

The Left In India:

Facing the Challenges of Liberalisation & Communalism

India is a country of 1.1 billion people. It is a country rich in natural and human resources but plagued by mass poverty. In the fifty-six years since independence, capitalism has developed in India. It has led to widening inequalities in all spheres of society. The Indian State is one dominated by the big bourgeoisie and the landlords. Policies of successive governments have benefited a narrow stratum of big business and the urban and rural rich. Capitalism has not meant the abolition of the old forms of exploitation. Rather capitalist exploitation has been superimposed on a swamp of pre-capitalist production relations and forms of social organisation.

These conditions are graphically illustrated by the continuing caste oppression in Indian society. The dalits (scheduled castes) are subjected to the worst forms of social oppression including the practice of untouchability. They constitute the bulk of the landless agricultural workers and are constantly subject to landlord and upper caste oppression. The tribal people (adivasis) number over 80 million. They are subjected to massive dislocation from their traditional habitats, particularly the forest areas and driven to wage slavery of a primitive kind.

After more than five decades of independence, even according to official figures which are an underestimate, more than 224 million people in rural India live below the poverty line. An increasing number of people in the rural areas have less to eat than they did 20 years ago. Between 1983 and 1998, the rural per capita consumption of calories is estimated to have come down by as much as 300 calories. The monumental scale of rural poverty is unparalleled amongst the nations in the world.

Sitting on top of this capitalist-landlord nexus are the big monopoly houses whose assets have increased 500 fold between the 1950s and the 1990s. Twenty-two top monopoly houses have assets worth 1580 billion rupees.

India's path of State-sponsored capitalism came to an end with the advent of liberalisation in 1991. Since then, for more than a decade, India has been subjected to neo-liberal reforms and the impact of imperialist-driven globalisation. This has resulted in a dramatic increase in social inequalities. Big business has prospered as never before and large sections of industrial workers, poor peasants, agricultural workers, workers in the unorganised sector have lost their livelihood or jobs. Rural unemployment and loss of employment opportunities for women have added to the rural distress in a

big way at a time when farmers in India are being ravaged by the opening of Indian agriculture to the global economy.

The first stage of reforms attacked the public sector and the working class in a big way. In the past one decade, 4,40,000 jobs have been lost in the Central public sector. In the second stage of reforms, the farmers and the rural workforce are under attack. There have been a spate of suicides by farmers who became victims of crop failures and mounting debt. In the state of Andhra Pradesh alone, 3,189 farmers committed suicide in 2002.

The all-round onslaught of liberalisation and privatisation has badly affected public services, social welfare and expenditure in the social sector too. The public distribution system which provided to a limited extent cheap food for the working people has been dismantled to a large extent. The privatisation of power, transport, water and municipal services is depriving the poorer sections of essential services.

The Left forces in India are engaged in a protracted struggle to fight back these neo-liberal policies. This struggle is taking place in the background of a rightwing offensive in India headed by a reactionary combination of political forces who are committed to an anti-secular agenda. Identifying religion as the basis of nationhood, they seek to impose an authoritarian regime based on *Hindutva* which can supplant the present bourgeois-democratic principles enshrined in the Indian Constitution. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its guiding force, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) have the long-term agenda of reordering the Indian State on the lines of their *Hindutva* ideology.

This communal/sectarian venture is combined with a right-wing economic platform which embraces the neo-liberal framework. In the last five years since the BJP-led coalition took over the central government, these policies have become the hallmark of the regime. In this thrust to make India amenable to the terms of international finance capital, the BJP-led government has the full support of the United States of America. At no time since independence has India seen such a pro-American and pro-imperialist government. The foreign policy has reflected this shift with the reversal of India's long-held non-aligned foreign policy.

With liberalisation has come a changed outlook of the institutions of the Indian State towards democracy and to the democratic rights of the people. More and more the resistance to the policies of liberalisation and any struggle for alternative policies are being met with State repression. The higher judiciary in the country now justifies the philosophy behind liberalisation and privatisation. It has become an instrument for the suppression of popular protests. A series of rulings have prohibited demonstrations, rallies and bandhs (general shut-downs). A recent Supreme Court judgement has declared that government employees have no right to strike. The government

has brought in a draconian law, the Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA) which is one more anti-democratic law which will be used to silence dissent and opposition.

The Communists and the Left forces in India are engaged in a twin struggle against the reactionary communal forces and the attacks on all sections of the working people through the policies of liberalisation and privatisation.

II

Resistance to Liberalisation-Privatisation Policies

The working class and other sections of the working people have put up strong resistance to the liberalisation and privatisation offensive. In the past one decade, there have been six one-day general strikes all over the country. The last general strike which took place on 21st May 2003 at the call of the Central trade unions and the national platform of mass organisations saw 15 million workers and employees join the strike action.

There have been a series of industry-wise strikes against privatisation and cutbacks in recent years. These include the three-day coal miners strike twice in November 2000 and December 2001; the fourteen-day postal employees strike; the one-day state government and central government employees strike in 2001; strikes by insurance, bank and telecom employees against privatisation; 1.5 million employees of all public sector unions went on a one-day strike in April 2002 against the government's privatisation drive; oil sector employees strike against privatisation in December 2003.

The Supreme Court in a judgement in July 2003 declared strikes by government employees as illegal. A big campaign has been launched against the court order prohibiting strikes. The state government employees and Central government employees federations has decided to go on a one-day strike to assert and defend their right to strike. All the major Central trade unions (with the exception of one) have decided to jointly conduct the strike on 24th February, 2004.

Apart from these countrywide actions, there have been protracted struggles by workers and people against privatisation. Notable among them are:

- At the initiative of the Left and other democratic forces a joint campaign was conducted against the establishment of the Enron plant at Dabhol in Maharashtra. The agreement counter-guaranteed by the central government was the biggest swindle ever perpetrated by a multinational company in India. A big campaign was conducted in the

year (1999-2000) in the state of Maharashtra with popular mobilisation at different levels which included marches to the site, demonstrations and public meetings. The shutting down of the Dabhol plant when the State Electricity Board refused to pay the exorbitant dues and the collapse of the Enron Corp. in the USA vindicated the strong opposition to the fraudulent practices of Enron and the complicity of the BJP-led governments in Maharashtra.

- The entire workforce of the Bharat Aluminium Company Ltd (BALCO), a public sector company went on a 67-day strike in the year 2001 against the privatisation of the enterprise. The struggle could not however prevent the privatisation of the company.
- The Central government's decision to privatise the profitable National Aluminium Company (NALCO) in 2002 led to strong opposition not only from the workers of the unit but has been resisted by all political parties and mass organisations. A broad front emerged which called for a general strike in the state. As a result the government has been forced to stop the privatisation move.

Most of these strike actions and struggles of the working class are being conducted by a joint platform of trade unions, which includes both public sector and private sector unions affiliated to various Central trade union federation and independent industry-wise federations.

A number of struggles by the peasant and agricultural workers have taken place mainly led by the Left-led peasant and agricultural workers organisations, for land, fair prices for peasants and wages for agriculture labour. Struggles for land and wages are met with brutal resistance from landlords and the rural rich in states like Bihar, Jharkhand, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and so on.

The women's movement has grown in both scale and intensity all over the country. Major struggles have been conducted on issues of social oppression of women through dowry demands, gender discrimination and against sexual exploitation. The fight for employment, access to livelihood and food has also become an important feature given the impact of the liberalisation policies. In the recent period, women's organisation like the All India Democratic Womens Association have been conducting a campaign on food security and struggles for supply of food through the public distribution system. The mobilisation of women in the struggles against liberalisation has become an important part of the general movement.

The efforts to privatise public services are meeting with varying degrees of resistance. The power tariff hikes in the wake of privatisation led to a mass

struggle in Andhra Pradesh in the year 2000. Conducted by eight Left parties jointly, the movement faced repression and two CPI(M) workers were shot dead in police firing on a demonstration in Hyderabad. Efforts to corner water sources by multinational companies have also met with popular struggles in Kerala, Maharashtra and other places. The protest by tribal people against eviction from their land and forest areas is increasing.

Student organisations have been conducting struggles against privatisation and the commercialization of education. Massive fee hikes have led to continuing protests and strikes in many states, notably Kerala, Maharashtra, Tamilnadu, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat.

On the initiative of the Left forces a broad-based platform – the National Platform of Mass Organisations was formed in 1993. This has served as the united centre for bringing various movements of different sections of people together.

Given the full-fledged assault of liberalisation and the ruling class consensus on the policies, the resistance has so far been sectoral and episodic. A much bigger and powerful movement needs to be built up to defend the rights of the working people and to roll back this offensive.

Struggle Against Communalism

The Left has been the only consistent force fighting the danger posed by the reactionary communal forces. In the recent years, the popular mobilisation to counter the efforts of the RSS-BJP combine to communalise Indian society has been taken up by the Left parties and other democratic forces. The Left-led organisations and Left intellectuals have been exposing the steps taken to erode the secular content in education and the systematic infiltration of the communal ideology in the syllabi and textbooks. After the Gujarat pogroms against the minorities, there have been countrywide campaigns to make people conscious of the dangers posed by majority communalism and the extremist minority and fundamentalist response to it.

It is due to the heightened consciousness of the people in the states where the Left is strong that the BJP has been unable to advance electorally and politically. In West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura, the BJP has not a single elected representative in the state assembly. But in other places, the tactics of communal polarization and the engineering of Hindu-Muslim riots have been the stock-in-trade of the RSS-led Hindutva brigade.

Against imperialism

The Left forces have been taking the lead in mobilising the people against the growing aggressiveness and the illegal wars launched by American

imperialism. Protests against the attack on Afghanistan and the war on Iraq were conducted all over the country including a march against the war on Iraq by 200,000 people in Kolkata in March 2003.

It is due to the mobilisation of all opposition parties by the Left that the Indian government was forced not to send troops to Iraq at the American request.

III

The Left forces are working to mobilise the people on the basis of an alternative platform. This is a platform which covers the political, economic and social spheres which constitutes the Left and democratic alternative.

The Left and democratic alternative broadly consists of the following:

- **Defence of secularism and national unity**

To uphold the separation of religion and politics under the Constitution; strengthen the secular character of the State and its institutions; combat communal ideology in society; provision of maximum autonomy under Article 370 of the Constitution; enforcement of the rule of law and judicial process to resolve the temple/mosque dispute in Ayodhya.

- **Strengthen federalism**

Restructuring of Centre-state relations and decentralisation of powers.

- **Democratic rights**

Expand democratic rights of citizens; scrap of repressive laws like NSA, ESMA and POTA; introduction of proportional representation with partial list system in elections; curbing of corruption by stringent action against corrupt public servants, businessmen and politicians; electoral reforms to curb money power and malpractice.

- **Economic policy**

a) Review policies of liberalisation to strengthen self-reliant economic growth; streamline and strengthen public sector in core and strategic sectors; promote non-monopolistic industrial growth, encourage medium and small scale industries. Ensure adequate resource mobilisation by increased direct taxes, recovery of tax dues and curbing black money. Foreign capital investment to be based on national priorities and requirements of advanced technology. Regulate capital flows.

b) Implement radical land reforms, distribution of surplus land and cultivable waste land to the landless. Provision of sufficient public investment

for agricultural development; expansion of irrigation facilities; credit to poorer sections of peasantry. Ensure procurement at minimum support prices for agricultural produce. Promote cooperatives run on democratic lines in all spheres.

c) Fight to revise WTO agreements to protect Indian agriculture, industry and indigenous science & technology. Impose higher tariffs to protect domestic interests.

- **Right of working people**

Need based minimum wages for workers; recognition of trade union on the basis of secret ballot; statutory provision for worker's participation in management; end discrimination of women workers; equal wages for equal work. Ensure minimum wages for agricultural workers and other rights through Central legislation. Right to work as a fundamental right in the Constitution.

- **For People's Welfare**

(a) Set up a comprehensive public distribution system to cover 14 essential commodities; adequate procurement of food stocks by the State for this purpose; roll back privatisation of public services like health, education, public transport, water and electricity supply. Improvement of public health system and expansion of primary health centres with adequate stocks of medicines. Housing to be a basic right.

(b) Compulsory primary education and universal elementary education; free education up to the secondary stage. Revamping educational system on democratic, secular and scientific lines. A comprehensive sports policy which provides adequate sports facilities for the youth.

- **For Development**

Promoting balanced development of all regions through planning. Decentralisation of development decisions up to the panchayat and local bodies level. Devolve financial and administrative powers to the panchayat system. Environmental policy integrated with needs for rapid and sustainable development. Promoting indigenous scientific and technological research for independent development.

- **For Social Justice**

Equality for women in all spheres by ending all forms of discrimination. Equal rights in property; joint pattas for women; provision of one-third reservation for women in legislatures and Parliament; measures to abolish child labour.

Eliminate untouchability and atrocities against scheduled castes and tribes by stringent action. Ensure reservation quotas for them are filled. Ensure right to forest land and protection of the cultural identity of adivasis. Regional autonomy for contiguous areas with majority adivasi population.

Equality of all Indian languages. Encouragement to Urdu language. Development of a democratic, secular culture.

- **Foreign Policy**

Non-aligned foreign policy with anti-imperialist orientation; end military cooperation pact with US; no nuclear weaponisation; strive for universal nuclear disarmament; strengthen relations with socialist countries; support to anti-imperialist struggles and world peace; policy of friendship and closer ties with neighbouring countries.

IV

Role of Left-led governments

The Left's struggle for a left and democratic alternative in India is not only at the level of building popular movements and struggles. In three states West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura, the Left is the strongest political force and it has been able to win elections and form state governments. There is a Left Front in West Bengal, which is a state with a population of 90 million. The Front has been running the state government in the state continuously for 26 years since 1977. It has won six successive elections getting a two-thirds majority every time. In Kerala a Left and Democratic Front was in office three times in the last two decades, the last stint being between 1996 to 2001. The state was the first to vote the Communists to office in 1957. In Tripura, situated in the north-eastern region bordering Bangladesh, the CPI (M) led Left Front has been in office for over ten years in its recent stint having won the assembly elections for the third time in succession with a two thirds majority.

The state governments under the Indian Constitution have limited powers. Real power vests with the Central government. But there are areas like agriculture, land reforms, education and health where the state governments have a major say. The Left has sought to utilize the running of these state governments to adopt alternative policies and provide some relief to the people while struggling against the pro big business-landlord and anti-federal policies of the Centre. After the advent of liberalization, the state governments are being squeezed to adopt the Central government's economic policies by cutting down the funds allocated to them.

The Communist-led state governments took up land reforms as a basic task:

- In the 1957-59 period, in Kerala, important land reform legislation was adopted which paved the way for the implementation of measures to abolish the old tenancy system. In subsequent years, Kerala was in the lead in adopting laws to protect the rights of agricultural workers and provide social welfare benefits which was brought into effect by a powerful movement of the agricultural workers.
- In West Bengal, around 1.1 million acres of land taken over as surplus above the ceiling on land fixed by law, has been taken over and distributed to 2.5 million landless and marginal peasants. 56 percent of the land was distributed to dalits and adivasis households. The land redistributed in West Bengal under land reform constitutes about 20 percent of the total land redistributed in the entire country under land ceiling laws.
- Further, in a drive to register sharecroppers to protect them from eviction, under a scheme called Operation Barga, 1.53 million sharecroppers (bargadars) were registered. By this step 1.1 million acres of land was permanently brought under the control of the sharecroppers and their right to cultivate the land was secured.
- The benefits of land reforms are evident in West Bengal. The state has emerged as the largest producer of rice and the second largest producer of potato in the country
- The Left-led governments have paid special attention to decentralize powers to the panchayat (local bodies) in the rural areas. In West Bengal, after land reforms the composition of the elected village councils and other tiers has changed with the small and middle peasants dominating these bodies. Regular elections are held to these bodies which involve over fifty thousand elected seats. 40 percent of the development funds are devolved to the three-tier structure of the district, block and village councils.
- In Kerala, during the last stint of the Left and Democratic government, an experiment for decentralized planning was initiated so that government development funds are spent on the basis of the plans made at the lower levels with people's participation. The People's Plan had many unique aspects which can be built upon in the future.
- In Tripura, the Left Front government in the eighties set up an autonomous district council in the tribal areas, so that the 30 percent tribal population of the state can have an administrative structure to manage their own affairs and protect the interests of the tribal people.

- The Left-led governments have ensured that the anti-democratic laws which sanction preventive detention are not enforced in their states or used against the trade unions and other popular movements. Anti-terrorist laws such as POTA and TADA were not invoked. Neither is the anti-working class Essential Services Maintenance Act been in use in these three states.

The CPI(M)

The CPI(M) is a major contingent of the Left movement in India. It is playing an active role in the ongoing struggles against the neo-liberal policies, the divisive communal forces and in defence of the interests of the working people. Its membership was 81,000 in 2003. It is active in various mass organizations like the trade unions, peasant unions, agricultural workers unions, women's organizations, and student and youth organizations. Its members are active in class and mass organizations whose total membership number around 40 million people.

The CPI(M) is the third largest party in Parliament. It has 34 seats in the Lok Sabha (lower house) and 13 seats in the Rajya Sabha (upper house). The Left parties together have 45 MPs in the Lok Sabha.

Further the CPI(M) has representation in 13 out of the 28 state assemblies in the country.

The CPI(M) runs six daily newspapers in five languages. It also brings out seven weekly papers in different languages. It also brings out two central weekly papers in English and Hindi.