

Lessons for the Saner Segments of the Margins

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The margins just got bigger. Many among those who customarily inhabit the centre have been pushed to the periphery. They are not my concern. There are analyses galore about why and how this has happened. I am not going to add one more to those. Margins exist on all sides. They encircle the political mainland from left and from right. Some might say there are no margins on the right. Everything on that side is mainstream. In any case, I will have little to say about the margins on the right.

My concern is with the left-side margins that now harbour the entire Left, although it is perhaps too soon for much of the traditional Left to acknowledge that. They are not likely, in any case, to listen to those of us who have spent a lifetime on the margins – partly because of our own follies and frailties but also because we have refused to succumb to the unsavory demands of the times. It is, after all, not our fault that we are born in a valley of historical time where the descent on the slopes of past glories has already come to an end and the ascent to the future ones is yet to begin.

The adjective “saner” in the title is an evaluative term and one could be accused of being judgmental and arrogant. Either one should spell out the criteria underlying such evaluations or admit that the judgment is a subjective one. I will begin with the second option for the simple reason that I do not wish to be pedantic about counting criteria that can be discerned, in any case, from what I have to say. Of course, one does not even need to point towards the lunatic fringe that lives by hurling accusations of revisionism, treachery and worse at everyone else. Whether one likes it or not, they too are part of the Left. I cannot say that they are not my concern. But they are almost hard-wired for not understanding the world as it is and thoroughly incapable of reflection and self-reflection. I do not expect them to draw any lessons from anything except for petty and selfish ends or for picking up an internecine fight.

Let me begin with what to expect in the aftermath of May 16. There is much talk about how bad it is going to be. Of course it is going to be bad, but not necessarily in the expected ways, although that too might happen. There should not be any doubt that the people of India, in their wisdom, have given a massive mandate to a person and a *parivar* capable of the diabolic. It is not helpful to conveniently change the meaning of the term “mandate” and say after the victory of the brutes that two thirds of Indians did not vote for them. There is no point consoling ourselves that they did not win the elections; the incumbents lost it. Nor should we draw much comfort from the fact that the horse of *Ashwamedh* was stopped in the far out kingdoms in the east and the south where local deities had their own divine powers. We are not entirely wrong when we attribute the victory to money-power and the corporate-controlled media. But, then, we also have the task of reconciling this with our faith in the wisdom of the people who can be thus navigated.

It is to be plainly accepted that it is a resounding victory. It has been, as the man himself acknowledged in his victory speech, in the making for sixty years and it has taken the “labour” and the “sacrifices” of four generations. The six decade long march of today’s

victors has left a trail of riots and carnages and steeled hundreds of thousands of men and women to have the capacity and the stomach for medieval barbarity. The question is – will they continue to do the same after this decisive victory?

The answer has to be in the negative. There could always be a riot here or a riot there. It cannot be ruled out in a society like ours. But the victors do not have to continue with what they were doing before the victory. Non-occurrence of riots in Gujarat after 2002 is a telling story. In fact they do not even need to repeat in rest of the country their *experiments with Gujarat*, where – to take just one accomplishment of theirs as an illustrative example – Hindus and Muslims can no longer live in the same neighborhoods.

Our first lesson, however, should be drawn not from what they can or cannot do to the social fabric. It should rather be drawn from what they can or cannot do to the state and its structures. The lesson here is going to be counter-intuitive for a regular leftist. The sources of the savage power of the victors lie primarily in the society, but this power cannot re-mould the state structures in the shape of its social ideology. Some might say – why would they even think of attempting such a thing? After all, it is a capitalist state. Having gained its control they can merrily get on with serving the corporate interests that have helped them come to power. Such an observation would be true as far as it goes. It states the obvious but misses a crucial point.

Capitalist interest can be served by a fascist dictatorship like Hitler's and it can be served by an enlightened bourgeois-democratic welfare state such as in Canada or in Sweden. Can one say that the difference does not matter to a leftist who is fighting to bring about socialism or to a people who are supposedly waiting for it? Indian state sits in the lap of a society that can, at times, enthrone men who would like to take the fascist-dictatorial path. Fortunately they will not be able to do so despite their desires and ideologies. They may not even try because they can read the writing on the wall. A leftist would be inclined to credit the people for forestalling the emergence of an Indian Hitler. She would not be entirely wrong. After all, anything that happens in the social world is, in the final analysis, a deed of the people. But such long-range analyses are often tautological and do not contribute to understanding.

The lesson, then, is about the Indian state and its rather puzzling relationship with the Indian society. One ought to notice that the society gives rise to savage forces and entrusts them with state power, but the state compels the savages to become civil and act in accordance with the constitutional framework. History has carved a modern polity out of a yet-to-be-modern society. Many parts of the cultures and practices that make up this society are ill-at-ease with the modern political structure. And yet the political structure is fairly secure. The child sits in the lap of a mother who finds the child alien and at times hostile, but holds the child nevertheless in her lap.

The lesson is not without practical implications. If, for example, the new ruler were to come after the leftists, how will they fight back? They are likely to assert that they will go to the people and fight on the basis of their strength. They will not be entirely wrong. But one should not forget that the new ruler can go to an even larger number of people. If the Left, for

example, cannot fight the *Trinamool* in the streets and fields of West Bengal, how can it fight the new Prince of Darkness in the cities, towns, villages and forests of the entire country even in the unlikely event of all other leftists coming together with it? The fact that the Prince, like the Greek gods, presently feeds on the admiration, fears and prayers of the masses makes the challenge even more formidable. One should think very hard before drawing him and his forces on the street for a political fight. That will have to be done another day. For now it is more likely, and wiser too, that the leftists would defend themselves within the existing political framework – in the parliament, assemblies, courts and other institutions while taking help of the Constitution and the laws. One should not forget that the courageous fight of a Mukul Sinha or a Teesta Setalvad on behalf of the victims of Gujarat 2002 has happened mostly in the courts and not on the streets of Ahmedabad or Gandhinagar.

Perhaps a caveat needs to be inserted here. One should not be complacent about the power of a modern polity to civilize the savage forces. The state structures are definitely affected by those who come to occupy the posts. In their persons they bring in those elements of cultures, practices and world-views that do not sit well with the character and the architecture of a modern bourgeois state. They do find ways to bend this architecture to their own ends. But the main point of the argument above remains valid.

This brings us to the second lesson which is closely related to the first one. It is about the forms and processes of democracy. There is a remarkable consensus across the ideological spectrum about the desirability of a thickly participatory grass-root democracy. The New Age philosophers and seers, who inspire a whole range of social movements, NGOs and Magsaysay awardees, have long preached about the virtues of strong democracy in which state power is decentralized and a vigorously active citizenry rules over itself through local self-government.

There have emerged on the Indian political scene new knights in shining armors who have their own visions of *Swaraj*. Many admired, even if from afar, when ministers in the short-lived Delhi government were “shaking up the system” by patrolling the streets through the nights. Many among the more sophisticated advocates of strong democracy may have cringed at the vigilantism and the excessively earthy oratory of the new ministers. They may also have wished that real people living in the real *mohallas*, such as *Khirki Extension*, were more tolerant of cultural diversity. But all this, in their view, would be no more than a minor irritant in an otherwise radical development that is robustly anchored in the grass-roots. Few among the more learned votaries of this viewpoint may yet be ready to accept the citizenship of the *Republic of Khirki Extension*, let alone of a village republic run by a *Khap Panchayat*, but all of them would admire the audacity of experimenting with a participatory democracy wherein every *mohalla* will write its own manifesto, take full control of all aspects of governance and development, and espouse, protect and put into practice cultural values and ethical norms organically rooted in the life of a community.

Left comes from the other end to join the consensus about strong democracy. Here the argument proceeds from an understanding that bourgeois democracy is nothing but a handmaiden of capital. Representative electoral democracy is merely a mechanism for

acquiring popular legitimacy for the bourgeois state. This is why no element of bourgeois democracy – not a single one of its institutions and practices – will be allowed to survive when socialism comes around. This is also the reason why, even under capitalism, the struggle of the left should be aimed at making democracy more direct, more participatory and more decentralized.

There can be little dispute about the goal of empowering people, but the arguments in favour of strong democracy miss the big picture on several counts. At its best strong democracy can play a supplementary role in the larger framework of constitutional-representative-liberal democracy. Without such a framework and in the absence of a democratic tradition it cannot work. At its worst strong democracy can play havoc with democracy itself. Examples of such disasters are littered across the ages and all over the planet. Our *Khap Panchayats*, tribal councils across the world and especially in Africa, Afghanistan and north-west Pakistan, and the ferocious mob democracy during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China can be some of the illustrative examples for anyone brooding over this question.

The leftist commonsense that no component of bourgeois democracy would be carried over to socialism arises from a view that the evolution of this democracy has been driven completely by the interests and designs of capital. People did nothing for bringing about this democracy and there is nothing in it for them. This, however, is a mistaken view. The history of modern democracy overlaps with that of capitalism but that does not mean one is synonymous with the other. Socialist democracy would imbibe much of the democratic ethos and tradition of the modern era and it would also take in many of its institutions and practices modified according to the core principles and values of socialism. The key point here is that democracy, even of the bourgeois variety, is not only a mode of constituting the state and other structures of power. It also carves out a domain of rights, choices and freedoms for the individual citizen.

At the same time, the fact remains that democracy is primarily a mode of constituting the state and other power structures. All power structures are, in the final analysis, inimical to freedom. The goal of human progress is to make them increasingly dilute and transparent and eventually to make them go away. That is how the state is expected to wither away in the very long run. Whether or not this actually happens, it does point towards the desirable forms of democracy and state structures. State should gradually shrink and release increasingly larger domains of life from its grip. This cannot really happen under capitalism because anything released by the state will be taken over by the market and subsumed under the animal kingdom of profit. But even under capitalism, state must be transparent, which is possible only if it is rule-bound, non-arbitrary and constitutional. Those who think that state can be made transparent by strong democracy are thoroughly mistaken. Strong democracy makes the political process thick and viscous. It makes the designing and implementation of policies muddied and opaque. More importantly, it is not possible for strong democracy to imbibe uniformly the democratic ethos of the modern era. If one has doubts about such assertions, one can, once again, look at the *Khap Panchayats* and tribal councils.

One hopes that this argument is not construed as a lesson in how to dis-empower people and how to exclude them from the democratic process. A transparent, constitutional and rule-bound state can as much be constituted by the people as any, and the process to do so can be made as democratic as strong democracy. In fact it is more so because policies and proposals can be debated rationally, transparently and on a larger scale. The tragedy of this election – indeed of all Indian elections – has been that socio-psychological and other non-transparent aspects dominate. They do not allow debates on ideologies, programmes and policies. The messiah who emerged victor this time simultaneously appeared many things to many people – many were reassured about his staunch Hindu credentials, others were happy about his authoritarian personality and yet others about his promises of miracles about growth, jobs and national pride. There was hardly any need to scrutinize his promises and examine his policies. The same factors that spoil the prospects of strong democracy contaminate the constitutional-representative-liberal democracy too, except that, in the long run, the latter is better equipped to deal with these conditions.

The third major lesson has to be about our approach to the programmes and policies of the bourgeois state. This should not be confused with the strategic goal of bringing about socialism which can be accomplished only by replacing the bourgeois state by a socialist state. However, the struggle around the programmes and policies of the present state remains a matter of critical importance. It affects people's lives now while it also feeds into the prospects of advancing the struggle for socialism.

Indian capitalism is in a particularly rapacious stage. Capital here is like a hungry beast with a prey in sight that it can pounce upon in just one leap. In such a stage, capitalist growth is rapid on account of two major factors – one, abundantly available cheap labour and second, the fact that most natural resources, such as forests and mines, and most of the small assets so ubiquitous in the entire economy, such as the land of small landholders, are yet to be turned into capital. Cheap labour is always a condition for good profits, but grabbing resources and assets for a song is a real windfall. Such a prospect makes the beast real hungry and desperately impatient. Capital always plays a big role in bourgeois elections, but this time it had a far more pressing reason to play this role more aggressively than ever.

The most effective way to resist this plunder – if one has to do that within the bounds of bourgeois democracy – is to fight for two things. First, one must fight for a welfare state that would collect adequate revenues from enhanced taxation of profits and other higher incomes and take full responsibility of the basic needs and services such as food, shelter, health, education, water, and all other civil services for every citizen. The second fight should be for a legal framework that would prevent capitalization of natural resources and dispossession of small asset-holders unless the state in the first case and asset-holders in the second are made permanent share-holders in the upcoming enterprises. This should be done over and above the monetary compensation determined on the basis of an appropriate and mutually negotiated combination of the current and the post-acquisition market prices of the assets and resources.

Left is the most natural force to put up this resistance. But it has failed miserably. The blame cannot be put entirely on the global dominance of neo-liberalism under which welfare state

and regulation of capital are considered dead horses. One has to fight in a given environment and the best way to do so is to base oneself on hard facts and just demands even if they are considered outdated under the current dispensation. Facts are so obvious that even the Congress Party tried to position itself on a welfare-oriented and rights-based left-of-centre plank when confronted with the nakedly neo-liberal and rightwing plank of the adversary. That it too failed miserably had many causes but the facts behind that positioning were not among them.

The worrisome aspect about the left is its double affliction with dogma and populism. Dogmatism operates as blinkers that keep the view focused on the bygone world of early and mid twentieth century. Imperialism of the colonial times and resultant nationalism appear to have gone into the leftist blood. This impairs the ability to forge effective strategies against Indian capital and against global capital as well. It also leads to foolish steps in the arena of parliamentary politics. It is not only the Left who are paying the price of walking out of the UPA1 on the issue of the Nuclear Deal. The entire political scenario, which gave such a shock on May 16, would have been quite different but for that grievous mistake.

Dogmatism also prevents the left from presenting the outline of a *socialist future* that can supersede the *capitalist present* not only on the criteria of equality and justice but also on those of productivity, creativity, prosperity and freedom. Despite the fact that many talks and articles of some of the tallest ideologues contain phrases like “Future Socialism” or “Twenty-first Century Socialism”, they are not able to free themselves from the grip of the view that holds Twentieth Century Socialism as the canonical model of socialism. The failure to present socialism as a viable and superior alternative has gravely negative political implications for the entire left.

Populism, on the other hand, deprives them entirely of ideological and political courage. Even the socially progressive sections of liberal bourgeoisie are far bolder in pushing the masses towards closing the gap between the actually existing popular consciousness and the historical consciousness of the era. On the left side one comes across celebrated theoreticians and scholars who still talk nostalgically about nationalist period and about the Gandhian-communitarian ethos when the communist party was so organically linked with the peasantry. Such an attitude puts all the blame for left’s failure on the severing of links with the masses. No one can claim that delinking with the masses is not a serious problem. But if one elevates it to being the only problem and advocates steps aimed solely at establishing this link, one would not be prepared to face the full challenge confronting the left.

Importance of the lesson about programmes and policies of the state is not only for the left. Realization for a comprehensive and well-orchestrated fight for welfare state and regulation of capital has been waylaid in more recent times by the populist anti-corruption movement and by the subsequent emergence of the AAP phenomenon. Populist anti-corruption movements led by messianic and demagogic leaders have invariably helped, despite their radical postures and popular appeal, the conservatives and the rightwing. Such an outcome is not yet established beyond dispute in the present case. But indications are already there. The shock of May 16 cannot be attributed in any major way to a new electoral arithmetic created

by AAP. But it can certainly be attributed in a significant measure to the political atmosphere created first by the India Against Corruption supported from behind by the Sangh Parivar and later by the AAP phenomenon strengthened by the participation of activists and leaders of social movements, sections of Lohiaite socialists, many leftists and other radicals, and a large number of politically uninformed idealist citizens.

From here we can easily move on to the last lesson on my list which is not really a lesson and it does not relate only to the recent political developments in India. It is more like a question that needs to be raised about a much wider global phenomenon. The phenomenon in question comprises of lightly organized, largely spontaneous and suddenly erupting mass movements. Some of them are movements focusing on economic and political issues, others on social issues and yet others bring together cultural, social and systemic dimensions to question an entire way of life characterized by modernity. These movements are favourites of unaffiliated leftists and other heterogeneous radicals, peace activists, environmentalists, NGOs and social activists of various kinds. They are theorized and applauded by post-structuralist, post-modernist, post-Marxist, post-colonialist and similar varieties of scholars and theorists.

Late sixties of the previous century was a turning point for this phenomenon. The anti-racism civil rights movement in the USA, the anti-war movement against America's Vietnam War, student movements in Europe and in many other parts of the world, the feminist movement in much of the west, the underground *samizdat* (self-publishing) movement of intellectuals in the Soviet Union that was supported from the west by the Cold War Right as well as the anti-authoritarian New Left, and the global spread of radicalism spearheaded by the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China – all this melded together to herald an era of great movements that were very different from the working class revolutions led by communist parties and anti-colonial movements led by nationalists as well as communists. Among many facets of these movements, one may also note that towering intellectuals like Sartre and Marcuse inspired, participated in and theorized about these movements.

The overall impact of these movements has been uneven. Some had great success and transformed the social-political-cultural-ideological landscape of humanity. Others came as immediate responses to issues and crises of the times and subsided as the world moved on to other things. The purpose here is not to make an appraisal of this history – an impossible task, in any case, for my abilities. My purpose is to underline the necessity of re-examining certain widely held views about this phenomenon.

It is often claimed that rigorously organized political movements led by tightly structured parties are a thing of the past. They have been superseded for all times to come by the spontaneous and loosely organized social movements. It is this view that needs to be brought under scrutiny. New Social Movements are not so new any longer. They have had a history of half a century. There is enough evidence by now to examine their track record. In more recent times one has witnessed the advent of *World Social Forum* and short-lived eruptions like the *Occupy Movement*. Their impact is very limited and their future is unclear. Even the outcomes of *Tehrir Square*, and of the *Arab Spring* in general, which were more overtly political than the classical examples of social movements, are at best ambiguous. How long

will the advocates and the theorists of such movements continue to point towards the failures of leftists and the absence of political and class-based movements as a proof that there are no alternatives to social movements when it comes to changing the world?

Left has not ignored the importance of social movements and it has not failed because it has refused to imitate them. Left has failed because it has not been able to come up with a grand strategy to challenge capitalism and its political framework of bourgeois democracy. It knows how to fight the feudalism, colonialism, monarchy and military dictatorships. But these are, by and large, adversaries belonging to a bygone era. Left has failed because it has no strategy against its current adversary. It should focus on remedying this grave shortcoming.

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