

Totems and Taboos of Left Mythology

Pranab Bardhan

Ashok Rudra

IT would be difficult to deny that in this country's political thinking the left-right distinction has increasingly become less a scientifically valid classificatory tool of politico-historical analysis and more a matter of attaching labels, of branding persons or parties on considerations which are of the nature of dogmas. The idea of left and right, of progress and reaction, has a history of more than two hundred years and if one were to apply criteria derived from the tradition of thought of "Scientific Socialism" to present-day India, one would perhaps classify as leftist economic policies or political programmes (or persons or parties working for them) that aim at a reorganisation of the society so as to lessen the political power of and finally eliminate classes that are at present dominating the society and deriving maximum advantage from its present organisation and to increase the political power of the exploited toiling masses, of which the organised industrial and white-collar working classes no doubt constitute an important segment but also consist predominantly of poor peasants and landless labourers. If one were thinking, each time one made the left-right distinction, of these two opposed class interest groups, keeping in full view the internal contradictions that unavoidably exist within the two groups, one would probably be making the distinction meaningfully. But much too often that is not how it is done.

ROUGHLY SIMILAR MANIFESTOES

Consider the distinction between left parties and right parties the way it is made. With minor variations most of the major political parties operating at the national level and participating in parliamentary politics have roughly similar manifestoes of announced goals and programmes, notwithstanding their eloquent attempts at product differentiation. Their radical rhetoric is often exactly identical. If one takes electoral support bases, it is difficult to neatly arrange the parties in terms of ascending or descending order of 'leftism'. Any analysis of data from nation-wide surveys electoral support bases shows that the rich farmers vote largely for the

Congress; the same party draws overwhelming support from the landless. The Jan Sangh and the Communist parties have often a similar support base: the professionals as an occupational group are large voters of both. The Arya Samaj devoted clerk in the Central Secretariat, New Delhi, may vote for Jan Sangh; his Kali-worshipping counterpart in Writers' Building, Calcutta, is a staunch supporter of Communists. The Ezhava agricultural labourer in Kerala often votes for Communists; his *Chamar* brethren in UP vote for Congress in decisive numbers.

ACTUAL DOING IS IMPORTANT

One may, of course, say that a party should not be judged by what it writes in its manifesto or what rhetoric it uses in public speeches or even by its electoral support base, but by what it actually does. If that is the criterion used in making the left-right distinction, it is to be noted that, most of them, communist or non-communist, act as pressure groups for the interests of largely the top two deciles of the population. These two deciles contain roughly 20 million families which include those of the better-off farmers and traders, white-collar workers and such sections of industrial labourers who have come to form a kind of 'labour aristocracy'. Most of the vociferous demands of these parties, whether for more 'remunerative' prices for farmers, or for higher wages and salaries in the organised sector, for tax exemptions on the lower middle class or against betterment levies on farmers, for various subsidies and underpriced inputs, for expansion of higher education or of jobs in the bureaucracy, all cater to the interests of the richest quintile of the population. Many of these demands are no doubt made in the name of the small man and there are substantial regional variations in the pattern of such demands or in the style of their articulation, but there cannot be much doubt about who the ultimate beneficiaries are. Of course, there are various kinds of conflicts of interests even among the pressure groups of the top quintile. The economic and political interests of 20 million families sharing the

spoils of the system cannot be homogeneous; the rich farmer lobby has to compete vehemently with the lobby of urban professionals and so on and there are frequently heated bargaining negotiations within the coalition of the power elite. But the intensity with which party lives are demarcated and party battles are fought and the gusto with which invectives are exchanged and scandals and counter-scandals exposed, give the misleading impression as if across parties there are fundamental cleavages involved. Much of this is in fact a show and a ritual to impress the poor as if it is their cause the parties are fighting for.

POOREST PEOPLE ARE UNORGANISED

It is of course true that there are many instances of the left parties trying to lead struggles for the poor and exploited workers, particularly around the industrial belts. But the fact remains that the overwhelming majority of the poorest people in India are unorganised. Except in a few localised pockets in the country the vast masses of poor peasants and landless labourers have been outside the pale of leftist movements; the leftist agrarian organisations have, if anything, effectively served only the interests of the rich and middle peasants, their declared intentions notwithstanding.

The fake character of the left-right distinction is particularly glaring when it comes to economic policy matters. Thus, if an economist stands more for controls, licensing, take-overs and nationalisation, he is a 'progressive'; in case he is against these, he is obviously a 'reactionary'. Price controls in steel, cement, automobiles and the like directly benefit the consumption of the rich, yet by supporting them one is supposed to uphold a 'progressive' cause. Richer industrialists have better connections and better access to the bureaucratic allocation of industrial and import licences, and yet the licensing system has to be unquestionably accepted. Quantitative trade restrictions provide an automatically protected market for inefficient domestic producers of luxury goods like air-conditioners, refrigerators and automobiles, and yet anybody criticising them must be having a 'free-trade', *laissez faire* bias. Leftists often refuse to extend their class analysis of the state to the expanding public sector and the sprawling bureaucracy. Administered allocation of premia-carrying licences and permits strengthen the

economic and political power not only of those who use those licences and permits but also of the relatively better-off white-collar workers who dispense those licences and permits: in fact this serves as a leverage they use in sharing the spoils with the industrialists. Nationalisation (even when it is not used simply to bale out owners of 'sick' mills) is used largely to expand the job prospects and security of white-collar workers, to improve wages, housing and other amenities of the unionised working class and to provide underpriced intermediate and capital goods for the private sector. Yet any expansion of the public sector is to be called a victory of the proletariat and any criticism of the way the public sector is run or the way the potential surplus is frittered away is to be construed as support for the cause of monopoly capitalists.

To support controls, without asking who controls, and to support take-overs, without asking who takes over and for whose benefit, appear to us to be basically un-Marxian in approach. There are, of course, many instances where controls and public ownership are fully justified on grounds of distributive justice and of second-best, if not first-best, static or dynamic efficiency; but to uncritically endorse any policy of controls and nationalisation in the name of socialism is part of the deadweight of leftist dogma. Neo-classical economists who argue in favour of the price mechanism are often criticised for ignoring questions of income distribution. This is not quite correct, for what they argue is that to tamper with the price mechanism is not the best way of improving the distribution of income; a less costly (in terms of sacrifice of efficiency) way is to directly redistribute income and assets through an appropriate fiscal policy. The fault in this neo-classical first-best solution lies in that it presumes a neutral government; the analysis ignores the class character of the state which is a bargaining counter of the ruling coalition. In the *n*-th best world, in which we live the efficiency of the price solution may not be delinked from the questions of collective bargaining of certain interest groups. But from the point of view of failure to carry out the discussion in the context of a class analysis of the state, the leftist economist who welcomes any expansion of control by the state irrespective of its class character is no less naive than the neo-classical economist. As a matter of fact the ruling oligarchy in India

is engaged in the building up of a populist variety of state capitalism and in this task it has found it very easy to mobilise the support of many left intellectuals who are now prepared even to condone many of its anti-people authoritarian policies in the name of fighting "right reaction".

DIFFICULT TO ACHIEVE

Another badge for the left establishment club is unquestioning support of the policy of concentration of investment in 'heavy industries' in the context of discussions on Indian planning. There are indeed strong arguments in favour of emphasis on heavy industries, of building a viable capital goods base for an economy which has inherited a lopsided industrial production structure. But the leftists frequently give insufficient attention to the problems generated by a mechanical application of this planning model in an economy where its institutional requirements cannot possibly be satisfied. In strict rigour the policy calls for the institutional framework of comprehensive planning where investment allocation in all sectors can be planned and controlled. In the absence of such allocative powers in the hands of the planning authorities, the ultimate purpose of a chemical-metallurgical heavy industry base is rendered largely ineffective by a diversion of the output of the basic intermediate and capital goods to industries producing luxury consumer goods. Also, successful application of this planning model requires a complete control on the part of the government over the supply of essential consumer goods. Yet one of the most disastrous failures of our government over the years has been precisely in this area: procurement and public distribution of food and other essential consumer goods even on a scale that is substantially below the minimum requirements of the poor have been difficult to achieve.

A pet bogey of the left establishment is devaluation of the Indian rupee. Artificial underpricing of foreign exchange encourages foreign exchange-intensive and capital-intensive methods of production in both agriculture and industry and often works against the employment and income distribution objectives of planning. Yet to suggest devaluation or more flexibility in foreign exchange management, irrespective of the context in which such suggestions are made, amounts in the eyes of the left establishment to being an accomplice in a sinister imperialist plot.

Another taboo is any criticism of the way the trade union movement in India is being run. More than 90 per cent of the 200 million workers in India are in the unorganised sector. Even in the organised sector the more affluent workers (e.g. in banks, LIC, Indian Airlines, etc) are usually more strongly unionised. The left parties which naturally lend all their support to the demands for higher wage, salary and other benefits for these unionised workers usually overlook three major consequences of such sectarian and exclusively economism-oriented struggles. Thus, (a) the government often concedes these union demands only by resorting to deficit financing, the inflationary consequences of which hit the poor unorganised workers hardest. (b) Quite frequently the government accepts the wage demands of one group of workers (usually the more affluent, the more vocal and the smaller-sized group) while rejecting those of others and in this way plays a divisive game in the labour movement. The left parties do not have a clear integrated wage structure in view, while demanding higher wages for different kinds of workers and there is hardly any instance of a left party instructing a trade union *not* to accept the government's concessions to its wage demands until and unless the demands of some weaker and poorer unions and labour groups are met. To take a recent instance, college and university teachers, while agitating for implementation of the salary increases announced by the UGC — increases behind which there has not been any struggle — did not think of taking a stand that the salary revision would not be accepted by them unless and until the more urgent demands of primary and secondary school teachers were met — demands for which these poorer workers in the teaching profession have agitated in vain over years. (c) The 'victory' in wage bargains for unions, while enhancing the benefits of the already employed, often implies bleaker job prospects for the unemployed. For, in the short-run higher wages and salaries for the already employed and larger employment opportunities for the unemployed indeed constitute alternatives. It may also be added that sometimes the very form of agitational tactics that the trade unions follow have adverse side consequences for the poorer non-unionised workers. For example, in sympathy for higher wage demands of a group of striking workers the leftist trade unions often declare a 'bandh' in towns and

cities. But a 'bandh' while it often means a paid holiday for salaried workers, implies a loss of a day's income for large sections of the urban poor, the self-employed in the petty trade and services sector and the casual day-to-day wage labourers who are more numerous than unionised workers and certainly in a worse position to afford the loss of income.

DECRY STRUGGLES

It is of course farthest from our intention to decry any struggles of unionised workers for wage increase. We are well aware that unionisation of workers is a necessary pre-requisite for any political programme for social change, that economic struggles have to be a part and parcel of any working class struggle aimed at changing the social structure. We are only pointing out that in India trade unionism has very largely reduced itself to economism pure and simple; that the working class struggle could have been so conducted as to defend the interests of the toiling masses as a whole (including the unemployed) and not to allow the divisive tactics of the ruling classes to succeed. What we are decrying is that any attempt to express reservations of this kind is branded as anti-working class.

We have given above several examples of the tired clichés and empty shibboleths by which one distinguishes the 'progressive' tribe from that of 'reactionaries'. But all these are at least issue-oriented. There are, of course, many instances where entry to the exclusive left club is allowed or denied on the basis of ascriptive or associational characteristics of a person rather than his ideas or action. If one is related by blood, marriage or friendship ties to any of the members of the left establishment, one's entry is easier. If one had a Students' Federation background in one's college days, then however much one might have indulged in nothing but crass careerism ever since, chances of one's being able to retain the membership of the charmed circle are very high. If one had been a student in Oxbridge and had the right 'contacts' there (e.g. known RPD or Maurice Dobb), this is a plus factor on one's entry passport to the club, whereas if one had gone to an American university one is undoubtedly a reactionary according to the leftist parlour game. If you are a mathematical economist, your entry to the Indian left club will be much smoother if you are quick to show your allegiance to

the Cambridge (England) theory of capital and reserve your choicest invectives for the Cambridge (Mass) variety, no matter how insignificant *both* theories are for your analysis of the problems of the Indian economy.

Left intellectuals in this country have, by practising or succumbing to such criteria of leftism as have been described above, acquired some of the characteristics of caste associations or tribal groups with suitable totems and taboos. Quite characteristically, in intellectual discourse their Marxism is in the good Brahminical tradition, the emphasis being more on scripture quotation and annotation and on ideological purity. In the hands of these high priests of received wisdom Indian Marxist analysis has sometimes degenerated into static theological disputations in lamentable contrast to the essentially scientific and dynamic spirit of Marxism. For fear of being disowned by fellow leftists as heretics or renegades, the Indian left intellectual has often shied away from looking on empirical reality in all its complexity and diversity and discussed such issues as mode of production in agriculture, class character of the state, etc. in a highly abstract fashion, tending to fit fragmentary evidence on his pre-conceived Procrustean bed.

STAGNANT POOLS OF DOGMA

Stagnant pools of dogma breed their own insects. There are many whose wholtime occupation seems to be to detect reactionaries in their midst, to indulge in character assassination of people (usually by calling them agents of some imperialist powers), to take a holier-than-thou attitude and to parade their own purer faith as a certificate for intellectual worth. This game is particularly noxious in the social sciences. A bad physicist cannot redeem himself by calling other physicists reactionaries. But a bad economist can easily cover his weaknesses with the smoke-screen of radicalism; he can shame his more competent colleagues for being not radical enough and thus shoot his way into professional success. Our universities and other research institutions are now full of such pseudo-radicals. By having such people in their midst, indulging in internecine disputes on hair-splitting points of theology and using fake or dogmatic criteria to shut out other sympathetic intellectuals from their exclusive clubs, the left intellectuals undermine whatever constructive role they could have play-

ed and very easily fall into the trap of the real enemies of the people.

There are others who are not of this type, who are self-critical, but then they often tend to go to the opposite pole of spending all their energies on cathartic outbursts of self-flagellation. The leftist intellectual usually carries the load of a sizeable guilt complex arising out of the awareness of his own class origins; his daily existence on the small island of relative affluence in the vast dark ocean of Indian poverty constantly nags him towards loathing his own class and his own self. He alternates between pouring venom on his fellow-leftists and lashing himself with despair about his own class-ridden incapacity to contribute to the left movement. 'What more do you expect in a country where the leadership is so middle class in original', he muses to himself. He waits for the day of messianic leadership arising from the midst of the toiling masses themselves, delivering us all, half suspecting at the same time that he may not live to see that day. He knows but overlooks in self-disgust the fact that in the history of successful socialist revolutions all over the world, leadership has often been largely middle class in origin, that the role of the intellectual in leftist movements is not so insignificant, that frequently the fault with him lies not so much in his class origin as in a certain incapacity to think things through, a certain inclination to let dogma prevail over reason and to arrange a willing suspension of disbelief in clichés for the sake of dedication to a cause, ultimately harming the cause itself.

CONTRADICTION IN VALUES

Among both these kinds of left intellectuals, the character assassinating type and the self-denigrating type, there is one common phenomenon too frequently encountered and that is the contradiction in the values they practise in their private lives and the leftism they advocate in social policies. In their relation to their family members, in their professional relations with their superiors and their subordinates, they are often just as hierarchical and as status conscious, or as sex chauvinist as their hated reactionary counterparts on the other side. This fact of their being claimed in their consciousness to such anachronistic value systems is part of the essential duality of Indian leftism, its illusion and reality, its mythology and science.