

India: Challenges for Left

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The Left parties can reverse their decline and strengthen themselves only through candid self-criticism and by returning to mass work.

THE mainstream Indian Left, which has contributed richly to the nation's social and political life for over 80 years, today finds itself in crisis and decline. The Left – the Communist Party of India (Marxist), the Communist Party of India, the Revolutionary Socialist Party, the CPI (ML-Liberation) and other smaller parties – successfully withstood the collapse of the Soviet Union and the global and domestic onslaught of neoliberalism and even grew in strength for almost two decades. This was a remarkable achievement given that many communist parties elsewhere in the world disintegrated.

However, the Indian Left has suffered numerous setbacks and reverses in recent years. These manifest themselves not only in its reduced parliamentary strength (down from 61 to 24 seats in the Lok Sabha), an electoral rout in West Bengal after 34 years, and a narrow defeat in Kerala, but, more importantly, in its declining national influence, prestige, moral-political authority, internal morale, and ability to forge a radical alternative to bourgeois politics, besides some weakening of Left unity.

Put starkly, the Left faces a number of crises and challenges: an ideological-programmatic crisis, a crisis in defining its policies vis-a-vis the state and ruling classes and in formulating political mobilisation strategies, and an organisational crisis, including factionalism and alienation of cadres.

The Left's presence in mass movements and grass-roots mobilisations on people's livelihood issues, while still substantial, has decreased. It is not taking up with enough vigour and tenacity burning issues such as gross income and wealth inequalities, which have reached obscene proportions in India, or the grave agrarian crisis, which has led to 250,000 farmers' suicides. Its influence within the progressive intelligentsia is also on the wane.

Regrettably, this is happening just when global capitalism is in deep crisis, neoliberalism has proved utterly bankrupt, and popular disenchantment with the Indian state is at its peak. It is of the utmost importance for the health of Indian democracy that the Left resolves its crises and rejuvenates itself.

After all, it is the only current in mainstream politics which has a deep commitment to India's underprivileged and an agenda of egalitarian social transformation. As this column has argued for two decades, if the Left did not exist in India, we would have to reinvent it. This must be done on a firmly Marxist foundation.

Many of these issues were discussed between top Left party leaders, eminent progressive intellectuals and civil society activists at a seminar organised by the Council for Social Development in New Delhi on August 8, which this writer coordinated. Although no overarching consensus emerged, this was the first dialogue of its kind, which all the 120 participants welcomed, not least because it highlighted the challenges facing the Left in a constructive, non-sectarian manner.

I also visited Kerala in mid-August to deliver the C. Achutha Menon Birth Centenary Lecture and met

a good cross section of Left leaders, cadres and scholars in Thrissur, Kochi and Thiruvananthapuram with whom I discussed the state of the Left. What follows is partially based on these two rounds of discussion, besides my own political orientation and analysis. In part, it is also a somewhat expansive wish list, albeit from a well-wisher. Consider a few propositions.

Ideologically, the Left is the sole consistent opponent of neoliberal policies in India's mainstream political spectrum. This opposition must be reflected more adequately than it currently is in its own policies and practices, especially at the State level. More crucially, the Left must recognise and emphasise the cardinal truth that the neoliberal state is fundamentally authoritarian and must necessarily dispossess people and suppress or limit their social, economic and civil-political rights.

Opposing neoliberalism effectively thus also means fighting the Indian state, which is becoming increasingly repressive, and defending the citizen's fundamental rights and liberties. This poses two dilemmas for the Left. How can it play a dual role as a party of governance (if only in a few States) and as a national party of opposition without the risk of being seen as part of the Indian establishment and partly losing consistency or credibility? Second, how can the Left achieve a balance between parliamentary politics and the politics of mass mobilisation to further its cause, which goes beyond capturing provincial power?

Resolving these dilemmas demands creative theorising and imaginative praxis. The Left can rise to these and the other challenges it faces only if it enunciates a distinctly emancipatory vision of social transformation based on Marxism, offers a cogent alternative to neoliberal economic and retrograde social policies, fights for an egalitarian income policy and income and wealth redistribution through higher taxes on the rich, devises innovative political mobilisation strategies, and widens its appeal by participating in struggles on issues that deeply concern working people.

To do this, the Left needs to update its analysis of Indian society and evolve a contemporary vision of development and relate this to its political programmes and policies. It must also develop a sharp analysis of the causes of the setbacks it has recently suffered, including through the social and economic policies pursued by its State governments, and its deficiencies in providing alternative perspectives and creating a pole of attraction for the classes and social groups it seeks to represent.

This calls for a number of changes, including a shift away from a literal belief in the inevitable development of the productive forces and the idea of a "two-stage" revolution. This is itself rooted in the axiom that India is some kind of semi-feudal semi-colonial society, rather than a capitalist one, even if it is a backward, poverty-stricken capitalist society that incorporates oppressive forms of gender and caste hierarchy and social exploitation, classically associated with pre-modern societies, into the bourgeois economic and social relations that prevail today.

This is not an academic distinction. Different characterisations of the state and the ruling class lead to divergent priorities, strategies and social coalitions. The central task before the Left is to oppose and weaken Indian capitalism and the neoliberal state while empowering working people to make inroads into, and eventually take over, governance structures to radicalise them along socialist lines.

This means combining a range of transitional demands based on a comprehensive charter of rights, which reflect mass aspirations for a life with human dignity, with a transformative politics and relating day-to-day mass struggles to that larger long-term goal.

Equally necessary is a rejection of the presumed inevitability and intrinsic desirability of industrialisation, especially along the classical Western pattern, which can lead to slippage into an "industrialisation at any cost" position.

This approach was at least partly responsible for the land acquisition and industrial promotion policies followed in West Bengal by the Left Front since 2006, which led to the Singur and Nandigram disasters and to the neglect of vital social agendas, reflected in the State's slipping or stagnant human development indices.

Closely tied up with this is the dominant view of nature and natural resources as externalities rather than as something central or pivotal to an alternative radical perspective which makes a clean break with GDPism and incorporates environmental protection into development and social transformation agendas.

The Left has to "green" itself and address issues such as climate change and defence of the commons (common property resources) not just in global terms, which emphasise differential North-South responsibilities. It must do so domestically, too, in ways that conventional thinking simply cannot do and acknowledge that ecologically India's growth trajectory is profoundly unsound. These issues must become organic to the Left's emancipatory development vision.

True, the Left has shed its obsession with "development" of the productive forces counterposed to environmental protection, which was evident in its support for the Silent Valley project in the 1970s and its suspicion of the radical environmental movements of the 1980s and 1990s.

The Left does recognise neoliberal capitalism's depredations and plunder of natural resources. But it has still not made ecology a central component of the development model it advocates. Even after Fukushima, the growing popular opposition to nuclear energy worldwide – inherently accident-prone and fraught with radiation and intractable problems of storing wastes that remain hazardous for thousands of years – and the emergence of safe, climate-friendly and cost-effective renewable alternatives, the Left still maintains a largely ambivalent position on nuclear power.

The Left has a unique opportunity to bring ecology centre stage amidst the explosion of grass-roots mobilisations in virtually every Indian State against destructive irrigation, power and industrial projects and on the issue of control over land, water, minerals and other natural resources. It must participate wholeheartedly in these and take on board their concerns to broaden its own agendas.

Above all, the Left should include these issues in a charter of people's rights to the fulfilment of their basic needs and aspirations, including equitable provision of food, water, employment and social security, universal good-quality health care, education, energy and other public services.

Besides outlining such programmatic perspectives and strategies as an integral part of a humane politics which empowers working people, the Left can greatly gain in credibility and popular acceptance by developing sector-wise alternatives on issues such as land, water and shelter rights, equitable access to energy sources, sustainable agriculture, rural job generation, urban development, ecologically sound housing, transportation, neighbourhood schools, culture, and egalitarian education and skill-generation programmes.

Equally important are issues such as pensions for the old, special programmes for unorganised workers, and affirmative action in favour of underprivileged, dispossessed and marginalised groups, including single-women-led households and homeless people, besides religious and ethnic minorities.

Central to such a comprehensive charter or grand agenda would be a programme of combating gender discrimination and fighting for women's rights, which goes beyond equal wages or 33 per cent political reservation and which recognises that patriarchy is a critical and integral component of the entire system of social oppression on which Indian capitalism is based. Fighting patriarchy

cannot be left to the future; it must be integrated into the Left's core agenda.

No less important are the "old" issues of caste, religion, ethnicity, tribal identity and regionalism, which the Left has self-confessedly neglected, and certainly not theorised to generate a multifaceted understanding of Indian reality. Some of these issues have been muddled by identity politics and its emotive appeal. But that makes it all the more pressing for the Left to address them in both theory and practice.

Of critical importance here would be a sustained, continuous dialogue between the Left parties and radical/progressive scholars and social activists devoted to expanding people's rights and entitlements to a humane existence. A substantial base of knowledge, analysis and insight exists among the latter, from which the Left stands to gain handsomely through such interaction.

Among the "emerging" issues the Left must grapple with are the new authoritarian and communal structures growing within the Indian state as it evolves an Islamophobic "counterterrorism" strategy and deludes itself that "left-wing extremism is India's greatest internal security threat" and then uses a militarist approach to deal with it.

Militarisation of state and governance in India's tribal heartland, where the bulk of the country's mineral and forest resources are located, is a great menace to democracy, perhaps greater than the crises in Kashmir or the north-eastern region were at their peak. Closely connected with militarism is nuclearism, or the government's growing addiction to nuclear weapons and its tight embrace of nuclear deterrence, a doctrine India rightly described for half a century as "morally repugnant" and strategically irrational.

The Left must resolutely oppose militarism and actively return to the principled nuclear disarmament agenda it adopted after the Pokhran-II tests in 1998 but which it did not quite pursue during the 2005-08 debate on the United States-India nuclear deal.

Another battle the Left has to wage is over the belligerent and chauvinist nationalism growing in India, based on hubris and domination and on a perverse notion of Indian exceptionalism, which deeply influences our ultra-individualist middle-class elite. This nationalism is located in a Hobbesian world view where might always prevails and nations forever compete fiercely; they never cooperate.

The Left will not find it easy to radically transform its theoretical framework, analysis of strategic issues and its political practices given the indifferent or poor culture of internal (and external) debate that prevails in its organisation. Underpinning this is the doctrine of democratic centralism, interpreted along Stalinist lines, which stifles free debate. There has also been an erosion of the quality of discussion in party forums in relation to the 1950s or even the late 1970s.

If the Left wants to overcome its decline, it will have to reaffirm a firmly Marxist orientation but rethink the political framework, or paradigm, within which it works. It will have to swallow the bitter pill of painfully candid self-criticism and admission of strategic errors, theoretical inadequacies and flawed practices through open and free debate. Without such debate, there can be no course correction and stemming of the Left's decline.

PRAFUL BIDWAI

P.S.

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