

# Indian Left–Trapped in Epistemological Conundrums

T G Jacob

The Indian left movement, more so the official left, had always been plagued by inconsistencies generated by theoretical disabilities which have over time assumed the nature of chronic maladies explicitly manifested in double speak without even an iota of self-criticism or shame. In its early and formative periods the Eurocentric Soviet Indologists and the leadership of the British Communist Party set the agenda which had its disastrous anti-climax during the Second World War. The unilateral withdrawal of the Telengana movement, the subsequent embracing of social democracy as ideology, and parliamentary democracy as the means to achieve the declared socialist objectives fully marked the cooption of the Indian Communist movement into the reactionary bandwagon. Even after the fiasco of the “first elected communist government” in Kerala the leadership never even remotely attempted the Leninist prescription of formulating programmes based on a study of the concrete situation in any given social structure. Incidentally the EMS led CPI ministry in Kerala was dismissed by the central dispensers not because of any revolutionary programmes, which the ministry sought to implement, but because of some feeble attempts at peripheral reforms that had initially been given voice to by the Nehru government in Delhi. The end result was that the ideologues of the official Left perpetuated their ignorance of the actual Indian reality.

A most conspicuous and deplorable illustration of this ignorance of the concrete reality is the perspective regarding the phenomenon of *caste* in Indian society. A rigorous social, economic and political phenomenon like the caste system which operated as the basis of a severely oppressive social system for thousands of years was encountered by the simple argument that with the defeat of feudalism and development of productive forces on a sufficient scale caste would automatically and inevitably be demised. In other words, the political and economic premises of the CPI, and parliamentary struggles to bring about these premises into concrete fruition, were and are still considered enough to defeat the demon of caste. This was precisely the viewpoint of Nehru and all those in whom the CPI saw the characteristics of “progressive national bourgeoisie.” Whether it was the question of caste or the burning indigenous question the CPI ideologues were hand in hand with the “progressive national bourgeoisie.” In fact, the CPI went even further than Nehru. While Nehru hired the services of an experienced foreign anthropologist to study the indigenous question the CPI was content with the mechanical materialist and Eurocentric repetitions of someone like S A Dange, who was far removed from being scientist or anthropologist, with the result the formulations that he came out with were nothing but libelling Engels. Even at that time itself D D Kosambi had clearly pointed out this vulgarisation of Engels by the topmost CPI leader.

For the CPI theoreticians regurgitating given formulations, mutilating them by endlessly repeating convenient partial quotations and blindly applying them to the Indian context, which was tremendously complicated because of its distinct

uniqueness and specificities, was far easier than painstakingly trying to understand the concrete situation through application of theory and practice. Indologists like Dyakov and British Communist Party leaders like Harry Politt and R P Dutt were enough for the CPI. Phoney internationalism, which was nothing but see-through justification for promoting the sectarian interests of the Soviet communist party under the Stalinist dictatorship gave the apparent rationale for such wholesale shameless borrowing. Class analysis and understanding the newly emerged Indian state which was still in an evolutionary process did not really enjoy any priorities. Moreover, any possible investigation into the theme of neo-colonialism was out-rightly suppressed through naked bureaucratic interventions. The situation continues the same to date in all the streams of the Indian communist movement, whether parliamentary or non-parliamentary.

The perceptions concerning the nationality question in India were even more curious. For several decades after the formation of the CPI this important question was not even recognised. Then suddenly, as if a revelation occurred to the leadership, the question was taken up in a heavily truncated fashion. Two factors resulted in this revelation. Firstly, the mechanical materialist formulations of Stalin popularised by Soviet ideologues. Secondly, the adoption of the Pakistan Resolution by the Muslim League in 1940. What the CPI did was to combine the Stalinist formulations and the communal demand of the Muslim League and the Sikh outfits. Suddenly ideologues (EMS, Sundarayya, Adhikari) were directly asked by the central committee to produce studies on Kerala, Andhra and Punjab respectively. These studies had nothing original with them. They were all mechanical materialist “applications” of Stalin’s formulations, which were implemented in the Soviet Union, and which subsequently played a major role in the collapse of the Soviet Union itself.

In a 1946 Memorandum of the CPI to the British Cabinet Mission submitted by P C Joshi the following is stated : “We suggest that the Provisional Government should be charged with the task of setting up a Boundaries Commission to redraw the boundaries on the basis of natural ancient homelands of every people, so that the re-demarcated provinces become, as far as possible, linguistically and culturally homogenous national units. ...The people of each such unit should have the unfettered right of self-determination, i.e., the right to decide freely whether they will join the Indian Union or form a separate sovereign state or another Indian Union. “This was the official position of the CPI on the eve of independence. Anyone who cares to go through Stalin’s formulations on the nationality question will readily understand that the CPI was only faithfully parroting the supreme master.

The somersault that was affected after the surrender to the “progressive national bourgeoisie” in 1951 was even more pathetic. From being the open advocate of multinational India they overnight became the most ardent and faithful advocates of one India. All the studies and documents to the contrary were withdrawn and obliterated as if no such position had ever been taken by the party. The cadres and sympathisers were asked to forget the earlier brave words. Why this abrupt switch? There is no great mystery at all about this. The withdrawal of armed struggle and the embracing of economism and the

parliamentary process yield no space for any sort of positive position on the nationality question. Advocating the nationality question is unconstitutional and one simply cannot fight elections while opposing the Constitution of the country. Of course, the CPI and the later-day CPI (M) never bothered to explain anything to the cadres and sympathisers concerning the regressive somersault. That only shows the contempt in which the leadership holds the followers.

When, after independence, the struggle for linguistic reorganisation of States broke out in different linguistic formations across the country the CPI was compelled to take a supportive position not because of any understanding of the latent but highly potent nationality question inherent in the struggles, but because of the clear prospect of isolation from the masses of people. And the leaderships of all these struggles were not with any national political party, as the CPI characterised itself, but with regional linguistically based groups. It is also important to note that in spite of the CPI and CPI (M) ignoring, denouncing and deliberately working against the maturing of the nationality question to the best of their ability the question as such did not vanish. When the nationality question subsequently emerged in different parts of the country in violent / and highly organised forms (the North East, Punjab, Jammu & Kashmir etc.) It is clear for everyone to see that the official left parties are the most vociferous apologists of national "integrity." They are perfectly unaware, or perhaps do not want to be aware, about the deep-rooted contemporary structural and historical factors leading to the eruption of the national question in militant forms. In any case, the nationality question simply does not fit into their scheme of things and hence need not be even understood. Discounting serious structural factors and their short- and long-term implications for the sake of opportunistic politics is their brand of dialectical materialism. Their epistemology stops far short of the methods and needs to understand social reality and as such is clearly anti-Marxist.

One-sided emphasis on the development of productive forces, and hence the total dependency on the theory of productive forces, has been the bane of the communist movement not only in the Indian context, but worldwide. This has been traced to Karl Marx himself. With the founding fathers of Marxism this assumed the form of a philosophical question. Communist revolutions will certainly occur in the then advanced capitalist countries was the basic postulate of Marx and Engels. This postulate was based on the deteriorating conditions of the working class and ever increasing conflict between labour and capital. But it did not happen like that. Revolution first occurred in backward Russia and later in the semi-feudal and even more backward China. Moreover, it has come to light that one of the main reasons for the revolution not happening in the advanced capitalist countries was the inexorable process of colonial looting, a share of which also went to the home working class. In other words, the growing conflict between labour and capital could be mitigated to a great extent in the advanced capitalist countries by means of sharing the colonial loot. This process literally emasculated the European working class and converted them into willing collaborators. Politically, this process was marked by the communists becoming social democrats.

Philosophically, the formulation that socialism and communism are possible only when man more and more dominates and controls the non-human reality and thus removes all vestiges of scarcity, is at the root of this issue. That is why, to date, it has not been possible for the Marxists to systematically develop a socialist ecology or even to develop a broad alliance with those sections who are fighting for basic ecological and environmental rights. Marxists are nowhere in the picture in this all important fight even though the dire need for such a global fight cannot be overemphasised in the developing situation.

Public ownership of means of production can by no means be equated with socialism. The state can be as ruthless an exploiter as anyone else. Moreover, the interests of the state need not represent the interests of the people. It depends on what the character of the state is, which means what are the class interests that any state is serving. It has also been repeatedly proved by history that the working class cannot be equated with the liberator class or section of people. The light for liberation has evolved into a highly complex phenomenon and there is no simple equation to define it. It was the signal contribution of Mao that he could identify the revolutionising of production relations as the key propeller of social change and egalitarianism. He tried this in the context of China and failed. But he could successfully identify the basic question. Mao's emphasis on revolutionising production relations also meant that the process has to be a long drawn-out and continuing one. On the other hand, unilaterally emphasising on productive forces is what the capitalist forces all through their class history has been doing, and when communists also do the same there ceases to be any qualitative difference between the two. This is what people have seen in both Russia and China where capitalism in all its ugly aspects has come back with a vengeance and social and economic inequalities are at the top of the world scale.

In this context, it is important to note that Marx and Engels while strongly predicting socialist revolution did not leave any blueprint on how a future socialist society can be organised. Those who succeeded to their legacy were equally blank on this important question. Both Lenin and Stalin and all the political rivals of Stalin, whom he exterminated, had nothing to offer but the development of productive forces which only could guarantee a socialist system and satisfy the needs of the people. As noted earlier the only exception was Mao, who could not succeed due to overwhelming opposition from within the CPC. It is also to be recognised that the serious ecological and environmental problems which are threatening the very existence of the planet itself are largely the result of the mindless craving for the expansion of productive forces and the Marxists are no exception at all to this general capitalist logic driven by profit motivation. Both Marxists and capitalists wholeheartedly agree that high speed industrialisation is the only way forward for humanity. In India this is what people are witnessing through the illustration of Nandigram and Singur in West Bengal, a State that is ruled by social democrats for the last three decades.

Is Nandigram an aberration? It is certainly not. The first communist led State government in Kerala had the same perspective as the present State government in Bengal has. One of the first projects initiated by the EMS government was to invite the Birla group to start up a big rayon manufacturing plant in the State. Incredible concessions, which included almost free supply of raw materials,

electricity and water and more than sufficient land at nominal lease rate, were given by the communist government. Birla jumped at the opportunity to make super profits and established the factory in Mavoor employing around 4000 workers.

It will be interesting to look at the balance sheet of this factory after nearly sixty years. This factory has cleaned out the rich bamboo wealth of the State. When raw materials scarcity became obvious the government gave them permission to clear fell natural forests and plant fast growing water guzzling trees like acacia and eucalyptus to feed the factory. The perennial Chaliyar flowing by one side of the factory became so polluted that all economic activities on the river came to an end thereby affecting tens of thousands of people. Cancer of various types became endemic in the whole area killing hundreds and crippling thousands. Chaliyar became a dead river and lakhs of people were severely affected. When the people rose up demanding unconditional closure of the factory the workers owing allegiance to the social democratic parties were the most aggressive against the suffering people. Even then, it was after a more than a year long struggle that the factory could be closed down. The Birlas went off leaving behind a devastated land and people without owning any sort of responsibility. In truth no kind of environmental study was done before the factory was started. The CPI government was so keen to develop productive forces and create factory workers that such studies were considered dispensable. The present generation of social democrats in power in Kerala are talking in terms of reclaiming the sea to start special economic zones because the State is land scare. There is no coastal area in Kerala that is not inhabited and how many Nandigrams will come up there if the project gets going is anybody's guess. Farmers and fisher folk are considered disposable people as long as industrialisation proceeds at high speed. This is the path adopted by the CPC once capitalism was restored there.

What Mavoor or Nandigram point out is that there is no essential difference between the perspectives of a multinational corporation and a so-called communist party regarding economic growth. Both wholeheartedly believe only in the theory of productive forces. Also, the borderline between private and public, which was earlier projected by the social democrats as capitalism and socialism has also disappeared or is fast disappearing. One of the most fundamental requirements for international capital to flow in is that there should be no labour laws worth the name and the workers should be docile and ready to work in any condition as demanded by the bosses. Both the Bengal and Kerala governments are working overtime to attract global capital, which according to WTO stipulations, enjoys national status which means that the laws and regulations of the local governments are not applicable. SEZs are virtually sovereign enclaves.

When Deng Hsiao-ping said that it does not matter whether the cat is white or black as long as it catches mice it was probably the most precise enunciation of the theory of productive forces. This is not vulgar pragmatism but vulgar pragmatism elevated to philosophical, epistemological levels. This is a world view and it is this worldview that is deciding the actions of the most rapacious capitalist as well as the, self-proclaimed socialists. In other words, the latter has

no alternative to present before the people and this is the trap in which the Indian Marxists are caught in and getting increasingly enmeshed. To develop an alternative it is imperative first to recognise that Marxism is not something value-free or akin to the so-called exact sciences. It is another matter that even the exact sciences cannot be value-free. It is essentially a stream of social science in which the humanist content should never be ignored. On the contrary, the prime duty of every genuine Marxist is to perpetually strive for the enrichment of the humanist content which was there present, though imperfectly, in the works of the founding fathers. Mao recognised this content of Marxism and strove to develop it. That is why in the present era of neo-colonialism, Mao despite his mistakes can be the starting point to forge a powerful fighting front to dethrone the common enemies of mankind and the planet. Social democrats, as is all too clearly shown by Nandigram, Singur and other similar episodes, are increasingly getting exposed as the devoted managers for these enemies of mankind and the planet, and this makes it unreal and whimsical to expect anything pro-people or positive from them. They are in competition with other bourgeois political parties on the question of who can be the most efficient manager and for this purpose they are using socialist and working class rhetoric and attempt every means to divide the people—the best means to serve the enemies who are global in character. □□□