

**Neo-Liberalism, Secularism And The  
Future of the Left in India  
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I

I profusely thank the Heyman Centre, its Chair Prof. Akeel Bilgrami for asking me to deliver the keynote address to this day-long symposium.

These discussions are taking place in the background of one of the worst electoral setbacks that the Left in India has suffered recently in our 15<sup>th</sup> general elections in May 2009. However, I must hasten to add that the influence of the Left on the evolution of modern India goes much beyond its electoral performance. Nevertheless, these results throw up many questions concerning both theory and praxis of the Left in India. These results must also be seen in their specific context and the specific electoral tactics that the Left pursued. The projection of an alternative government, at Delhi, by a conglomerate of non-Congress non-BJP parties, we have concluded in our review, suffered from both a lack of credibility and viability in people's perception. Added to this are specific state level factors in the Left's strongholds that led to an erosion of our electoral base. Thus, these results cannot be interpreted as a reflection of the Left's inability to comprehend or come to terms with neo-liberalism. If this was the case, then 2004 (where the Left's outside support was critical for the survival of a secular government) would not have happened. This, however, is not to suggest that there are no new challenges posed by neo-liberalism and its specific trajectory in India. Indeed, there are such challenges that need to be addressed. We shall return to this later.

II

Having made these preliminary remarks, let me begin with the conclusion that I shall arrive in this address. The Left's steadfast opposition to neo-liberalism and equally committed championing of secularism defines the future of India – India, as we know, today. The Left's future in India is, hence, inseparable with India's future.

Let me attempt to reason this substantiative statement.

Left had played and continues to play a critical role in the process of *realization* of the idea of India. What is this idea? It is the creation and consolidation of a unique oneness in a multinational country. India's diversity – linguistic, religious, ethnic, cultural etc – is incomparably vast than in any other country in the world. Officially it has been recorded that there are 1618 languages in India; 6400 castes; six major religions – four of them that originated indigenously - six anthropologically defined ethnic groups; politically administered through more than 30 states and union territories; 29 major religio-cultural festivals with the maximum number of religious holidays compared to any other country in the world.

Those who argue that it was British that united this vast diversity ignore the fact that it was the British which engineered the partition of the sub-continent leading to over a million deaths and a communal transmigration of a colossal order. British colonialism has a history of leaving behind legacies that continue to fester through the partition of countries – Palestine, Cyprus apart from the Indian sub-continent. It is the Pan-Indian people's struggle for freedom that united this diversity and integrated more than 660 feudal princely states into modern India giving shape to a Pan-Indian consciousness. The Left had played an important role in this process of the realization of the idea of India.

Let me illustrate this with reference to three issues that continue to constitute the core of the idea of India. The struggles on the land question unleashed by the Communists in various parts of the country – Punnapara Vayalar in Kerala, the Tehbagha movement in Bengal, the Surma Valley struggle in Assam, the Warli uprising in Maharashtra etc. – the highlight of which was the armed uprising in Telengana brought the issue of land reforms to centrestage. The consequent abolition of the zamindari system and landed estates drew the vast mass of India's peasantry into the project of building the idea of India.

It was the Left that spearheaded the massive popular struggles for the linguistic reorganization of the states in independent India. The struggle for Vishalandhra, Aikya Kerala and Samyukta Maharashtra were led, amongst others by people who later emerged as communist stalwarts in the country. This paved the way for the integration of various linguistic nationalities that inhabit India into the process of realizing the idea of India.

Further, the Left's steadfast commitment to secularism was based on the recognition of India's reality. The unity of India with its immense diversity can be maintained only by strengthening the

bonds of commonality in this diversity and not by imposing any uniformity upon this diversity. While this is true for all attributes of India's social life, it is of critical importance in relation to religion. Following the partition of India and the horrendous communal aftermath, secularism became inseparable for the realization of the idea of India. The Indian ruling classes, however, went only half way in meeting the Left's objective of defining secularism as the separation of religion from politics. In practice, the Indian ruling classes have reduced this to define secularism as equality of all religions. This, in fact contributes to providing sustenance to the communal forces.

The emergence of the conception of the idea of India arose from a continuous battle between three visions that emerged over what ought to be the character of independent India. The mainstream Congress vision had articulated that independent India should be a secular democratic Republic. The Left, while agreeing with this objective went further to envision that the political freedom of the country be extended to achieve the economic freedom of every individual, possible only under socialism. Antagonistic to both these was the third vision which argued that the character of independent India should be defined by the religious affiliations of its people. This vision had a twin expression. The Muslim League championing an Islamic State and the RSS championing a Hindu rashtra. The former succeeded in the unfortunate partition of the country with all its consequences that continue to fester tensions till date. The latter having failed to achieve their objective at the time of independence continues with its efforts to transform modern India into their conception of a Hindu rashtra. In a sense the ideological battles and the political conflicts in contemporary India are a continuation of the battle between these three visions. Needless to add the contours of this struggle define the direction and content of the consolidation of the idea of India.

### III

Let me invoke one of the illustrious alumni of the Columbia University, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar who is widely regarded as the architect of India's Constitution. On November 25, 1949 while presenting the draft Constitution for adoption in the Constituent Assembly, he said:

"On January 26, 1950, we are going to enter into a life of contradictions. In politics we will have equality and in social and economic life we will have inequality. In politics, we will

be recognizing the principle of one man-one vote and one vote-one value. In our social and economic life, we shall by reason of our social and economic structure, continue to deny the principle of one man-one value.

“How long shall we continue to live this life of contradictions? How long shall we continue to deny equality in our social and economic life?

“If we continue to deny it for long, we will do so only by putting our political democracy in peril. We must remove this contradiction at the earliest possible moment or else those who suffer from inequality will blow up the structure of political democracy which this Assembly has laboriously built up.”

The current neo-liberal trajectory that is being pursued by the Indian ruling classes exacerbates Dr. Ambedkar’s concern. During the course of the day we have heard very enlightening presentations on the economic ruination of vast masses of the Indian people from Dr. Prabhat Patnaik, C.P. Chandrasekhar and Jayati Ghosh. I do not wish to repeat their rich analysis. But the conclusions are fairly disconcerting. Embracing neo-liberalism has resulted in decisively ending the former dirigiste regime and trajectory employed by the Indian ruling classes in the early post-independence decades. Globally, the hallmark of neo-liberalism pursued by present day imperialism is the intensifying the process of the primary accumulation of capital through expropriation more than through appropriation. As Prabhat calls it accumulation through encroachment as opposed to accumulation through expansion.

The neo-liberal trajectory has generated an acute agrarian crisis and distress through such merciless accumulation through expropriation. The net result is that there are two India’s in the making today – a shining and a suffering.

The Forbes magazine states that the number of billionaires in India doubled to 52 in 2009 and their combined net worth was \$ 276 billion or a quarter of the country’s GDP. The 4<sup>th</sup> and the 5<sup>th</sup> richest persons in the world are Indians. On the other hand a Prime Minister appointed commission has reported that 77 per cent of Indian people or 836 million are living on less than Rs. 20 per day. Adjusted to purchasing power parity this tallies with the UN Human Development Report that estimates that 75.6 per cent of Indians live on less than \$ 2 a day. 47 per cent of our children are underweight due to malnutrition and 17 per cent fail to make it to

the age of 40. 78 per cent of our pregnant mothers are anemic. They are giving birth to India's future. This is the other – real – India.

This neo-liberal trajectory hence ruptures the process of the realisation of the idea of India. This can only happen on the foundation of universal prosperity.

#### IV

The battle between the three visions that we spoke of earlier continues in India's political and social sphere. The vision of the Hindu rashtra was chillingly articulated by one of the RSS chiefs way back in 1939.

"In Hindusthan exists and must needs exist the ancient Hindu nation and nought else but the Hindu Nation. All those not belonging to the national i.e. Hindu Race, Religion, Culture and Language naturally fall out of the pale of real 'National' life."

"Consequently only those movements are truly 'National' as aim at re-building, re-vitalizing and emancipating from its present stupor, the Hindu Nation. Those only are nationalist patriots, who, with the aspiration to glorify the Hindu race and nation next to their heart, are prompted into activity and strive to achieve that goal. All others are either traitors and enemies to the National cause, or, to take a charitable view, idiots".

And then continues

"...So long, however, as they maintain their racial, religious and cultural differences, they cannot but be only foreigners".

And further:

"There are only two courses open to the foreign elements, either to merge themselves in the national race and adopt its culture, or to live at its mercy so long as the national race may allow them to do so and to quit the country at the sweet will of the national race. .... From this standpoint, sanctioned by the experience of shrewd old nations, the foreign races in Hindusthan must either adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and hold in reverence Hindu religion, must entertain no idea but those of the glorification of the

Hindu race and culture, i.e., of the Hindu nation and must lose their separate existence to merge in the Hindu race, or may stay in the country, wholly subordinated to the Hindu Nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment - not even citizen's rights. There is at least should be, no other course for them to adopt. We are an old nation; let us deal, as old nations ought to and do deal, with the foreign races, who have chosen to live in our country."

And, how should such 'old nations' deal? The adulation of fascist Germany could not have been more brazen.

"To keep up the purity of the Race and its culture, Germany shocked the world by her purging the country of the semitic Races - the Jews. Race pride at its highest has been manifested here. Germany has also shown how well nigh impossible it is for Races and cultures, having differences going to the root, to be assimilated into one united whole, a good lesson for us in Hindusthan to learn and profit by."

Since the late 1980s the unfolding of this vision that reached a crescendo over the demand for temple construction at Ayodhya leading to the demolition of the Babri Masjid continues to express itself in a variety of issues which seek to communalise the polity in order to facilitate the transformation of the modern secular democratic India into a inherently intolerant theocratic State. The Gujarat carnage of 2002 continues to both shame and horrify the country's consciousness.

Such communalization in its own way ruptures the realization of the idea of India by striking at the very roots of equality for all within India's immense diversity that we spoke of earlier.

Clearly therefore, both neo-liberalism and communalism are the very antithesis of the idea of India. The Left's firm opposition to both is an important element in the realization of this idea of India. In order to achieve such realization the Left would need to succeed in changing the correlation of political forces amongst the Indian people in its favour. This it is seeking to do by sharpening the class struggles. A week from today on April 8 lakhs of people across the country will defy law to be arrested in protest against the unrelenting rise in prices of essential commodities. While such popular struggles will intensify in the days to come, there are also certain critical issues that the Left must come to terms with in order to strengthen itself and in the process strengthen the consolidation of modern India.

## V

One of such issues is the manner in which the question of caste needs to be dealt with. Prof. Javed Alam had presented a very interesting paper this afternoon which covered many issues. I do not wish to repeat them. It is however necessary to note certain features. Class formation in India is taking place within the caste stratification that has been handed down through the centuries. In this situation, there is a very large overlap between caste and class with the most exploited classes belonging to the most socially oppressed castes. Class rule in India thus stands on two legs – economic exploitation and social oppression. Unless the Left integrates the struggles on both these aspects, its advance can only be ‘limping instead of running’. While we are actually conscious of this need, in practice, such an integration has to be strengthened by the Left.

Another critical issue relates to the development paradigm that the Left-led state governments in India must undertake. I am told that Nandigram and Singur have become common in the international lexicon. There is ofcourse a large amount of misinformation and deliberate disinformation in the campaigns against the Left Front government in West Bengal. I am sure we shall discuss many questions later. For a moment consider the following: Close to a thousand acres of land was acquired in Singur for the automobile factory. Over 12,000 individuals were given compensation for this land. 12,000 people for thousand acres of land, meaning 12 families were legally surviving on one acre of land. Is this possible? In reality, may be one or two families were cultivating while the rest were doing some odd jobs like pulling rickshaws or working as domestic help. Land and agriculture is no longer a viable option for improving their levels of livelihood. During the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the implementation of land reforms (unprecedented anywhere else except in Left ruled states) led to the fragmentation of land amongst the family members of two generations. Industrialisation was considered as a way of improving livelihood standards on the grounds that it will generate employment and consequent economic activity that can provide opportunities to enhance the levels of quality of life.

As far as Nandigram is concerned, no land was ever acquired and even the incomplete plans for the consideration of the establishment of a chemical hub were abandoned once disagreement was voiced. The trouble over there is entirely of a political nature where this became an issue of political polarization by the opponents of the Left Front who were and are desperate to

see that the Left Front does not win the elections for the 8<sup>th</sup> successive time in 2011.

This is not the first time that land was acquired in West Bengal under the Left Front government. But this time around, in retrospect, it can be said that the required home work was not done as meticulously as it was done in the past. One reason was that these developments occurred soon after the Left Front returned to the state government for the 7<sup>th</sup> successive time in 2006. These elections were fought, amongst others on the issue of industrialization. Since the Left Front won a resounding victory it was presumed that the people endorsed the proposed industrialization drive. On earlier occasions, village level committees were formed with whom the state government negotiated the terms of land acquisition while explaining the reasons and purpose for such acquisition. Only when the matters were settled did the process of acquisition begin. Such an approach would have eased a lot of misunderstanding and importantly would not have provided the opponents of the Left Front with the opportunities to mount an offensive using all unscrupulous means.

There is however a much larger question that arises. Given the constitutional limitations on state governments and the enormous pressure exercised by the Union Government to make all state governments subscribe to the neo-liberal trajectory, a question naturally arises whether pursuit of development and anti-neo-liberalism are compatible? The Left Front governments primarily aim to provide relief to the people while mounting the opposition to neo-liberalism. The latter requires these governments to prevent all forms of primitive accumulation of capital through expropriation such as the forcible dispossession of agricultural land from the peasants or the forcible curtailment of the activities of fishermen or the unrestricted and unregulated flow of foreign direct investment into the state etc. This may well entail the restriction in the flow of resources in a situation where the states are already squeezed for resources under neo-liberalism. This in turn would restrict the scope and extent of developmental activities. Therefore the task of opposing neo-liberalism and its implications while utilizing available opportunities and formulating schemes at the state level within the limited means at the disposal of the state governments to provide succor to the basic classes against distress is a challenge that the Left is currently engaged with.

The rise of identity politics and the activities of various NGOs in taking up specific issues such as universal education, rights of the disabled, rights of the dalits etc. or the ultra Left's ostensible articulation of the plight of the tribals, are invariably associated with



the process of depoliticalisation. Identity politics can at best provide relief to that specific section of people but is never aimed at transcending the system. This is as true for the ultra Left, despite their strident calls for 'armed revolution'! The CPI(M)'s objective however is precisely to transcend the capitalist system.

## VI

In order to strengthen the struggle for transcending the system the Left has to build and strengthen the worker-peasant alliance, the basic class alliance, for changing the correlation of class forces amongst the people in its favour. Naturally, this has to be built around strengthening opposition to neo-liberalism i.e. anti-imperialism and against the communal forces i.e. for strengthening secularism.

There are however many a compulsion of the immediate. For instance, in order to strengthen secularism it would be necessary to prevent the communal forces from controlling the Union Government. At the same time, in order to strengthen the struggle against neo-liberalism it would be necessary to prevent the Congress party to assume the reins of government. Thus a combination of anti-BJP anti-Congress political parties needs to be forged. More often such a front emerges at the time of elections without a set of credible alternative policies. Further many such parties on earlier occasions when in government in various states may have followed the very same neo-liberal policies or flirted with communal forces making their credibility suspect. As distinct from such electoral fronts the Left seeks to strengthen an anti-BJP anti-Congress political alternative that is based on alternative secular anti-neo-liberal policies. This is an ongoing effort which has to be based on developing the popular struggles on this alternative policy direction. Many intermediate steps and measures would be required to be undertaken to advance in this direction for changing the correlation of class forces. This will have to be based on concrete analysis of concrete conditions.

In the meanwhile, the biggest challenge that the Left is facing currently is the concerted attack being mounted by a gang up of all anti-Left forces in our strongholds especially in West Bengal. The all-in unity against the Left Front includes the ultra Left Maoists, the foreign funded NGOs, sections of the corporate media, the communal forces of both Hindu and Muslim hues under the leadership of the Congress-Trinamul alliance. As I stand here speaking to you nearly 200 of my comrades have been killed by such a gang up in West Bengal alone. We have been through such

attacks in the past, paid a heavy price by losing precious lives, but emerged stronger.

More importantly however for the idea of India to succeed, indeed survive, as we spoke at the outset, it is imperative that both neo-liberalism and communalism are weakened and defeated. For this precise reason, all the forces that back these trajectories unite to attack and weaken the Left. This is the struggle that is currently ongoing in India. Thus, to return to the assertion that I made at the outset, the future of India and the future of the Left in India are inseparably and integrally interconnected.

Instead of neo-liberalism where economics drives politics, India requires a system where politics determines its economics. Instead of an exclusion based nationalism that communalism represents, India requires an inclusive nationalism. This is what the Left stands and works for. This is what that can make us realize the idea of India.