

The Indian Left Needs to Reinvent Itself

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The future of the Left in India will depend on its ability to forge a 'cultural revolution' and fuse it with economic egalitarianism.



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The Left is staring at the prospect of a dismal result in West Bengal, as the Trinamool Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party fight for the limelight. They were recently [wiped out in Tripura](#), and are hanging by a thread [in Kerala](#). In less than ten years, the fortunes of the Left have been wiped out due to the rise of the BJP.

In 2009, the return of the Congress party to a second term was largely credited to the role the Left parties played in keeping the grand old party on track with social welfare programmes, including the national rural employment guarantee. In UPA-II, without the Left, many analysts argued that the Congress was a different party, delaying the Right to Food Bill and other welfare measures.

The strength of the Left parties came from their steadfast ideological positioning against both neoliberalism and communalism.

Most other regional parties have made more pragmatic choices, moving between the NDA and the UPA, not for ideological but for electoral purposes.

The Left is also alone in articulating the problems of imperialism and neo-colonialism in global developments and in analysing the appropriate direction for India's foreign policy.

It was only the Left that stood outside of the growing neo-liberal consensus, within the limits of pragmatic considerations. They also kept their focus on labour, migration, minimum wages, rural distress, contractualisation, privatisation and saffronisation of education, issues of health and urbanisation.

If anything, given this line of reasoning, the Left parties should have witnessed resurgence and not the kind of terminal decline they face now. Even more ominous is that there seems to be no visible rethinking, no new programme that the Left is seeking. They still seem caught in mundane rhetoric, unable to negotiate the complexities of India's dramatic change since Mandal, kamandal and neoliberal reforms.

Right-wing populist-authoritarianism has brought ideology back from the days typified as 'the End of Ideology'. Today, even regional party leaders must critique the authoritarian role of the RSS. It was unprecedented to see Chandrababu Naidu and Mamata Banerjee directly talk of a kind of 'deep state' that the RSS was running for the last five years.

It should be seen as a new opportunity by the Left that ideological moorings are back in electoral politics, to whatever limited extent away from mere service delivery, sops and arithmetic calculations. Can the Left manage to recalibrate equations between political parties, based on more robust ideological positions?

What India needs today is a social reform movement that is cultural – even spiritual – in nature. In fact, the Left stood to benefit from such social reform movements in Kerala and Bengal. The kind of social consciousness that Narayan Guru, the Bhakti movement, Basava, Rabindranath Tagore, Vemana, Iyothee Thass and others contributed has aided the radical-democratic programme of the Left parties.

In the post-independence period, we have witnessed no such major social and cultural mobilisation. In fact, the RSS is the only organisation that is working systematically on the cultural front. The Left parties also benefitted in the past from mobilising workers and peasants outside the electoral domain. The declining electoral prospects of the Left is symptomatic of their shifting focus exclusively to electoral politics in the past two decades.

The Left can reinvent itself by forging the 'cultural revolution' India awaits. Beyond both pragmatic and dogmatic calculations, the Left needs to open up the complexities of culture, caste and community. In order to do this, the Left requires not merely a critique of capitalism but also a critique of modernity, and its unholy nexus with traditional modes of power.

The Marxism of the Indian Left has remained a kind of modernisation theory. By default, even if they supported the cause of workers and peasants, the idiom they articulated these issues in, by default, made them part of a cultural elite. Cultural elitism combined with economic radicalism has today led to new kinds of binaries between Left-Brahmin and Right-Bahujan.

The dogmatism of the Left is in irretrievable conflict with the pragmatism of subaltern groups. The future of the Indian Left will depend on its ability to forge a 'cultural revolution' and fuse it with economic egalitarianism, thus retaining at least a semblance of substantive – not merely procedural – democracy in India.

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