

The Strategy of Pacification

Though most people here in India disapprove of what is going on in the name of development and social mobility, there is no meaningful leadership from above, no irresistible shove from below. The left is on the defensive. It doesn't matter much even if they promise to go on the offensive. Because their so-called pro-people stance often translates into petitioning—nothing more than that. Labour organising in the current situation is deeply disturbing. And equally disturbing is the overwhelming hopelessness that has gripped the peasant community.

Even a decade ago official Communists and their non-communist allies used to organise a 'famine march', at least once a year. It is no more. Starvation deaths or suicides by farmers provide them an occasion to become philosophical. They think their most powerful weapon to pacify aggrieved people could be a religious vision of the world. The left is captivated by a belief that has been variously described as secularism, albeit their skin-deep commitment to secularism has long been challenged by the religious right which develops horizontally and vertically as well because of political space left by the Left. In the end leftist leaders at their best stand at the margins of power refusing to change the status quo. In reality they have resigned to spontaneity discouraging popular mass mobilisation at every level. And their sole objective is how to get vast masses of poor and marginal peasants alienated from land. That is precisely the agenda of multi-nationals and global institutions that back them. They know well spontaneous outbursts here and there will soon lose momentum and direction as well, creating more confusion and frustration among the deprived. In a sense this phenomenon is universal.

Right now French labour is up in arms against the disastrous consequences stemming from neo-liberalism. Not since the beginnings of the Reagan-Thatcher era in the early 1980s, when millions came out in Britain, the US and Germany to oppose anti-labour offensives of their governments, have workers in the West seen such numbers hitting the streets of France. Earlier student-worker protests in France constituted the largest popular mobilisation of the left in over two decades, at least in the industrially developed world. But spontaneity is no answer to the ever growing onslaught by global capital.

Toilers in India too have been witnessing spontaneous outbursts against anti-people policies of the state and central governments for more than two decades. And yet there is no possibility of shift in policy in the administration. In truth the country is heading for the worse. The ruling elites have mastered the art of absorbing the shock waves by suitably playing too many diversionary cards while allowing the Left to dance to their tune.

If there is no communal flare-up despite provocations, they can always make a case out of caste as anti-reservationists are back in the streets of Delhi to protest against the

Congress-led UPA government's decision to provide other backward caste (OBC) people reservations in government aided elite educational institutions. This quota business is the brain child of Congress. Having lost their traditional vote base among the scheduled caste communities, the Gandhians are now targeting OBCs to expand their vote bank. But the Mandal parties representing the creamy layer of OBCs are very much in the saddle in their areas of influence and Congress is unlikely to get any advantage from quota-politics. It may be counter-productive in the long run. The Bharatiya Janata Party is already out to give a new twist to the issue by announcing its resolve to allow caste-based quotas in minority educational institutes as well if voted to power at the centre. So all this reservation culture is about vote.

It is a tragedy that students have no time to think over privatisation of education. Nor do they think in terms of 'education for all'. Whether the Left admits it or not the Congress brand of quota policy is sharply driving a wedge between dalits and non-dalits who have nothing to gain even if the anti-reservationists lose.

The temptation to try to fight fire with fire is understandable. But the Left's deliberate attempt to pacify people's anger through their strategy of inaction could allow them to look for salvation in all the wrong places. Given the enormous damage that has been and is being done in the name of protecting weaker castes, progressives should be sensitive to the danger that the caste-based public policy presents, whether it comes from the right or the left. ~~del del del~~