

A Future for the Left: Ravi Sinha



It is with considerable satisfaction and with a mild sense of accomplishment that we arrive at this moment. For those of us who have been a part of this process, it has been an exciting but difficult journey. One little climb is over. After every climb, howsoever small, one gains a view. And a view we have gained.

I speak of satisfaction, and of a sense of accomplishment. But, I also speak of trepidation. I do so because a climb much steeper and far more challenging begins from here.

We have gained a view, admittedly still hazy, but much clearer than the one we had in the valley we come from. Most of the climb, however, lies ahead of us.

Fortunately, it is not like climbing in the mountains. Fortunately, metaphors have their limitations. There, in the mountains, as you gain height, the air gets thinner and climbers begin to drop out. There, it gets lonely at the top.

The terrain of history is different. Climbing has a different meaning in the movement. Here, the air gets thicker as you climb higher. Here, you join others as you gain a clearer view. With clarity comes a higher but broader platform for unity.

Here, a summit is reached when an entire revolutionary class stands united in its resolve to overturn the status quo. Here, a summit is gained when an invincible mass of humanity comes together to bend the course of history. We know that others too are climbing from their respective valleys. We know that we all, coming as we do from our respective valleys, are on course to meet at the summit, if not earlier. Till then we all have to do our climbing. Till then we have to continue joining with groups after groups of climbers. As I said, in this terrain, the few become many and the sparse become the mass as we gain height and as we gain a clearer view.

The process that we now call New Socialist Initiative started long before it gained a measure of self-awareness. Those who were there at the beginnings before the beginning started out more from compulsion than plan. Most of us had joined a movement that was already on the decline. But we thought the decline was a temporary setback caused by revisionists and rotten eggs. We were certain that we could build the party and make revolution within no time if only others were willing to listen. Yet, as most of us spoke and few of us listened, we kept getting fragmented even further. Despite a little gain here or a small victory there, the movement continued its descent into the valley.

No one is perfect, and no one will ever be. It is easy to feel wise when looking into the rear view mirror. But I can say nevertheless that we had more of hubris than forethought; judged more often than analyzed or introspected; valued partisanship much more than objectivity; inspired aggression more than solidarity; claimed much more than we ever understood; announced conclusions even before learning the methods to arrive at them.

If you hear in this a tone of regret, you have heard it wrong. You should hear in this a note of pride, because proud we are to have fought against ourselves and to have overcome at least some of our weaknesses. If you smell in this any hint of resignation, you would be absolutely mistaken. We in the NSI have emerged into the open leaving much of the fog behind and we are more determined than ever to meet the challenges ahead.

But it will take more than pride and determination. It will take much more than overcoming our own weaknesses. The Left – here in this country as well as in the whole wide world – is confronted with daunting challenges – challenges that are not merely a product of our weaknesses and failings. More than anything else, they are posed by the changing times and by the new realities. They are more objective than subjective; their sources are out there in the real world.

We in the Left must put our house in order if we hope to overcome this challenge. But let us be clear that it will not be overcome merely by putting our house in order. In any case, if we fail to understand the nature of the times we live in, how shall we agree even about the ways to put our house in order? After all, houses are made to suit the weather and to withstand the conditions outside.

We have often proclaimed answers without understanding the questions and explained away challenges rather than meeting them. Is it any surprise, then, that the influence of Left has declined worldwide? And this has happened despite the fact that the number of leftists – if you were to count them all over the world – has not declined. There are big and small leftist parties all over the world – some of those are even ruling parties. And, there are leftists – perhaps even larger in number – who do not belong to any party.

At times we think we have answers because in past we really had answers. We often think we can beat the challenges just because in past we have done so. But there are no eternal answers, and the challenges keep changing.

Left came to the forefront of history more than a century ago. It became a global force in the aftermath of the October Revolution. It led glorious revolutions of the twentieth century and took on the heroic task of building socialism in extremely difficult conditions.

We made revolutions against kings and compradors, against colonial rulers and military dictators, against feudal, fascist and autocratic regimes. We really know how to do that. We could build a party that could act as a military commander and we could raise a revolutionary army out of peasants and serfs, village artisans and forest dwelling tribes. Our revolutions could never be defeated as long as the task remained to pull those societies out of the conditions left behind by the old order.

But, just because we made revolutions a century or half a century ago, does it mean that we know how to make a revolution today? Look at Nepal as a latest illustrative example. We threw the king out because we know how to do that. But we are having enough trouble in figuring out the next step. And if we do not find a way soon enough, who knows what will happen? Even the king might stage a comeback even if in a different avatar.

There was never a manual for making revolutions. But the problem goes deeper than that. Past revolutions do not teach you much about how to make a revolution against capitalism and against bourgeois democratic regimes, which is precisely on the agenda now. For the first time in history, revolutions are now to be made directly against capitalism and under the conditions of bourgeois democracy. Instead of finding a way to do that – instead of creatively and inventively engaging with the realities of today – we have largely been engaged in imitating past revolutions.

We stretch the meaning of colonialism to make it come alive long after it has departed from the stage of history. We do so because we know how to fight colonialism. We cite what the American imperialism is doing in Iraq or Afghanistan, but we choose to ignore the fact that this behemoth of a superpower is having enough trouble keeping even one little colony, precisely because the time for colonialism is over.

We keep finding the ghost of feudalism in every corner of India and elsewhere. We raise an alarm about it because we know how to fight feudalism. We ignore the fact that wage labor and cash transactions are all-pervasive, including in the remotest villages and in the densest of forests. We ignore the fact that India is a full-fledged capitalist country, even if the capitalist system sits here in the lap of a less than modern society. We ignore the fact that those who need revolution cannot win Delhi by fighting in the forests. They cannot even win the forests by fighting in the forests.

Fighting ghosts is not the only folly we indulge in. More often we go to the other extreme. We become accomplices in running the capitalist system. At times we end up changing sides altogether and become full-fledged captains of capitalism. That is what has happened in China. A party that still calls itself a communist party is busy building the fastest growing capitalism that the world has ever seen. That is why it worries more about the health of the dollar and of the world economy and less about the fate of the Chinese working class. The Left in India too is not free from such deviations. It needs to realize that we are not obliged to build capitalism just because we live under capitalism. Who has asked us to run governments instead of making

revolutions? Is it any surprise if some of us are left with Singurs and Nandigrams hanging around our necks?

But, realizing this much is hardly enough. The capitalism we are confronted with is not the capitalism of a hundred years ago. We cannot devise a strategy to fight it merely by going back to our books. Capitalism has survived and at times even thrived during the past century by continuously changing itself. Of course, it has not changed into something else. It remains the same system and operates by the same logic. But it has adapted to the changing times. Mere declarations about it being moribund are not going to pose any threat to it.

We are not awed by the adaptability and the survival instinct of capitalism. Being awed by your adversary is to give up the fight. But it is equally self-defeating to underestimate the adversary.

Capital has a terminal diseases coded in its logic. It is once again evident in the current global recession. But it will be foolhardy to expect that it will fall on its own. It still has half of the world to expand into and it still keeps creating new markets for selling things it has never sold before. If the growth rate comes down from ten to seven percent in China or from eight to five percent in India, it is not exactly the kind of disaster we expect capitalism to suffer. A Greece or an Ireland is sure enough a symptom of the disease, but it is hardly enough to bring the beast down.

There is no point in putting up a caricature of an enemy so that we can easily knock it down. We will have to confront the real enemy. It is one thing to fight a capitalism that is completely bogged down; it is quite another to fight one that is still on the move. It is a new challenge before the Left and it will take some effort on its part to find a way to beat it. The first step in this direction is to become aware of the task.

Capitalism can never be reformed into something else. Nor can it be stopped or replaced without a revolution against it. Revolution against a system is first and foremost a political revolution. Political revolution against capital is primarily a replacement of the bourgeois state by a socialist state. Replacing a bourgeois state would become possible only if the bourgeois hegemony is broken and the working people are weaned away from it. Among many things, this would require a vision of socialism that is accepted by the people as a desirable and viable alternative.

Socialism, then, is not only a goal. Its vision is a part of the strategy to fight capitalism. This is why our approach to the twentieth century socialism assumes a practical importance. It is much more than a matter of historical interest.

Grappling with this question has been one of the triggering points of the NSI process. It has been a process of prolonged considerations and lively debates. It is hard to do justice to this process in a few minutes. I can only state the conclusions we have arrived at. These are very general conclusions that may now appear as little more than common sense. But they contain elements of a significant reorientation towards our own history.

Our basic position can be summarized in one sentence. *We uphold the heritage of twentieth century socialism, but we do not consider it a model for future socialism.* This was a socialism of

backward societies and emergency conditions. It proved to be invincible in those conditions. It pulled those societies out of the crises of the old order. But it could not inflict a final defeat on capitalism. It degenerated and eventually collapsed, primarily because the task for which it was built was over.

We must realize that the demise of twentieth century socialism cannot be explained on the basis of subjective factors alone. It cannot be explained by the emergence of revisionism and degeneration of communist parties. Those factors did play a role and debates will continue about them. But a materialist explanation would still require unearthing the causes for degeneration setting in and revisionists being victorious.

More important for us is to dispel the popular notion that twentieth century socialism is the only possible model of socialism. It is part of our political task to envision socialism afresh, so that it can be presented as a superior alternative to capitalism. It must be envisioned as a model of creativity, productivity, prosperity, democracy and freedom – a model that will inspire the working people all over the world to overthrow capitalism and build socialism.

Future socialism is to be presented not only as a superior economic system and a better political democracy. It must also be envisioned as a system that would actively eliminate all forms of social oppression and inequality. It must be envisioned as a system that does not become confined to a blind pursuit of material prosperity. Instead it uses creativity, productivity and material prosperity as the foundation for enlarging the realm of human freedom.

We are often asked – what is this adjective “New” in New Socialist Initiative? Are we proposing a new kind of socialism that falls outside the Marxist tradition? At one level we clarify by saying that “New” is to be prefixed to “Initiative” and not to the word “Socialist”. It is intended to be a new initiative for socialism.

At another level we say that socialism is to be envisioned differently in today’s conditions and doing so does not take you outside the Marxist tradition. Just as you cannot give rise to a New Left by publishing a journal in that name, you cannot conjure up a New Socialism by calling yourself New Socialist Initiative. Socialism can be built only by replacing capitalism and its actual shape will largely be determined by what kind of foundation has been laid by the capitalism it will replace.

We are also asked – is NSI going to become in future a new revolutionary party? Or, do we reject the idea itself of a revolutionary party? Our answer is that we neither reject the idea nor the necessity of a revolutionary party. But NSI is not going to turn into a party. It would be best if I quote from a leaflet that sheds light on the idea behind NSI:

“Ours is not an effort to create a new revolutionary party. The advent of such a party lies yet in the future. Ours is not an effort to replace the existing parties and organizations. Nor is our intention to work at counter purposes to any of the existing revolutionary organizations and processes. Ours is an effort to contribute towards meeting the historic challenge that confronts the entire Revolutionary Left. Ours is an effort to begin the process of forging a new language that will be the language of entire Left, of designing a strategy that will be the strategy of entire

class of working people, of envisioning afresh a socialism that will be adopted as the future of humanity.”

NSI is a combined product of the special nature of our times and of the specific history of the group that has brought it to life. The special need of our times is that of a strategic re-orientation. These times are so different from a century ago that Left needs to re-orient itself to the new realities. Old orientation will not help in taking us towards our final goal.

Without such a re-orientation we cannot chalk out the path of our onward journey. Without such a re-orientation a new revolutionary party cannot be built and a new programme for revolution cannot be formulated.

NSI is one small effort in the direction of such a re-orientation. Hundreds of such efforts are needed. We do not claim to be the sole repository of all wisdom and foresight. We are willing to join with others and learn from them. But we also do not shirk from our own responsibilities.

Left has had a glorious past. We are proud of our heritage. But we cannot resurrect the past and claim it as our future.

Left has a bright future. But we must realize that a future lies in the future and not in the past.

As our manifesto says, future is never a destiny. It must be made. It is to be made on the platform offered by the present. Future will be what we will make of it.

We must occasionally look into the rear view mirror to draw inspiration from our glorious past and to learn lessons from previous setbacks. But, most of the time, we must look ahead. For that is how we will claim our future – a future we deserve and a future that humanity awaits.

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