

Hard Times

Progressives are in short supply. And communists ever since the collapse of actually existing socialism in the Soviet bloc in the 1980s have been suffering from a crisis of identity. Also, those who used to echo the ideological puritanism of Maoist China are in limbo because what remains in post-Mao China today is an apology of socialism. As for socialists and social-democrats socialism makes little sense but 'market socialism' does. No political party on the left has chosen to forward any socialist alternatives, albeit socialism is no longer a dirty word even in western Europe. As global financial crisis is worsening, affecting all, big economies and small economies as well, even die-hard rightists argue in favour of nationalisation, not privatisation. Then there are liberals and democrats who are happy with their world of civil liberties and human rights which are being violated somewhat nakedly by all governments, irrespective of the parties that run them. People are in a dilemma as to how to differentiate progressives from reactionaries. Also human rights movement is an urban affair, having very little impact on rural population. Public Interest Litigation cases again make sensational news items without altering the ground reality. Yet it is a way of airing grievances. And Right to Information Act is yet another sophisticated area where political parties, progressive and not-so progressive as well, show little enthusiasm.

In electoral politics progressiveness is measured by the relief ordinary people get from the parties in power. As India lives at many levels, parliamentary parties find it easy to duel on secondary issues while diverting public attention from primary issues all the time. As voters have very little choice before them they would like to choose the lesser evil, no doubt, but sometimes even the lesser evil is not so lesser. Major parties or 'mainstream parties' ignore the promises they make before every election, voters are increasingly switching over to regional outfits, hoping somewhat against hope that they would liberate them from their precarious existence. More and more people are in desperate mood to look for new alternatives without succeeding much. These regional groups are no lesser evils. Some are out and out casteist, some are communal while others are notoriously parochial and provincial in outlook. Many are reactionary to the core opposing progressive forces in every possible way, yet regionalism is on the rise.

As the middle class is getting strength numerically and becoming politically assertive with every passing day regionalism seems to be the simplest device to share exchequer and hoodwink the unemployed and deprived. So demand for smaller states (or some kind of autonomous administration) is the logical culmination of regional politics. Creating more states means multiplying bureaucracy without really effectively increasing job opportunities. But every body thinks competition for government jobs which are in any case limited, will be less competitive in a state of their own. But job seekers are increasing in geometric progression shattering the utopia that the sons of the soil dream of. The smaller states of Jharkhand and Uttarakhand have not succeeded in solving the unemployment problem because government is in no position to control business and job market but big businesses certainly control government and its regulators.

Nepali speaking people of Darjeeling are not satisfied with Gorkhaland Hill Council. They want a separate state. With all major parties opposing a separate entity for Nepalis, albeit the BJP keeps the agitationists in good humour by covertly pampering them, the Gorkha Land agitation has reached a stage where violence can hardly be avoided. As the leaders with elitist and middle class background become more ambitious and desperate to have their heaven in a very short time they are antagonising the tribals of Dooars who feel threatened from the Gorkhaland movement. Result : ethnic clashes and riots. The CPM-led left front seems to have

heaved a sigh of relief because there is every possibility the movement may lose momentum, getting bogged down in a communal mess.

Communal card is a well tested tool to make public diversion and silence the aggrieved. While the saffron brigade basically relies on religious divide, other players are equally mischievous in utilising caste and ethnic antagonism to their advantage. Having failed to tame the Gorkha agitationists the ruling Marxists of Bengal now see a ray of hope in tribal backlash against the Gorkhas. The policy of divide and rule works fine. And ethnicity is such a strong identity impulse that political parties can bank on for years to come.

Regionalists are not really arguing for more than a welfare administration. Unless they do that in concrete terms popular support they enjoy at the moment is bound to wane. After all the world is passing through difficult times. It is all the more important now to see changing events in a global framework, not a regional or sub-regional one because the enormity of the crisis demands new ideas that, until recently, seemed unthinkable. □□□