

NON-MARXIST SOCIALISM

New Face of Socialism

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The tussle between capitalism and socialism as alternative visions of human society is not yet over. It is like the old fable of the race between a hare and a tortoise. At times one seems to be the winner. At other times the other seems to be leading. Capitalism is like the hare of the story. It looks fast, impressive and dynamic but after some time it is tired and resting with its own contradictions. In the end, it is the tortoise of socialism which will prevail. But that end is yet to be arrived at.

Capitalism looked supreme and unchallengeable in the later decades of the past century. With the disintegration of USSR, reverting of China, Vietnam and many other communist countries to the path of capitalism, and downfall of social democracy in Europe, there was no challenge to capitalism. Thus 'end of history' was arrogantly announced. Market fundamentalism of Reagan and Thatcher varieties started ruling over the world. But soon many crises arrived. Ecological crisis with the dangers of climate change and global warming on the one hand, and the global financial crisis with the worst recession since the thirties on the other, shook the faith in the supremacy and immortality of capitalist civilization. Added to these were the growing crises of hunger, malnutrition, homelessness, violence and war. The number of hungry people in the world kept growing and crossed the figure of 100 crores in the first decade of the twenty-first century i.e. every sixth person on the earth today remains underfed and starved. This is perhaps the biggest and the most glaring failure of capitalism. Even after more than two centuries of the industrial revolution and miraculous progress of science and technology, it is unable to fulfil even the most basic need of the humankind.

The twenty-first century therefore started with new doubts about the supremacy, desirability and invincibility of capitalism. Search of alternatives began with new vigour. The word 'Socialism' once again gained currency and became a talking point. But what kind of socialism? What does it mean? How is it different from what was experimented within the last century which apparently failed? There seems to be a lot of confusion.

While the debate of violence v/s non-violence is never-ending (it has become more a matter of faith than logic based on actual experience), it is a historical fact that long armed struggles, if successful, lead to centralized dictatorial regimes. It is natural because they have to organize themselves on military pattern where there is no scope for debate and differences. They are always amidst a war where obeying the commander without questioning is necessary. As Gandhi pointed out, means start influencing and determining the ends. Thus, democratic and broadly non-violent means suit the goal of socialism, although one should guard against co-option and dilution. The worlds of 'radical' and 'violent' should not be confused. Non-violent movements can also be quite radical and revolutionary.

How Socialism will look like in the new century is still not very clear. It will certainly be not like state capitalism of USSR. No one would like to repeat the mistakes and horrors of the Stalin era. Nor will it be like 'market socialism' of Chinese variety, where socialist principles have disappeared and what has remained is a total subservience to world market added by one of the worst dictatorships of modern times. It will also not be the social democracy of Europe that has little relevance for the poor underdeveloped part of the world. Socialism cannot also be equated to mere nationalization and establishment of public sector in an otherwise capitalist setup, as people have seen its limitation and failure in India.

Most of the leftists today reject all three past models of socialism, but they are not sure of what really ailed them? They are also not sure of what is the alternative path. There is a lot of discussion on forms of ownership and management. It is indeed important. But little attention is paid to the question of scale, technology, life style and development model, which have emerged as crucial factors. (See, for example, the recent book by Michael A Lebowitz, 'Build it Now : Socialism for the 21st Century', Monthly Review Press, 2006 or a background note by Abhay Shukla prepared for a meeting on 'Socialism in the 21st Century', at Nagpur, in the last week of July 2010). The colonial question (with neo-colonial and internal colonial forms) also remains neglected and under-emphasized, and its full implications are not recognized.

It is clear now that socialism can be built only on an alternative model of development. People need radically different and alternative kind of industries, technology, life style and values than what have historically developed under capitalism. Small units, labour-intensive techniques, alternative energy, local management, respect for diversity and harmony with nature will be important elements of this development.

The state of neglect and exploitation of agriculture and other primary sector activities should be reversed. Assisted by nature, they are the activities that really produce and create values. Industries only reshape and reform them. Services only circulate and redistribute the values created by agriculture and industry. But, while giving prime place to primary activities, what is needed is vibrant industries too. The present state of total dominance of (and dependence on) agriculture in village life is, in fact, a distortion. It is a colonial legacy, continued after independence and intensified further. A significant part of the village population has to be diverted to industries. But those industries will be small units, labour-intensive and mainly village based. Villages and small towns have to be again made centre of development. Mega-cities with large slums are unmanageable and unsustainable. Some of the highly developed urban civilizations like Indus Valley and Maya could not sustain themselves and disappeared. If people want to avoid the same fate, a kind of de-urbanization has to be planned and promoted by providing employment, prosperity and basic facilities to villages.

Dalit and women activists may not agree. They have a legitimate fear that they will never find an equal and respectable place in traditional village life. But then what is the option? Even after six decades of independence and planned development, large number of Dalits live in villages. In the cities, they are confined to slums. If one leaves out reservations in jobs, which in any case can lift only a very small proportion of Dalit population and which are also now shrinking due to privatization, the place for Dalits in cities is only in slums and ill-paid informal jobs. At the time of independence, there were a number of factories in cities employing tens of thousands of workers such as textile mills of Mumbai and jute mills of Kolkata. There was a hope that they would grow in number and Dalits and Shudras would get jobs in them and also a

more egalitarian space. But even those hopes are shattered now. With growing mechanization, now there is no hope for providing respectable employment to Dalits and OBCs in any significant number. There is no alternative but to struggle to transform the village society. Had Ambedkar been alive today, he would have perhaps reconsidered his call to Dalits to leave village. He would have certainly opposed the modern development and globalization which has destroyed village industry, handicrafts and traditional livelihoods affecting Dalits and Shudras the most.

Moreover, villages in a socialist society will not be the same traditional village. Struggle to build a new society may get it transformed with less hierarchy, more equality and more freedom.

Each village and its Gram Sabha should be given autonomy and full powers to run the village administration and decide about their daily life matters including 'Jal-Jungle-Jamin', but adequate legal protection of civil liberties and fundamental rights of every resident including those belonging to weaker sections should be ensured. Most of the powers of central and state governments should be transferred to a district level elected government along with village and town councils. State will perhaps never wither away, but it can be radically decentralized, democratized, cut to size, and brought closer to people. Direct democracy should replace present indirect and incomplete democracy in India whose failures are too apparent to be ignored.

The dilemma of public vs private sector cannot be resolved without reference to the question of model of development. There is a third alternative of 'people's sector' meaning ownership and management by community, but that is possible only when the structure of economy is decentralized and the forces of consumerism (promoting greed and individualism) are effectively banned. If there are very few large units and the economy is mostly dominated by cottage, mini and small units of industries and services, they can be allowed to remain in private hands with strict discouragement to the tendencies of concentration and monopoly. An upper limit can be fixed to income, salaries, wealth and property as is done in India in case of agricultural landholding. There will be certainly no place for MNCs and big corporations and their harmful advertisements in a new society. Large units, if unavoidable, can be managed by workers with society retaining overall control. One can learn a lot in this matter from ongoing experiments of co-management and co-operation in Latin America. In case of agriculture, collective farms and state ownership of land is not advisable but cooperation in various forms is. Collective use and ownership of natural resources (other than land) should be promoted, and one can learn from already existing (but now threatened) traditional forms of them. Absentee land ownership should be banned and 'land to the tiller' should be the norm. It should be noted that equal distribution of agricultural land among all rural families in India would be a foolish act making landholdings very small and uneconomic. (It may be a different case in other countries where population density is low and there are big landlords owning thousands of acres of land). Existing inequality in Indian countryside, conflicts over land, and the problem of high attachment to land can be removed and resolved only by industrializing the countryside and diverting a significant part of rural population to non-agricultural occupations.

After the experience of communism, it is not possible to do away with market. It is also not necessary either. Market may remain, but its powers should be taken away. It should serve as a servant of the society, and not the master. It should be controlled and guided in the interest of

society. Markets should be more localized, competitive and equal. The poor countries of the world have to certainly break away from the present chain of international trade, investment and finance which is unequal, dominating, exploiting, crises-creating and a tool of imperialism. Trade and cooperation among the poor countries is preferable. 'Exchange among the equals' should be the guideline.

But there should be no market and no business of certain things like water, education and health. Allowing market for them means limiting access to them to the rich and denying the poor. It is inhuman and barbaric. Even if a limited inequality of income is allowed (Lohia suggested that the ratio of maximum to minimum income should not be more than 10:1), there should be no discrimination in case of education, health, food, nutrition etc. A minimum of basic necessities should be ensured for everyone. Society and the state (including local governments) have to take up that responsibility. Cuba can be a model for this. It has the best health service in the world, completely funded by the state. If a low-income, tiny island nation can do it, why not other countries?

If there are multiple sources of domination and exploitation in a capitalist system, the struggle against it also has to be fought by heterogeneous and diverse forces jointly. Unorganized and informal workers, peasants, artisans, fisherman, cattle growers, tribals, Dalits, coloured people, women, hawkers, displaced communities and such other victims of the system have to combine and fight together. It is not easy, but there is no other way. Because of this diversity and heterogeneity also, the struggle has to be democratic, participatory, non-dominating, broadly non-violent and with a collective leadership.

These are some of the broad principles, guidelines and hints for building a socialist society in the new century which emerge from the past experience. All details need not be chalked out in advance and should be left to the people to decide in the course of the struggle and construction.

'Liberty, equality and fraternity' were the ideals of French Revolution which inspired revolutionaries for last two centuries. Now in the twenty-first century, other principles of decentralization, diversity, self-reliance, simple life and non-violence have to be added to them. And that will define the socialism of the new century. □

[Source : Kafil]

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