

State, Politics, Conflict and Social Transformation

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The face of urban India has changed considerably in recent years and changed pretty fast. This is true more of metropolitan cities, but smaller cities and towns are also in the race. Indeed, villages close to many district headquarters or bigger towns in some advanced states also wear a somewhat changed look.

Looking slightly deeper into this changing face, one can see a massive explosion or expansion of the market. Today people live in a society where almost everything is available in the market or there is a market for almost everything. Thanks to continuing scientific and technological progress, changing lifestyles and living and working conditions, consumer profiles and tastes are changing fast, with new needs being generated and aroused almost on a daily basis. Corresponding to this tremendous proliferation of needs, citizens have a continuing explosion of commodities. This fact—of things, goods as well as services, turning into commodities, commodification of things so to say—is a defining feature of the present-day society. From education and health to basic gifts of nature like water, everything is being commodified and commercialised at a furious pace.

Also almost everywhere small units are giving way to or being marginalised or taken over by big firms and big brands, scale of production is also being restructured. Many industrial units have closed down, almost all big units including those in the public sector and government departments are employing less people today than they were even a decade ago. But the growing domination of the big over the small goes to show one thing very clearly -that production is being increasingly socialised. All the decentralised and home-based production is as a rule not an expression of self-sufficiency or isolated and individualised production, but only an extension of socialisation of production or incorporation of more links in the chain of socialised production.

But while production is being increasingly socialised, what about ownership and control? On this score, the trend is inevitably towards greater privatisation. The government is downsizing its direct economic involvement and public sector units are being privatised in varying degrees and in a variety of ways. Privatisation has become one of the most sacred mantras chanted by almost every government around.

Away from the world of manufacturing and production, one can also see the growing impact of capital in every other sphere of social life. One cannot but feel the ever-expanding domination of mega corporations transmitted through the market, media and the state. Simultaneously, massive volumes of capital are breaking free from the trajectory of production and exploring newer avenues of speculation in search of

ever quicker and bigger profits. Aided by unprecedented technological advances, capital is now truly in search of unfettered freedom and mobility.

Now, these are features that can be observed and verified as much in India as perhaps in most other countries of the world. The term globalisation seems to best convey and capture the global sweep, scale and impact of these developments and hence its rise to the status of the number one buzzword of recent times. But globalisation says little about the content of the social system. Hence some people insist on qualifying globalisation as corporate globalisation or capitalist or imperialist globalisation.

But is globalisation the only or overriding feature of the society and economy? Are not there vast areas and hundreds of millions of people in the country who seem to be untouched by the sweeping economic march of globalisation? There can be little dispute regarding the answer: it's an unquestionable yes. Instead of dying out, precapitalist and pre-modern patterns continue to survive in Indian economy, society and culture. Not only is the old stubbornly surviving, in many areas and in many ways it is also staging a comeback of sorts.

Feudalism in the form of brutal extra-economic coercion, massacres for instance, may appear to be a phenomenon confined to some obscure villages in distant Bihar, but social oppression, and prejudices and adverse discrimination against adivasis and indigenous tribal communities, dalits and other oppressed castes and groups, and women at large are very much a pan-Indian reality. Caste panchayats that still lynch and hang dissenters for violating traditions and attempting inter-caste marriages, temples and traditions that glorify *sati* all survive quite close to political and financial capitals. With the fabled green revolution running into a crisis there lie scars of bondage and usury all over Punjab, the powerhouse of India's rural economic development. In many areas of corporatised agriculture, in the horticultural farms of Karnataka for example one finds young girls being forced to work in conditions of bondage. The same pattern prevails in SEZs and export-oriented industries in many parts of the country. In Patiala, the current and erstwhile fiefdom of Punjab Chief Minister Amrinder Singh, female foetuses lie buried in wells, while even the celebrated Kerala model of human development has to bow reverentially to all kinds of anti-women prejudices sanctified in the name of religion and tradition.

Will not a few more years of globalisation automatically take care of all that is backward and obscurantist in the country? Such a conjecture does not have the backing of either history or relevant contemporary international experience. It was British colonialism which had actually organised landlordism in India which in turn had provided a strong internal basis for more than two hundred years of colonial rule and plunder. From the erstwhile Soviet Union and Eastern Europe to all over Central and West Asia, recent history is replete with instances of enormous social and economic destruction and the rise of sectarian and fanatical forces aided and abetted by the self-styled champions of globalised democracy and development.

Indeed, the co-existence between vast areas of backwardness and globalising capitalism is not accidental but symbiotic. Capital would hate to lose its abundant access to cheap labour that is guaranteed by the continued survival of pre-modern

relations and pockets of retarded development. And even where capital is compelled to break down pre-modern barriers, it cannot but continuously polarise society between extreme accumulation of wealth and power at one end and of untold misery and plight at the other. as much from the brutalities of capitalism as from the barbarities of the pre-capitalist survivals, as much from distorted pattern of development as from the lack of any development.

The economy, it is said growing at eight percent per year, but jobs are declining and the proportion of people below the poverty line is being reduced only through statistical manipulation. Otherwise, after six decades of freedom and four decades of green revolution one would not be seeing starvation deaths all over the country. Add to this the phenomenon of farmers' suicides— Union Agriculture Minister Sharad Pawar himself acknowledged a staggering one hundred thousand plus peasant suicides between 1993 and 2003 on the floor of Parliament and the number is increasing everyday. The situation of acute distress is not really very different in most of urban areas—the combination of utter lack of basic amenities, acute infrastructural shortage, unplanned expansion and growing unemployment can be quite lethal in many ways and even big metros have of late been experiencing it quite frequently.

This is the context in which people have to consider the question of social transformation. Incremental social change is taking place continuously, but such changes have not ushered in a society that can be described as significantly more just and democratic than the one Indians were born into. This is why the agenda of social transformation demands a radical structural shift and not just more of the same.

Where does the Indian state stand in relation to this agenda of social transformation? Seldom has the state, spelt out its priorities as clearly and emphatically as today when it is pursuing the agenda of closer and more comprehensive integration with the US-led world order.

The concern for independence, is an anachronistic obsession in today's globalised world where India is anyway recognised as an emerging economic power and a de facto nuclear weapons state. But how come the stubbornness of feudal survivals does not ever appear anachronistic to these gentlemen? They have never felt ashamed of the state's failure to implement land reforms and eliminate acute poverty in all these fifty-nine years of independence. The lack of political will to do away with the vestiges of landlordism is as defining a feature of the Indian state as is its enthusiastic courting of the American superpower.

It is this collusion with feudal survivals and imperialist offensive which makes India structurally vulnerable to the spectre of communal fascism. Between the Ram Janambhoomi campaign and the Gujarat genocide, people got a real glimpse of the fascist threat in India. The worst may seem to have been over with the ongoing crisis of orientation and organisation facing the BJP, but the structural context in which the threat could really assume such alarming proportions is still very much there. If India does not have a vibrant anti-imperialist and modern-democratic national identity, Indians would always be in danger of relapsing into the quagmire of Hindutva, the disastrous politics of Hindu nationalism.

A lot has been said of late about the so-called retreat of the nation-state in the face of globalisation. There are many who welcome it in the name of greater individual freedom. Is the state really beating a retreat? It has certainly retreated in relation to the forays and flows of capital, both foreign and domestic. It is increasingly withdrawing itself from a host of direct economic activities. But has that meant greater freedom for the common citizen? Has that translated into greater social expenditure and public accountability? Within ten months of enacting the Right to Information Act, the death warrant was already out for this so-called landmark legislation, and it has taken massive opposition from many quarters to get the warrant stayed for the time being. The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act remains a showpiece of legislative tokenism, and reports of large-scale violations are coming in from almost all the 200 districts where it is currently in force.

Most importantly, has the state become any less repressive or more sensitive to the constitutionally proclaimed democratic rights of the citizens? If anything state is getting increasingly militarised, not only in its external dimension but also in its internal functioning. In the name of maintaining national security and law and order, and tackling terrorism and extremism, the state is increasingly arming itself with more black laws, more funds for weapons and forces and more sophisticated means and institutionalised patterns of repression.

While beating a measured retreat in certain selected areas, the Indian state is relentlessly advancing the pro-globalisation agenda, concentrating in its own job of leading the campaign and monitoring its implementation, using all its might to secure absolute compliance of the people and making necessary tactical adjustments in order to manufacture and sustain a working consent over the whole thing. And from Gurgaon to Kalinganagar, the state has shown time and again that it really means business and how. While it is preaching the market mantra to the toiling masses and the middle classes, look at all the goodies it is offering to the corporate sector for setting up special economic zones which are nothing but super exemption zones for the corporate sector and special eviction zones for the peasantry and the rural and urban poor.

It is impossible to win the battle of social transformation without also transforming or radically restructuring the state. To be more precise, this restructuring would actually entail replacing the existing state which is the product of a certain social order and designed to sustain it and pursue a certain agenda with a new state propelled by a new class coalition committed to the agenda of social transformation. The new state will have a much larger social base and work on the basis of the political will and active political identification and mobilisation of a much larger proportion of the society. Hence it should be able to practise more extensive and effective democracy internally and enjoy much stronger bargaining capacity and strength of resistance in relation to imperialism.

In other words, the goal of social transformation can only be meaningfully pursued through the politics of social transformation aimed at bringing about a new social order and a new state. This brings in the larger question of polity and conflict, the two words that quite suggestively appear as the bridge between the state and social transformation.

Politics is often described as the art of the possible. And the word possible is interpreted in a way in which it is delinked from any notion of desirability and treated just as a variant of the existing order or shape of things. In this way politics acquires a vulgar and entirely pragmatic connotation - an art of managing the existing order and making people conform to the system. In the radical politics of social transformation, the art of the possible is backed by an objective analysis of the actually existing but also constantly stretched and guided by a vision of the desirable.

Between the politics of status quo and the radical politics of nodal transformation there may be a whole range of intermediate forms and shades some of which may even claim to be apolitical. Pitted against the politics, of manufacture of consent, there lies a whole series of schools of dissent, not all of them contemplating a thoroughgoing social transformation. Single-issue movements and specific expressions of dissent certainly have their own relevance, but social transformation cannot just be the sum total of only individual movements or expressions of dissent or protest. Without a comprehensive vision and a clear act of political and structural transformation, social transformation is bound to remain just an unfulfilled promise.

As for conflict, it is not difficult to see that the existing society sustains itself through a series of inherent conflicts.

The most basic conflict in the society is of course that between socialised production and private appropriation and control. Capital is nothing but the crystallisation of this essential conflict. Resolve this conflict and capital will be reduced to just machine, technology, natural resources and human labour. This conflict is codified in terms of law and sought to be sanctified in the name of tradition, contained with the help of state power and legitimised in the form of a commonsense that sees everything as a natural and eternal division of labour, but that does not alter the basic or inherent nature of the conflict. Of course not all conflicts are equally fundamental in nature. In the course of managing and containing the basic conflict between socialised production and private appropriation, the system generates and encounters a whole range of secondary conflicts some of which may even threaten to derail the system at times.

Instances of such secondary conflicts are so numerous that the fundamental conflict is often relegated to the background or even pushed into invisibility. In its early days capitalism had produced a very clear discourse of classes. From economics to politics, the idea of class struggle dominated everywhere. The Communist Manifesto began with the observation that the whole of written, recorded history has been a history of class struggle. And Marxism distinguished itself from other ideologies not merely on the basis that it recognised classes and class struggle (this was rather what it shared in common with many other social ideologies), but in terms of the destination of class struggle and how the goal is to be pursued constantly and consistently through changing conditions and through every twist and turn in the situation. But today only Marxists seem to be talking of class struggle. The discourse of capitalism has brought individual citizens and customers, or rather political and economic customers, to the fore. The glamour of the market has eclipsed the key spheres of production and distribution. In fact, the spotlight seems to have shifted from production to speculation.

All members of the classes are of course not always and fully aware of the conflict. But they are never far removed from the reality of class struggle.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and serious crisis facing the remaining countries that call themselves socialist, liberal democratic capitalism has once again begun to proclaim itself as the ultimate destination of history, as the highest order attainable by human society. But can a system that fulfils the greed of a few while rejecting the needs of the many ever be considered democratic in content? A quick look at the developed world will reveal how most countries are shedding their democratic and welfare pretensions. In the “Confessions of an Economic Hit Man”, John Parkins rightly describes the US, the self-styled greatest democracy of the world, as a corporatocracy. Even otherwise, the inherent anarchy of the capitalist order has now assumed alarming proportions giving rise to growing mayhem in the market and society and making life increasingly more chaotic and uncertain.

In spite of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the serious challenges facing socialism, the quest for an alternative to capitalism therefore has become more relevant than ever before. The choice is not between brutal or decent (more brutal or less brutal) capitalism, but can only be between barbarism and socialism, as a great twentieth century revolutionary put it. The communist vision of a society functioning on the principle “from each according to his or her ability, to each according to his or her needs”, a society which would not need a state but would instead be self-governing, comprised essentially of a free association of free producers, where abundance of material goods would not only eliminate the very notion of poverty but provide humanity with real freedom to discover itself and live in harmony with nature, remains an inexhaustible source of inspiration and guidance for the quest for an alternative to the present order. *⚡⚡⚡*