

Future Perspectives for the Mainstream Indian Left

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The keys for a rejuvenated and radical left in India must be its promotion of alternatives to neo-liberal capitalism, formation of a united anti-capitalist front, tweaks in its organisational principles of “democratic centralism” to allow for the flowering of genuine democratic discussion and debate within itself and constant involvement in struggles of and for the people.

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After the 2009 Lok Sabha elections, the parliamentary left has clearly suffered so serious a defeat that it would not be out of place to describe the current situation as one of crisis. The fact of the matter is that it is not just its poor electoral showing that constitutes a grave warning but that there is the widespread sense that even as a grass-roots mobilisational force it has reached a historical trough compared to its own past. How then does this mainstream left seek to revive itself? Can it become a significant political and social force with the capacity to help reshape Indian politics and society for the better and in ways that can move towards a capitalism transcending socialist future? The views presented here are personal and pertain mainly to the mainstream parliamentary left of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) – CPI(M), Communist Party of India (CPI) (and perhaps at a stretch to the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist)-Liberation – CPI(ML)-L) excluding the Communist Party of India (Maoist) which pursues a strategy aimed at armed overthrow of the Indian state, a strategy that creates its own problems of militarised authoritarianism internally but also, in this writer’s view, has no chance of success.

Insofar as the mainstream communist left defines itself in relation to capitalism, what the different parties, forces and intellectuals of this left perceive is going to be the future trajectory of global and Indian capitalism will shape their own understandings of what should be the future trajectories of the Indian left.

In this respect the Right is right: meaning that the kind of capitalist reality currently available is the only form of capitalism now possible. This is a neoliberal form of capitalism that is irreversibly rapacious ecology-wise and which can adopt a more or less human face. That is to say, it can be what has been referred to as a “compensatory neo-liberalism” with an array of targeted rather than universalist welfare schemes; or a much less welfarist-inclined “disciplinary neo-liberalism”. What this indicates is that even the pursuit of establishing a social democratic capitalism nationally or globally, i e, the vision of a global cosmopolitan democracy that must necessarily rest on some form of global Keynesianism, is a chimera even as a transitional goal, perspective or state of affairs.

The left must, of course, start with and propose various social democratic perspectives such as strong welfarism, full employment, green economics, greater social and cultural rights and more -

empowerment of ordinary people, not because it believes that these are fully or properly achievable within capitalism but precisely because they are not! Therefore, such demands and the struggle for their achievement can be the spur towards the creation of a much more radical understanding of the need to break with capitalism as soon as possible. In short, the Indian left even as circumstances and its own failings have put it more on the defensive than in its past, it must now be more radical in its programme and practice than ever before. Strategically speaking, even allowing for the necessity of possible tactical compromises and retreats, offence is not just the best but the only realistic strategy for it to advance. What does this mean or imply? Where is the Indian left now at? And where does it go from here?

The Left and Its Challenges

For some 20-odd years after the collapse of the communist bloc of the Soviet Union and eastern Europe and the capitalist transformation of post-Mao China, India was the only country in the world that saw both communist parties that are the political legatees of the Stalinist Third International and of Maoism not just survive for so long but actually grow and become more influential. This is testimony surely to the Indian peculiarity – its distinctive combination of being at the macro-level a remarkably stable bourgeois democracy yet having extraordinary levels of economic impoverishment and multiple forms of social, cultural and political oppression, often of extreme brutality.

This has allowed Stalinist and Maoist conceptions of “national development” disguised as the “true socialist project” to maintain wide appeal, even as it has meant the absence of an adequate and effective strategy for successfully confronting and undermining a capitalism encased within its “best political shell” of a genuine and real even if limited and weak liberal democracy. The end result is that the main, i e, the biggest organised currents of the communist left have failed to avoid the two dangers of overall subordination, or complete negation of parliamentary politics.

Both paths have and will continue to prove dead ends for those unwilling to change the course of their politics – their theories and programmes, their organisational structures and practices. The suggestions here, as mentioned above, are directed not at all communist forces but at those which at least formally acknowledge the necessity of combining parliamentary-electoral and extra-parliamentary politics and are also formally committed to anti-imperialism, socialist internationalism and the goal of transcending capitalism. There are, in this regard, certain key guiding principles for parties and organisations pursuing genuinely transformative politics even when operating within the framework of a capitalist liberal democracy.

For such forces it is the programme that should make the party, not the other way around. That is to say, there are strict limits to the dilution of their programme and even to parts of it and to the related demands of this programme, for the purposes of accommodating strategic or even tactical alliances with other forces or for the sake of achieving power or for expanding the party’s social-electoral base. Furthermore, what follows from this principle is that even as one may strive to attain provincial power within an overarching bourgeois framework, the primary purpose is not to remain in power at all costs and therefore to make programmatic and policy adjustments accordingly but to remain true to, and consistent with, the programme and its related reform projects, even if this means having to step down from power or face defeat at the polls. Compromises are sometimes necessary but must be based on principle. Defeats do take place and must be acknowledged as such. Retreats should not be disguised as useful or desirable detours.

Another key principle is that anti-capitalist parties must be cadre-based and must resist at all costs the temptation to become loose, non-cadre based parties which prioritise above all, having the

widest cross-class, cross-caste, cross-gender voter base and accordingly therefore must abjure the politics of polarisation via the practices of extra-parliamentary mobilisations on progressive rather than diversionary or jingoistic causes. In fact, the only way radical left political forces can steadily advance electorally is via the successes of their extra-parliamentary mobilisational politics on the widest possible range of issues reflecting the widest range of contemporary injustices. In short, the balance between parliamentary-electoral pursuits and extra-parliamentary mobilisational activity must always be tilted strongly towards the latter. But this in turn imposes two crucial realities.

First, the fate of radical left parties and their political prospects is tied above all to the character of their cadre base, even more than to their social bases which will be more variable, uncertain and fluctuating in their loyalties as can be expected, given the operative framework of a multiparty competitive system. Securing, maintaining, expanding and deepening the political-ideological consciousness, commitment, morale and moral discipline of its cadre base is paramount. Without this there cannot be the kind of ongoing mobilisational politics that must lie at the very heart of left party politics and that must incorporate the various kinds of just struggles whether waged in the name of the politics of redistribution or of recognition, for both the politics of life chances and of life choices, for livelihood concerns and identity concerns. Cadre discipline, enthusiasm and commitment are voluntary and cannot be institutionally imposed from the top. That voluntary commitment endures only if it (a) comes from a deep belief in the righteousness of the cause, in the integrity of the guiding ideological framework, in the validity of the party programme that concretely expresses the route to the achievement of final objectives. (b) It comes from being part of an organisation whose internal culture is strongly democratic and therefore capable of continuous self-correction. (c) It comes from constant involvement in the actual struggles of the oppressed masses. What all might follow from this? One makes bold to suggest the following:

(1) Theoretical-ideological revamping – the complete rejection of the whole Stalinist tradition of politics, programme, organisation. Only in this way can there be the kind of revitalisation of the - socialist cause that is necessary.

(2) Programmatic revision rejecting the two-stage approach to bringing about revolutionary change and all that goes with this perspective by way of social compromises and class alliances with this or that section of the so-called progressive bourgeoisie.

(3) Programmatic clarification that socialist democracy will be deeper and wider than bourgeois democracy, providing for even greater civic, social, cultural, economic rights as well as for the participation of many parties including those which are avowedly bourgeois and capitalist with of course the proviso that violent overthrow of a post-capitalist order is constitutionally prohibited.

Internal Democracy and United Fronts

Organisationally, any communist party worth the name must be structured in such a way as to be sensitive to the context in which it operates and to maximise internal democracy. Although the - Indian mainstream left has a more internally democratic structure than all other bourgeois, dalit or ethnic-based parties in the country (something that is invariably ignored by critics) this is far from enough.

(1) What is required is not the rejection of the principle of democratic centralism but a recognition that this is a fundamentally political, not an organisational, concept. Insofar as a party must seek to develop a totalising and overarching vision encompassing an understanding of all forms of oppression and exploitation and of how to struggle against them, this vision can never be the property of a few leaders or theorists or the monopoly of the central committee or the politburo. It

can only be arrived at, maintained, corrected and advanced through maximum freedom of debate, discussion, dispute and argument tested through practice. As in the best periods of historical Bolshevism and as the practices of its most principled legatees have shown, there must exist full freedom for party members to connect horizontally with each other, to seek intra-party political support for views independent of control by higher leadership bodies. That is to say, there must be a structure of rules and norms that allows for tendency and faction formation rights, for proportionate representation for tendencies and factions at all levels in the pyramid of leadership bodies.

(2) Insofar as India has its specificities of oppression, recognition of the importance of this means there should be reserved representation proportionate to the changing membership weight in the party for dalits/most backward classes, tribals and women at all levels in the pyramid of leadership bodies. The value of this in attracting militants from such oppressed groups and in advancing the party's capabilities and credibility in the waging of such sectoral struggles should be self-evident.

(3) One of the greatest failures in India has been the uneasy and mutually suspicious relationship between the left parties and the social movements independent of them. Though the fault for this is shared, it is the parties, especially the parliamentary left that must take greater responsibility to rectify this state of affairs. Not only must it give committed support to such movements but must also often consciously adopt a determinedly low-profile back-seat role as well as not treating such movements as primarily recruiting grounds for enhanced membership. Moreover, in legislative assemblies at all levels, such left parties must act as the parliamentary tribunes of progressive movements with as much determination and commitment as would be the case if such movements had their own representative leaders in such assemblies.

(4) Forging greater left unity is a must. The view that the CPI(M) and the CPI have fundamental programmatic differences preventing their merger is frankly utterly unconvincing to those outside and perhaps many within as well, thus raising suspicions that bureaucratic wrangles and controversies over the possible spoils of office after a merger have been the main obstacles to such a development. Furthermore, the pattern of United Front (UF) behaviour has also left much to be desired. Such fronts on specific issues or on agreed though limited programmes are not mechanisms where establishing a unity of action must presume that there be unity of analysis or argument. While what unites the constituent parts of the UF is always more important than what divides them, there must also be acceptance of full freedom of debate and dispute in which different organisations will seek to express their points of view and to win over adherents to their perspectives regarding tactics to be followed or programmatic adjustments to be made. UFs are most effective when they are democratic, when they combine commitment to overall unity precisely because they incorporate freedom to criticise. Such an approach to UFs has always been anathema to Stalinist approaches where the dominant partner has invariably sought to maximise allegiance to its perspectives not through maximum freedom for political debate and criticism but through other means.

Such suggestions as presented above are far from adequate in addressing today's "crisis of the Indian left" but they would, in the view of this writer, constitute a modest step forward in the collective effort to rejuvenate the Indian left.

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P.S.

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