Fishworkers' Forum, All India Union of Forest Working People, Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan, Indian Social Action Forum, New Trade Union Initiative, Shramik Mukti Dal, New Socialist Initiative, Radical Socialist, and Campaign for Survival and Dignity.

The party Left is now reduced primarily to two currents: the mainstream Parliamentary Communist parties and their affiliates, and non-parliamentary Maoist or Marxist-Leninist groupings. The first is a Parliamentary alliance and campaigning bloc mainly comprised of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPI(M), the Communist Party of India (CPI), the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP), and the All India Forward Bloc (FB), recently joined by the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist-Liberation) and Socialist Unity Centre of India (Communist).

The Maoist groupings - more than thirty at last count - are ideologically variegated and geographically dispersed, but the most important current is the Communist Party of India-Maoist, formed in 2004 after a merger between the People's War group and the Maoist Communist Centre of India. It is particularly active in India's well-forested and mineral-rich tribal heartland, which extractive capitalism wants to exploit rapaciously. Some eighty-odd districts there are declared by the Indian state as dangerously affected by 'left-wing extremism' where paramilitary troops and special police forces rule rather than the civilian administration. The Maoists have waxed and waned, and now seem to be in decline, with the recent arrest or effective immobilisation of some of their top leaders.

The present book has an admittedly narrow focus: it deals primarily with the parliamentary communist parties. This focus arises from three factors. First, the mainstream bloc has had the longest and richest experience of trying to grapple with India's bourgeois-liberal democratic system, which despite limitations, enjoys a fair degree of popular legitimacy, and offers opportunities for progressive change and potentially transformative politics. Parties working within the system face obvious constraints: of having to operate within the four corners of the Constitution, and to fight elections, which are increasingly becoming a Big-Money game. They also run the risk of being co-opted by the system and rendered utterly ineffective.

However, the greatest challenge for Left politics in India lies precisely in the bourgeois-democratic arena, and the possibilities it contains both within the state and in society, the latter with its own institutions, organisations, and freedoms of association and action.

The Maoists, despite their admirable commitment and dedication, have totally retreated from this challenge. And the non-party political Left does not directly engage with it—often for well-considered reasons—through state-level participation, as distinct from popular education and mobilisation, or advocacy and lobbying.

Second, the mainstream bloc is the biggest of all left currents, and has had the longest continuous organised existence, notwithstanding various splits, dissensions and mutual rivalries. It also shares many ideological and strategic premises, which are today in need of revision.

If the Left summons up the will to revisit its strategic perspectives and undertake course correction, its relative cohesion and access to resources can reduce its vulnerability and offer it some protection. The opposite can happen if the bloc remains ideologically rigid. This book attempts to create a basis for understanding which way the mainstream Left might be headed.

Third, astonishing as this might seem, there is very little recent analytical literature on the mainstream Left at the national level—as distinct from state-specific studies and articles. The present book will hopefully help fill this void by combining an analysis of the state- and national-level performance of the left parties with a critical appraisal of their ideological premises, strategic perspectives, political mobilisation approaches, and organisational doctrines and practices.

The real lessons for the future lie in how well the mainstream Left acquits itself in the face of the challenge of working within the bourgeois-democratic system and uses the freedoms available within it to expand the space for radical politics, empower the exploited and oppressed, and work for a transition to a post-capitalist society. On test is the ability of its national leadership to overcome the grave crisis they confront today as the Left faces its Phoenix Moment.

This book was planned well before the downslide of India's mainstream Communist parties became apparent in electoral terms. Indeed, it should have been written ten, if not twenty, years ago. It is a coincidence that it is being published just when the left parties find themselves in the grip of their worst-ever crisis. What is not a coincidence is the persistence of some of the long-term processes that drove my decades-long analytical interest in the Left – its ideological deficiencies, theoretical rigidity, aridity in programme formulation, and undemocratic organisational practices.

A brief personal note is in order here. I have for more than four decades considered myself a socialist who broadly accepts Marx's analysis of capitalism. I was exposed to the working class movement in my student days in Bombay and worked with trade unions and Dalit youth in the slums of Matunga Labour Camp (a part of Dharavi). I never joined a left political party because I found none of them sufficiently undogmatic or open to new ideas—in particular receptive to my staunchly anti-Stalinist views—but I have worked closely and happily with members of a variety of left parties all my life.

In the early 1970s, I was associated with the Magowa Group and the Shramik Sanghatana which was active among the Bhil tribals in northern Maharashtra, where I worked briefly. Later, I was also part of what mutated from the Revolutionary Bolshevik Circle to the Platform Tendency, based in Delhi, Bombay and Bangalore, which took theory extremely seriously and exposed its members to Marxism as an intellectual adventure—with an amazingly rich repertoire of literature, views and ideas on a stunning variety of subjects.

I was fortunate enough to be able to research the history of the Indian communist and trade union movements of the 1940s, and also to combine this with union activism with outstanding labour organizers like D. Thankappan of the Kamani Workers' Union, and later, the Centre for Workers' Management. I spent a fruitful period in Europe in the late 1970s, and observed the communist parties as well as the then vibrant Far Left in France and Italy go through a fateful transition, which was, alas, aborted after the Soviet collapse. My education in science, technology, economics and philosophy, my interests in the social sciences, and my career in analytical journalism, helped me understand issues like ecology and energy and integrate some of the insights I thus gained into my understanding of socialism.

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I can only hope that this book will persuade at least some readers to believe, like me, that the Left is indispensable to the health of Indian democracy. If it did not exist, we would have to invent it.

Praful Bidwai

P.S.

* "First read: Praful Bidwai's final book examines whether the Left can rise again in India". Scroll.in, Jun 27, 2015 · 12:30 pm:

<http://scroll.in/article/737092/first-read-praful-bidwais-final-book-examines-whether-the-left-can-rise-again-in-india>

* We welcome your comments at letters scroll.in

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