

Left-Out Lefts

Ranjit Sau

A self-styled vanguard left-party of India had committed two Himalayan blunders. One was, not long ago, refusing to join a coalition government in Delhi to be led by, as prime minister, a veteran member of the same party. The second was, the other day, forming a third front with non-Congress-non-BJP-secular parties, evidently all regional outfits except one or two, to contest in the last general election. Why was this volteface to embrace now coalition dharma at the centre?

The party has governed one state for 32 years at a stretch, a world record-breaking tenacity of its kind. Power, narcissism, greed has entered its head. Anyway, what was the model that eventually burst into the second blunder?

Model: In the existing semifeudal-capitalist polity Congress is bourgeois, BJP feudal, and the rest, who deserve the title of *non-non-sec* parties in short, are all proletariat ripe for revolutionary indoctrination and strategic instruction. The third front designed to attract these non-non-sec entities. The tantalising bait for their leaders was prime minister's crown.

Response was terrific. One candidate had already proclaimed in Parliament: "I too want to be PM;" the audience laughed. Another worthy spread the word around that he qualified for the top job because none from his state, the financial capital of the country, had ever been a prime minister. A third boasted: under this person's rule the state, largest in the country, had famously erected largest number of statues of elephant all over the place. A handful of other hopefuls kept mum awaiting the right moment to strike. However, as soon as poll results poured in, non-non-secs rushed to surrender at the feet of the bourgeois. That's the end, if for a while, of the stylised model.

Secularism: For the third front, secularism was the paramount slogan for election campaign. But, evidently the front did not know what secularism is.

The holy Bible is the earliest testimony to ordain separation of profane from sacred, state from church: "Render unto Caesar the things which be Caesar's, and unto God which be God's" (Book of Luke. 20:25, *Bible*, p. 1089). The first political statement of secularism was in the Declaration of Independence (1776), followed by the First Amendment of the American Constitution. By a decree in 1890, Brazil affected separation between state and church.

Laicism, in English, (*Laicite* in French), is a French concept akin to secularism, connoting the absence of religious intervention in government affairs, and vice versa. The term has been used since the late 19th century to signify freedom of public institutions from the influence of Catholic Church. Laicism is respect for freedom of thought and of religion, division between private life and public sphere. It was introduced first in public education. Although, during the 20th century, it evolved to equal treatment of all religions, more restrictive interpretation of the term is being witnessed since 2004.

By number of faithful, Islam in France is the second largest faith, albeit split into several disparate sects. The-then interior minister, Nicolas Sarkozy, now president of France, initiated a national council of Islam with membership of over one thousand mosques and prayer centres. Thereby he had ushered in an

innovation to bring them to a common platform for articulation, exchange and representation of causes they uphold. Other mainstream religions in France have long enjoyed such facility. These organisations serve as channels by which each of them communicates directly with the government. What is, however, missing is a unifying ambience, an institution of all religions together where they could come to know each other the same way—sort of a grand congress of all faiths.

John Rawls, arguably the most influential political philosopher of the past century, suggested a notion of ‘public reason’ analogous to individual’s faculty of reason. For democracy, he proposed that ‘reasonable comprehensive doctrines, religious or nonreligious, may be introduced in public discussion.’ ‘Citizens’ mutual knowledge of one another’s religious and nonreligious doctrines expressed in wide view of public political culture recognises that the roots of democratic citizens’ allegiance to their political conception lie in their respective comprehensive doctrines, religious and nonreligious’ (*The Law of Peoples*, at 152-53). Adam Smith, an 18th-century polymath, had held a comparable view.

The concept of secularism has evolved in several directions. It is not a confessional faith to be solemnised before a priest-politician, nor is it a trivial matter to play with as an election gimmick to prey upon helpless parties or gullible voters.

Imperialism: Anti-imperialism was a second item in the front’s declared agenda. Even school children were dragged to march in its ceremonial processions in the city.

China had tasted the ordeal of foreign imperialism since mid-19th century, certified by treaties with Britain (1842-43), with the United States and France (both 1844), and with all of them and Russia in 1858. ‘The 18th-century educated men of China were,’ wrote two American scholars in 1967, ‘not philosophers but plodding academics, laboriously compiling huge encyclopedias of much information but little thought. Except for a few intellectual critics, the Chinese literati-calm patient men forgot what reason was. The Chinese reluctantly began to learn reason from the West, and so began China’s intellectual revolution.’ Two centuries later the very West has now come to learn an awful lot from China.

In 1979, China opened its economy to foreign direct investment, not to the foot-loose ‘hot money’ of portfolio transaction. A well-nourished, skilled, disciplined workforce utilised the advantage of globalisation to transform the country’s economic landscape. As poor as India until very recently, China is on the way to be the largest economy in the world. The underlying principle of its success was: ‘The colour of the cat is irrelevant so long as it catches mouse,’ without crossing the boundary line drawn clearly and firmly. Vietnam too seems to be on such a track.

Today economic links between China and America are so deep and reciprocal that Niall Ferguson, a British historian now at Harvard, has coined an acronym, Chimerica, to celebrate their intimacy. China has accumulated as much as 768 billion dollars of US debt, becoming the single country with the largest amount of US government bonds in its Treasury: ‘turning China into America’s banker—the Communist creditor to the capitalist debtor, a change of epochal significance’.

Humanism: In 1989, a collection of 167,000 bricks were lined up in Ayodhya — not ordinary bricks, but *Ram Shilas*, ‘Lord Ram’s bricks,’ meticulously

collected from within the country as well as abroad dispatched by emigrant communities in the United States, Canada, South Africa, and the Caribbean, representatives of affluent diaspora Indians. These were to be used to construct a huge temple to mark the cartographically 'certain' spot where Lord Ram was born, and where the Babri Masjid had stood since the 16th century. What happened to the structure of Babri Masjid on 6th December 1992 is history.

About two decades ago, a judicial decision allowed images of deities to enjoy legal status to own land and properties. The argument was that sacred scriptural law recognised an idol as a legal subject which could have properties, by reason of the shastras, following the status of a legal person in the same way as that of a natural person. The rituals by which idols were infused with life (*pran protishtha*) and invested with divine dignity were displayed. But here is a country where millions of live people are denied human dignity.

The May 2009 shootings in a place of worship in Vienna were an outburst of societal tension between two groups of emigrant Indians — one *dalit*, the other upper-caste, both professing the same faith. The hotbeds of this social virus are Europe, Canada and the UK. Its spread of contamination could be serious owing to the sheer number. The estimated population of the two factions in the UK is some five-hundred-thousand, of which one-third are dalits.

The worst internal enemy of India is antagonistic division, subdivision and fragmentation of the people. The diaspora takes its cultural baggage from the homeland. A party or a front is not worth its name so long as it milks faith-centred societal fault-lines for its narrow political gain.

Two Contradictions: Economy is the base, and polity the superstructure. In the history of India, economy and society have long remained intimate cognates. The Planning Commission, in the seventies, i.e. the heyday of Garibi Hatao, did computer simulations and found the following: India can have economic growth without socio-economic justice, but not enduring justice in the absence of economic growth. The country has to make progress in social as well as economic spheres.

Three episodes narrated above respectively about the bricks, the idols, and the internecine firings, unveil the blatant violation of human dignity and rights. Secularism has to pervade two dimensions: one within every single religious group, and the other among all religious groups together. If the left parties do not address the festering social malaise who will?

The other contradiction is as follows. No country is an island anymore. Global forces bear upon all. India must stand capable of withstanding international pressures — economic, social, and political.□