

# **The Problem with the Indian Left**

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The current problem with the Indian Left, and in this term I include all sections of the Left, from the so-called “parliamentary Left” to the so-called “revolutionary Left”, is in my view, its lack of appreciation of the dialectics between “reform” and “revolution”. There have been many critiques of the Indian Left, but none to my knowledge has made this point; and their not making this point is perhaps indicative of the fact that the critics themselves suffer as much from this lack of appreciation of the dialectics between “reform” and “revolution” as the Left that they are critiquing.

Before proceeding further however I should make it clear that I consider myself very much a part of the Left; and everything I say below is meant in a constructive sense, as a means of aiding Left praxis. I believe that the Left in India is poised for a major advance provided it appreciates better the dialectics between reform and revolution; or, to put it differently, the hurdle before a Left advance in India at this moment is to a significant extent its theoretical understanding.

By the dialectics of reform and revolution I mean the following: revolution is the denouement of a persistent demand for reform on the part of the people which the system cannot accommodate. Therefore pressing for reform and mobilizing people around a demand for reform is not “reformism”; it is itself a revolutionary task. The problem with social democracy which is avowedly “reformist” is not that it asks for “reform” instead of “revolution” but that, being avowedly “reformist” it tailors and limits its demand for reform only to whatever the system can agree to. It does not ask for reforms that push the boundaries of the system.

To be sure, one does not exactly know where the boundary of the system lies. But that is inconsequential: if the system can yield one set of reforms that are asked for, then that only provides the opportunity to push ahead for further reforms; and when it cannot yield what is asked for, then that only provides the opportunity to mobilize people around what is asked for and press further towards a transcendence of the system. Systematically demanding reforms that the people can respond to and that push against the boundaries of the existing order is the way forward towards a revolution, which requires therefore a continuous and intense engagement with the existing state of things within the order itself.

A lack of such engagement, and a concentration either on fighting directly and exclusively for a revolution, or simply waiting for the opportune moment to launch a fight for a revolution but confining struggles in the meanwhile to routine trade union, peasant and other mass front struggles, is what I call missing the dialectics between reform and revolution. Whenever the Left has actually based itself on this dialectics, it has registered great advance, an instance of which is the CPI(M) between the mid-sixties and roughly the mid-nineties, when it had led big struggles for altering land relations, for re-ordering centre-state relations, for a democratic devolution of power and resources down to the panchayat level, and (in Kerala) for the introduction of massive “welfare state” measures. On the other hand, when it has missed this dialectics, as I argue below it has done of late, it has been on the retreat.

For the Indian Communist movement the decision to fight parliamentary elections and to form state governments wherever it is elected to a majority, had itself meant an appreciation of this dialectics between reform and revolution. This is why the very distinction between the “parliamentary Left” and the “revolutionary Left”, unless meant in a purely descriptive sense, i.e. if it associates a higher sense of purpose with the latter compared to the former, as is often done, is itself unappreciative of the dialectics between reform and revolution: it identifies in a facile manner a demand for reform as “reformism”.

To be sure, being “parliamentary” per se does not mean an application of the dialectics between reform and revolution. One can be parliamentary and reformist, and one can be parliamentary and revolutionary; and one can be parliamentary and revolutionary and yet miss the dialectics between reform and revolution (the “revolutionary Left” does so anyway). The point I wish to argue is that the current problem with the Indian Left, even that section of it which participates in parliamentary elections, is that it misses this dialectics.

Let me provide an example to clarify the general point I am making about a lack of appreciation of the dialectics between reform and revolution. That segment of the Left which is engaged in armed struggle and hence is working directly and exclusively for a revolution, would, I do not doubt, want a universal healthcare system for the people. But since it believes, quite rightly, that such a universal healthcare system is not possible within capitalism in India, and that it is fighting anyway for socialism, under which alone such universal healthcare is possible, it sees no need to engage in any specific struggle for universal healthcare within the existing order.

The so-called “parliamentary” Left too, though it is not engaged directly and exclusively in armed struggle, for which it believes the time is not ripe, also believes, rightly, that universal healthcare in India is possible only under socialism. Since it is working anyway towards socialism, though without resorting to armed struggle at the moment, it too does not raise the demand for a universal healthcare arrangement: asking for universal healthcare under capitalism would be analogous in its view to asking for the impossible. It too therefore, while focusing on fighting against the concrete injustices heaped by capitalism upon the people and mobilizing people through agitations against such injustices, apart from doing its routine mass front activities, does not carry out any specific struggle for universal healthcare.

Hence, we have this remarkable fact, namely that on perhaps the most important single factor, the rising cost of healthcare, which has contributed to the recent growing impoverishment of vast masses of the Indian population, there has been scarcely any overarching demand for reforms on the part of the Left.

To criticize the Left for not raising such a demand is not to say that capitalism would actually provide universal healthcare if such a demand were to be raised: in that the Left is perfectly right. But not to demand something under capitalism because its realization is not possible under capitalism is precisely to miss the dialectics between reforms and revolution; on the contrary the whole point of Left praxis must be to demand things which are not necessarily possible under capitalism.

Not doing so has two overall results: first, even that which is potentially achievable under capitalism (though it may not go as far as universal healthcare) is not achieved.

And, second, there is no concrete sense that is provided to the people of what a socialist society can achieve, owing to the absence of such major demands. The Left simply agitates against injustices (the Maoists may do armed struggles around injustices); and at the same time promises something apparently “mythical” called socialism. But a schism, an un-connectedness, develops between its daily practice of agitations and its promise of a radiant future.

Since the Left in India is not social democratic, in the sense of losing sight of socialism (though different elements within the Left often call one another “social democratic” as a term of abuse), it does not believe that any significant reforms are possible within capitalism, which is a perfectly valid proposition. But for that very reason it does not demand any significant reforms within capitalism, while on the contrary it should be doing precisely that, and doing so for the very same reason. This is what I mean by losing sight of the dialectics between reform and revolution.

What I have just said may be readily conceded, but it has two necessary implications that may not be so easily accepted, in which case conceding the above point remains only facile and meaningless.

The first point is that wherever the Left comes to power, at the state or local level, it must push against the boundaries of what is possible under capitalism. A demand for universal healthcare on the part of the Left when it is nowhere in power lacks meaning if there is no push towards it (though it may not be actually achieved because of the limitations of state governments) when the Left has state-level power, just as an opposition to neo-liberalism in Left documents and agitations lacks credibility if the Left pursues exactly the same policies as the proponents of neo-liberalism when it has state-level power. To do the latter because of the limitations upon state governments within the existing order, which are no doubt stringent, and to separately and unconnectedly advocate a new order that transcends the existing one, is to miss the dialectics between reform and revolution.

A corollary of this is the following: to miss any opportunity for pushing against the boundaries of the existing order that may come the way of the Left, whether at the state or at the national level, through the electoral system (as had happened when Jyoti Basu was offered the Prime Ministership of the country), is also tantamount to missing the dialectics between reform and revolution. It is to treat the revolution purely as a matter for “tomorrow” for which we have to remain “pure” today by not engaging in the messy politics of “today” even though the latter offers us the possibility of pushing against the boundaries of the system. It fails to see that pushing against the boundaries of the system “today” increases the prospects of a revolutionary “tomorrow”.

The second implication can be seen as follows. I talked above about universal healthcare which is a “good thing” per se. But people do not just suffer from the absence of “good things”; they suffer from the inexorable logic of the working of the capitalist system. Mobilizing people through agitations against these sufferings would gain strength not just by holding before them an alternative called “socialism” where such problems as they face because of this inexorable logic would disappear; but by actually suggesting alternative solutions to these problems, solutions which are short of socialism, which do not per se visualize a transcendence of the present system itself, but which the system itself may be incapable of adopting. The Left in other

words must always have an alternative way of resolving every existing problem facing the people, a way that is not constrained by the logic of the system but that does not just invoke an apparently mythical state called “socialism”.

In Greece for instance it was necessary for Syriza to have an alternative solution to the problem of Greek debt compared to what the previous regimes had tried; but it did not have such an alternative. On the other hand, the Greek Communist Party simply shrugged off the problem itself by saying that they would never be in Syriza’s shoes anyway. The Greek Left therefore was found wanting in serving the Greek people. The Left, it follows, must always be engaged with the people’s extant problems, in finding transitional resolutions for them, instead of simply ignoring them and holding before them a vision of socialism where such problems just would not exist, for that amounts to ignoring the dialectics between reform and revolution.

## II

What, it may be asked, has all this to do with the present conjuncture? The fact that neo-liberalism has reached a dead-end from which there is no easy escape, the fact that it has plunged the world economy into a crisis which for basic structural reasons shows no signs of abating, are by now quite well-established and I shall not labour them here. In this context, because the liberal bourgeoisie is at the end of its tether, and has no solution to the crisis and not even a cognizance of it, and because the Left has as yet been unprepared, for reasons we need not go into here, to present to the people an alternative route by which they can escape from their present predicament (as distinct from merely advocating socialism which as I have just argued is inadequate), fascist elements, propagating a combination of messianism and hatred of the “other”, are on a world-wide ascendancy; and international finance capital is backing them to buttress its position during the crisis against potential threats.

Such a scenario is being played out in India too where fascist elements are in State power. We do not of course have a fascist State as yet, but these elements are trying their best to push the neo-liberal State in the direction of a fascist neo-liberal State. This period of transition, before severe fascist repression is let loose upon the Left, provides it with an opportunity to mobilize the people against the fascists and in defence of democracy and civil rights.

For checking the fascist onslaught however it has to build up as large an alliance of secular and democratic forces as possible, which raises the very valid question: if the growth of fascism has been a result of the stasis created by neo-liberalism then how can fascism be fought in alliance with parties that uphold neo-liberalism? Doing so surely would only mean a persistence of the stasis, so that even if the fascists are temporarily defeated, they would again come back with a vengeance. How can the Left pursue a praxis that does not just help in rolling back the immediate fascist onslaught, but also changes the very conjuncture that gives rise to fascism?

Since the achievement of the first of these objectives cannot be consolidated without achieving the second, there has been a strong opinion within the Left that there should be no understanding with any neo-liberal bourgeois political forces. And this opinion has been advanced in a refracted form by suggesting that the Hindutva government in India does not represent a fascist dispensation. The reason for this refracted opinion is that if one agrees that it is fascist then by the Dimitrov thesis adopted at the seventh

Congress of the Communist International and generally accepted by Communists everywhere then and now, this would call for an all-in oppositional unity, including even with the bourgeois neo-liberal elements. (The Seventh Congress Position it may be recalled had come as a rectification of the disastrous “third period” ultra-Leftist trend of the Sixth Congress, because of which the German Communists had made no attempt to unite with the German Social Democrats to keep Hitler out of power, which was clearly possible in 1933). A rather odd debate therefore has arisen within the India Left on whether the Modi dispensation is a fascist one or not.

This entire discussion however needs to be anchored in an appreciation of the dialectics between reform and revolution, which it is not. In a situation where vast numbers of the most oppressed people, the Muslims, the Dalits, the tribals, the other religious minorities, women, agricultural labourers, the peasantry and the petty producers, are groaning under the tyranny of the Modi dispensation, for the Left to continue with its routine mass front struggles, supplemented no doubt by resistance to specific acts of injustice, repression, authoritarianism and suppression of civil liberties, is to evade its historic responsibility, to forego a historic opportunity to fight for a change that, though immediately apparently reformist, can have dialectically revolutionary implications.

The real issue in short is not what we call the Modi administration (its extremely dangerous character is not altered one iota by what we call it); it is not even whether there can be any basis for an understanding with the bourgeois neo-liberal elements (a common minimum programme can always be worked out even with them which advances the people’ interests and stalls the impact of neo-liberalism; indeed the Left has to make such a programme happen). The real issue is to recognize the political imperative for fighting the Modi administration, which is itself a revolutionary task for the Left. Uniting all possible forces for doing so, and working out the practical possibilities for such unity, and practical proposals for alleviating the consequences of neo-liberalism towards this end, is not a “reformist” task but something that is demanded today, above all, by the needs of the Indian revolution.