

The Stench of Counter-Revolution*

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The closest friend I had in my childhood was a boy who came from a dalit family. He lived in a little bustee near our house in the small mofussil town in Odisha where I spent my early years. He was mature for his age, full of wisdom, and always tried to prevent me from acting with the impetuosity that was my habit. The local bigwigs, all from upper castes and consisting predominantly of Brahmin landlords, frowned upon our friendship. They would often tell my mother that her son was “keeping bad company” (my father, a Communist activist would be generally away from home, engaged in political work when he was not in jail). But my mother, a feisty woman with a fiercely libertarian and egalitarian outlook that made her keep a distance even from the Communist Party despite being sympathetic towards it, totally ignored all such remarks. She would tell stories, including on current events, to a group that included me, my dalit friend, and sundry others, who happened to gather around her in the evenings when she was cooking.

If some bigwig would be coming from the opposite direction when my friend and I were walking down the single main road of our town which ended at the railway station, he would suddenly disappear from my side, to avoid, I now realize, having to listen to some sneering remark; he would rejoin me as quietly after the bigwig had passed. His brother worked in the railways, which I suppose did not practice any caste discrimination, at least in their lower-level recruitment, and had moved up to become a “shunter” of locomotives. We would often climb on to locomotives that he was “shunting” and watch coal being shovelled into the blazing furnace.

On hot summer afternoons I would lie on a mat atop the earthen platform that served for a bed in his thatched hut and listen to him speak on various subjects, and would often wonder why he admired Jaggivan Ram so much, whom I knew only as a member of Jawaharlal Nehru’s cabinet (without being aware then of his dalit background). The other icons for him were Gandhi and Ambedkar, among whom I never recollect his making any comparisons. Indeed his entire family, including his father (whose occupation I now forget, though his ancestors had been manual scavengers), habitually wore khadi.

I invariably think of my friend, with whom I lost touch after we left that little town, whenever I hear contemporary scholars in academic gatherings making disparaging remarks about Gandhi for his acceptance of the caste-system, or about Ambedkar or Periyar for their lukewarm attitude towards the anti-colonial struggle; or when they pooh-pooh either the anti-colonial struggle for its upper-caste elitism or the social emancipation movement of Phule, Periyar and Ambedkar for its softness towards colonial rule. I do so not because the scholars are factually wrong in their assertions about the views of the leaders of the two struggles, or even about the distrust that these leaders may have had for one another, but because they miss entirely in my view the dialectics of the relationship between these two struggles, which for me was expressed through the attitude of my friend.

If one insists on looking only at the pronouncements of the leaders or at their mutual relationships, then one misses the crucial fact that in the consciousness of millions of people like my friend, the two movements reinforced one another; they

complemented one another in putting “liberation” in a broad, though perhaps imprecisely-defined sense, on the agenda. The anti-colonial struggle would not have succeeded in drawing such massive support if it did not also put social emancipation on the agenda; and the struggle for social emancipation would not have advanced if it did not get sustenance from the conjuncture of the anti-colonial struggle.

Gandhi’s staying in “harijan” bustees may have been mere tokenism that was, from a certain perspective, even patronizing and objectionable, no matter how well-intentioned. But such tokenism too had an impact. It created the context within which the Indian National Congress could adopt a resolution in Karachi in 1931 which put before the people a vision of post-independence India that would have equality before law, universal adult suffrage with one-person-one-vote, a set of fundamental rights and a separation of the State from religion. All these, needless to say, got incorporated into the Constitution.

One often hears talk of the “tolerance” that is supposed to have characterized India historically. Nothing could be further from the truth. A society with millennia of institutionalized inequality enshrined in the caste system, with millennia of inhuman practices like “untouchability”, and even “unseeability”, can by no stretch of imagination be considered “tolerant”. Such “tolerance” as apparently existed in such a society could at best be called, after Herbert Marcuse, a “repressive tolerance”: it was a state of mutual “tolerance” where the “tolerance” of the oppressed was because they lacked the power to resist, and the “tolerance” of the oppressors was because they faced no resistance.

The project of “modern India” in short is not a continuation of the historical tradition of the country, but a departure from this historical tradition. And precisely because it is such a radical departure, made possible by the twin-struggles of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, viz. the anti-colonial struggle and the social emancipation struggle, it constitutes a veritable social revolution. Its revolutionary character is usually missed because of its occurring over such a prolonged period, but it is no less real for that. It is an expression of a country’s rising above its own past, marked by horrendous inequalities, to fashion out of itself a fraternity of equal citizens.

This social revolution has always been bitterly opposed, and this opposition has now taken an overtly aggressive stance. What we are witnessing today is the unleashing of a counter-revolution against our long social revolution, against the project of “modern India”. It challenges the secular nature of the State; it identifies the “nation” with the supremacy of one particular religion, whose essence, moreover, lies, according to historian Suvira Jaiswal, in the caste-system; it tries to muzzle all dissent against itself; it “captures” all institutions of higher learning to shove its agenda down the throats of students; and it launches physical attacks on all those who differ from its position.

Such a counter-revolution has of course become possible because the social revolution itself has been losing steam. Indeed its foundations started getting undermined almost from the very beginning of our life as an independent nation. To start with, the absence of any radical land redistribution kept pre-existing asset inequalities largely intact, notwithstanding some changes in the composition of the top land-owning strata. The superimposition of capitalist development upon this foundation, with its immanent tendency to generate economic inequality, further

exacerbated disparities, which even Nehruvian dirigisme proved incapable of countering.

Ambedkar, in his final speech to the Constituent Assembly, had warned against the danger that growing economic inequality posed to the social vision of the Constitution. And Nehru himself was sufficiently concerned about this growing inequality when he set up the Mahalanobis Committee in 1960 to report upon it. But even though inequality actually kept increasing, the fact that it was undesirable, that it posed a threat to the project of “modern India”, was still widely accepted for a long period of time. The adoption of neo-liberal policies in 1991 however changed all that: growth in inequality was now not only recognized as following from the new policies, but was actually endorsed officially, which represented a further blow to the project of “modern India”.

It is this context that has allowed the forces of counter-revolution to come to the centre-stage. These forces comprising the various Hindutva groups have, not surprisingly, no link whatsoever either with the anti-colonial struggle or with the struggle for social emancipation. Not a single one of their founding leaders ever participated in the anti-colonial struggle, with the sole exception of V.D. Savarkar, who also, notwithstanding his early resistance, made peace with the colonial rulers. And none of their founding leaders was part of the social emancipation struggle, even though the current champions of Hindutva shower adulations on Ambedkar and cobble up alliances with various dalit political formations for purely opportunistic reasons.

The essence of any counter-revolution, as indeed of any revolution, lies in its attempt to change the nature of the State, whether in one stroke or gradually. Not surprisingly, we are witnessing today an attempt to change the nature of the Indian State to a Hindu Rashtra. This is a hallmark of the counter-revolution and needs to be resisted with all strength. But this resistance also requires a development strategy that prioritizes greater economic equality.

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