

“GDP-NATIONALISM”

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Liberal opinion is invariably opposed to “nationalism”. It treats “nationalism” as a homogeneous term that necessarily entails a non-friendly, non-accommodative and rivalrous attitude towards other countries. This view however is completely erroneous; anti-colonial third world nationalism is entirely different from the nationalism that developed in Europe in the seventeenth century following the Westphalian Peace Treaties. This difference appears in the most unmistakable form in the difference between the nationalism of a Hitler, which is descended from European nationalism, and that of a Ho Chi Minh, which exemplifies anti-colonial nationalism.

There are at least three basic differences between European nationalism as it developed in the seventeenth century and the anti-colonial third world nationalism of the twentieth century: first, European nationalism typically identified an “internal enemy” within the nation, such as the Catholics in northern Europe, the Protestants in southern Europe, and the Jews everywhere; third world nationalism by contrast was an inclusive one, indeed it had to be in order to confront the immense power of the colonial masters. Second, European nationalism put the nation above the people, an entity for which people were supposed only to make sacrifices; third world nationalism by contrast saw the entire rationale of the nation as consisting in serving the people who had been oppressed by years of colonialism. Third, European nationalism was from its very inception imperialist; Oliver Cromwell’s conquest of Ireland within months of the Westphalian Peace Treaties was the beginning of a project embarked upon by all European powers, a project that drew sustenance from that particular concept of “nationalism”; by contrast anti-colonial third world nationalism, though territorial, was not imperialist, and on the contrary sought to develop fraternal relationships with other third world countries that were engaged in similar anti-colonial struggles.

European nationalism in short was marked by the apotheosis of an abstract idealised metaphysical entity called the “nation” that stood above the people, while anti-colonial third world nationalism was essentially non-metaphysical; it was what Marx would have called “this-sided”, and was concerned with the well-being of the people.

The post-colonial state, no matter what its other failings, had reiterated its commitment to the concept of anti-colonial nationalism, upon which for instance the basic features of the Indian Constitution, that were captured by its Preamble, were based. Democracy, secularism and socialism were all embedded in the anti-colonial struggle’s commitment to this concept of a nation; and likewise the control on the private sector sought to be exercised through the licensing system, the importance of the public sector within the framework of a mixed economy, and the general commitment to egalitarianism, while none of these amounted necessarily to the advancement of a socialist project, derived from the slogan of socialism. Indian dirigisme in other words was based on a professed commitment to socialism which in turn was organically linked to the concept of anti-colonial nationalism.

A decisive shift however has taken place with the introduction of the neoliberal regime in the concept of nationalism professed by the Indian state. The justification for the introduction of neoliberalism that is supposed to have been in the interests of the “nation”, was that it would bring about a more rapid growth of the Gross Domestic Product, whose benefits would “trickle down” to everybody, and would also make India a major power. The fact that a neoliberal regime increases economic inequality was never denied; indeed the contrary was never claimed at any time by even the most ardent supporters of neoliberalism. In short, the introduction of neoliberalism was defended not on the grounds that it is a better means of building a nation as visualised by the freedom struggle, but on the grounds that it would make the Indian nation into a big power. There was thus a shift in the concept of the nation, from being an anti-imperialist entity serving the people in an egalitarian manner, into an entity that is engaged in a race with other nations to become a big power.

Implicit in this shift is an abandonment of the “this-sidedness” of the concept of a nation, of a real and concrete entity concerned with the conditions of the people’s lives, for an abstract, metaphysical entity of a big power, standing above the people, for which the people are supposed to make sacrifices. This changed concept of a nation is reminiscent of the European concept of a nation, though, as we shall see, not identical with it.

Neoliberalism in short was not expected to achieve to a greater extent what dirigisme had set out to achieve. In shifting from one to the other regime, there was a change in the desideratum itself; and associated with it a change in the concept of the nation and of nationalism. One can call this change as one from an anti-imperialist nationalism to a “GDP-nationalism”. To be sure, such a “GDP-nationalism” is not per se imperialist, as European nationalism had been, though it sees the nation as being engaged in a competitive race against other nations; nor does “GDP-nationalism” necessarily invoke an “enemy within” as seventeenth century European nationalism had done. Its adherents are not necessarily people who compromise on the issue of secularism. But “GDP-nationalism” because it reintroduces a metaphysical concept of a nation acts as a bridge to fascistic notions of nationalism.

This happens for two reasons: first, as we have seen, “GDP-nationalism” negates the desideratum of an advance towards an egalitarian society marked by equal citizenship rights and also greater material equality; it substitutes in its place an inegalitarian society whose inequalities are supposed to be achieving some “higher” metaphysical end such as big power status. And second, as the neoliberal regime gets bogged down in a crisis, as the hopes even of a “trickle down” fade and the reality of material deprivation affects larger and larger numbers of people, resentment against the unfolding unequal order increases; the acquisition of big power status no longer suffices as an antidote to such resentment; that is when big capital in the country that is integrated with international finance capital and sustains the neoliberal order, makes an alliance with fascistic elements to create a new metaphysic, of a Hindu Rashtra that is a camouflage for a fascistic state.

This new metaphysic does not replace the old one but supplements it. That is when GDP nationalism, meant to provide an ideological cover for a neoliberal regime, gets ensconced within a fascistic “nationalism”.

This is what we see taking place in India. While the initial introduction of neoliberalism was done by political elements that were not opposed to secularism, but who justified the new regime in the name of accelerating GDP growth and making India into a big power (to a point

where a senior Congress leader had even said that corruption should be avoided because it prevented India from becoming a big power(!)), the dead-end which neoliberalism reaches pushes the country further away from the idea of inclusive anti-colonial nationalism. It not only brings about an alliance between big capital and fascistic elements, but also brings these fascistic elements to power along with their fascistic “nationalism”.

While neoliberalism thus creates the material conditions for the domination of fascistic elements, the ideology underlying the introduction of neoliberalism, namely “GDP-nationalism”, creates the basis for the ascendancy of fascistic “nationalism” by undermining anti-imperialist nationalism.

Overcoming the hegemony of the fascistic elements therefore requires not just transcending neoliberalism (otherwise the fascistic elements, even if ousted from power, will always make a comeback, as Donald Trump has done in the US), but also a revival of the anti-imperialist nationalism.

There is a reason for stressing this at present. Dr Manmohan Singh, the former prime minister who passed away recently, was endowed with excellent qualities of head and heart, and was a thoroughly secular person; but he was also largely responsible for introducing the neoliberal “reforms” in the country. There is a discernible tendency at present among advocates of the neoliberal regime to make use of Dr Singh’s unexceptionable personal attributes to promote the acceptability of this regime. This tendency moreover is likely to meet with some success because the connection between neoliberalism and the political ascendancy of the fascistic elements is not generally recognised. Such ascendancy is generally attributed to purely political factors detached from the economic context. This however is an erroneous perception, which, if not rectified, will only perpetuate the hegemony of the fascistic elements.

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