

# Theses on India

Ravi Sinha

---

## 1

India has been variously imagined and endlessly explored – as a fact, as an idea, and as everything in between. Like any major segment of humanity, it is an object of compulsive engagement for a few who strive to understand it, for some who wish to preserve it, and for many who desire to change it. More than most such segments, it exists as an intricate weave of structures within structures that have widely differing functions and flows as an often turbulent flow of processes within processes that have very different dynamics and greatly varying time-scales. It changes daily to remain the same over the decade; it preserves itself through the decades only to metamorphose into something else over the century; it has changed over the centuries and yet has been able to maintain its identity over the millennia as a civilization enveloping many civilizations. While it has existed in its own space and flowed in its own time, it has interacted, sometimes weakly and gently and at other times strongly and vigorously, with systems and civilizations across the globe. The complexity, the turbulence, the permanence and the change that is India, has always frustrated the wish to preserve it in a given state and often thwarted the plan to change it according to a given blueprint. And yet, the fact remains that social structures arise out of human interests and practices. The river of historical time does not flow through a pre-existing terrain to a pre-determined end. While being a product of these structures, humans can still change these structures; while being carried by the current of history, humans can still intervene in the flow. The challenge is to understand this flow and design effective strategies for intervention. India – complex and colossal as it might be and near eternal as it might appear – must be contemplated and explored from the vantage point of a revolutionary agency.

## 2

It would be stating the obvious if one is to say that India, just like any other major country, is simultaneously an economy, a polity, a society, a culture, a civilization and an integral part of the global whole. The consequences that follow from this statement, however, are not always as obvious. Such a piece of multi-layered reality, where the layers are inextricably articulated into one another, invariably generates unmanageable complexities. But, rarely as it does, its multi-causal dynamics also gives rise to unexpected simplifications. Rare simplicity of a complex object is as hard to fathom as the complexities that abound, but it does offer a window of historic opportunity to the revolutionary agency. Revolutionaries put premium on making history and they can hardly be blamed for it. If an opportunity arises, it must be seized even if its origins are

ill-understood. But what is to be said of those who become accustomed to expecting only the simple? For them the simple alone is possible and if anything appears complex it must be reduced to the simple. Many of the disappointments and tragedies of the revolutionary movements have their origin in such an approach. If the simple fails to arise, the blame must be put on the agency that could not beget it through its revolutionary practice. Such an obsession blinds one to the possibility that the complex may offer openings for triggering processes leading to the emergence of the simple. Revolutions have happened in past through simple slogans that sufficed under the classic conditions of crises and contradictions. But each revolution has been different from the other and the criterion of simplicity does not apply to all of them in equal measure. In future one may have to look more often and more closely for opportunities residing within the complex. It would be all the more true for a country like India which has been described as the elephant that is finally on the move and which is being advertised as one of the two emerging giants of the new century.

### 3

The theorist has the advantage of being able to play with the beast. The practitioner has to confront it. Understanding begins in simple models even if the real object is dauntingly complex. The key lies in abstracting the model from the real in such a way that the former captures the central dynamics of the latter. Theory often has the facility to add complications to the model and see how the dynamics changes. Practice can deal with nothing but the full dynamics of the real. It comes to grief when it takes the real to be exactly same as the model. And yet, practice cannot proceed without theory. A blind practitioner is ill-equipped to confront the beast.

### 4

India can be modeled as a *mode of production* along with its characteristic institutional and ideological structures. Such a model would have room for many of the salient features of the Indian economy, polity and society. The resultant dynamics, however, would be greatly modified if one were to improve the model by incorporating one or more of the other *modes* which are remnants of the past and play secondary roles as compared to the dominant mode, but interact significantly with it. Even within the single-mode model, such as the capitalist one, it would make a big difference if unevenness of capitalist development is incorporated in the model. Indeed the dynamism of emergent economies is made possible largely by such unevenness. The dynamics would be further modified if the model, instead of taking India as a *mode* or an interacting arrangement of *modes* perfectly closed within its boundaries, accounts also for its interactions with the outside world. All this may sound as unnecessary pedantry, but the fact remains that theorizations of most practitioners lack elementary care about methodological questions. Confusions abound also about the relationship between the *mode of production* on the

one hand and the political-institutional and cultural-civilizational aspects of the society on the other. It is one thing to theorize the emergence of a *superstructure* out of the material *base* within a model *mode of production*. It is quite another to establish such a relationship in the case of the full-blooded social reality.

## 5

*Economic* is not synonymous with the *material*. The latter is not exhausted by the former. It is a legitimate theoretical endeavour to look for material bases of ideas and institutions. It is not proper, however, to insist on reducing everything to the economic. Nor should the components of the *material* that cannot be reduced to the *economic* be put in the bin of the *superstructural*. All this does not mean, however, that the economic can be ignored. Intellectual fashions vary, especially in reaction to the theoretical excesses of the past, but the practitioner still has to engage with reality for what it is. The *economic* may not be the root cause of everything that happens in the society but it is undoubtedly the most basic, most substantive and the most dynamic part of social reality. Its relative primacy is all the more pronounced in the modern capitalist era and so will it be even in the future when the modern era would have gone beyond its capitalist phase. An active, objective and transformative engagement with India must begin, therefore, with the *economic*.

## 6

Indian economy is a capitalist economy with highly uneven capitalist development. The regime of commodity and money is all-embracing and labour-power is universally recognized as a commodity. As is the case with any capitalist economy, there are non-capitalist pockets which are not fully penetrated by the cash-nexus and where labour is not compensated for money – internal economy of the family-based household being one such example. But they are fully articulated into the larger capitalist structure. One may also find remnants of pre-capitalist modes but they exist on the periphery with progressively diminishing shares in the overall economy. The most consequential feature of the Indian economy, which is largely responsible for its current dynamism, is the unevenness of capitalist development. Indian capitalism has entered a special phase. It is a phase characterized by maturation of capital as well as by abundance of untapped potential for growth. Indian big capital has come of age. It regards entire globe as its playing field. There are giant corporations with enormous financial and other resources at their command and with large chunks of market and economy already under their belt. They play largely by the rules of capital and amass wealth and power through standard mechanisms of surplus appropriation. Large parts of the Indian economy, however, remain in an underdeveloped stage of capitalism. These are being readied to be put on the table of the big capital. Many sectors are yet to be subsumed under the formal structure of developed capitalism. Here standard

rules do not always apply and the scene often resembles the classically savage conditions of primitive accumulation. There is great churning for new titans of capital to emerge. Corporate predators are hungry to feast on sectors currently populated by petty capitalists, customary traders and small producers. Mountains of money are to be made by grabbing land, mines, licenses and government contracts. Such are the bowels of a growing capitalism and this is how a new giant emerges on the world capitalist scene. It is bound to be different from the advanced capitalist countries where, apart from the rare instances of new technological revolutions leading to emergence of new markets, there are no virgin-fields and little scope for new titans to emerge. It is also different from many other parts of the third world, such as most of the sub-Saharan Africa, where virgin-fields are in abundance but large capitalist predators are yet to emerge, although this may change rather soon.

## 7

The brutal injustice inherent in the process of primitive accumulation has always given rise to resistance and rebellion. Intensity of resistance varied from one country to another, but there are no examples where, short of a revolution, advance of capitalism could be stopped. However, old ways of primitive accumulation are no longer possible. The world has changed a great deal from the days of Enclosure Acts in Britain or of capturing the New World through the monstrous pillage and extermination on the American continent. Increasingly, alienation of traditional owners from land and other productive assets is being accomplished through monetary compensation and markets. For every example of conflict over land acquisition, there are many others where peasants have willingly sold their land for industrial, infrastructural or housing projects. Land becomes gold when touched by capital. Conflict is about who will get how much of the gold. A landowner, more often than not, will be happy to see capital appearing at the village gates. There have been in India in recent times some famous examples of resistance against land acquisition, but they have all originated in forcible acquisition by the government or inadequate compensation by the corporate capital or the government. Even these few examples, aided by compulsions of competitive politics under an electoral democracy, have made the ruling classes cautious enough. Generally speaking, the situation in India can no longer be characterized as that of primitive accumulation. More and more it fits a description of petty capitalists and small producers being subsumed under the formal structure of big capital.

## 8

Despite vociferous demands by the corporate capital to throw open the entire economy exclusively to the market forces, Indian state will continue to play a crucially important economic role. The neo-liberal *reforms* will continue to unfold, but not entirely according to the wishes of the corporate capital. Capital is never completely safe in the market and it needs to be

saved from its own logic not only in times of severe crises but also during periods of rapid growth. There are dangers galore while advancing at a breakneck speed. Unevenness of capitalist development offers avenues for rapid growth, but it also carries dangers of instabilities and turbulence. In a country where more than half of the population lives in extreme poverty, where ninety percent of the working people eke out a living in the informal sectors, where agriculture remains a vast ocean of small peasant economy contributing only a sixth of the national income but employing more than half of the work-force, and where there are hardly any social safety nets for the poor and the unemployed, an unbridled swallowing of the entire economy by the big capital and a full unleashing of the market forces in all sectors would lead to certain disaster. Capitalist development, therefore, must proceed with due care and under necessary surveillance by the state. Rapid growth must steer clear of the dangers of social upheaval. The Indian state has prepared itself well for the role of a guide and a troubleshooter. Its revenues are growing rapidly in a fast growing economy, which enhances its capacity to ameliorate the dangerous consequences of the big capital marching into sectors populated by hundreds of millions of workers, small producers and petty capitalists.

## 9

The current acceleration in the Indian economic growth has come about in the time of *globalization of capital*. This, however, has not been the only jump in the Indian growth rate. The previous one, which was equally significant, happened during the period of decolonization. From a growth rate of less than one percent per annum during the first half of the twentieth century, Nehru's India made a jump to an average annual growth rate of more than four percent. This prepared the ground for the success of the current policies, just as Mao's socialism ended up being a launching pad for the capitalist superpower that China has now become. Colonialism had brought capitalism to the shores of India and other colonies, but it also acted as a barrier to capitalist development in these countries. Political independence followed by the process of decolonization helped remove the colonial shackles. Further acceleration required new policies and a different world. Current policies would not have been safe for the Indian capital had it not been nursed to strength by the Indian state during the period of decolonization. But they would still not be safe if a different world were not to emerge from the debris of colonialism. In fact the new policies had to wait for the stabilization of the postcolonial world order. Capitals from all nations and countries have their allegiance to the new global system. *Globalization of capital* is the new modus operandi of capitalism in this postcolonial world. It is the new global strategy of capital to deal with and operate through the international framework of independent nation-states which are increasingly constituted through some or the other form of political democracy. Without such a strategy capital would be faced with even more serious crises and with a much more hostile world. Emerging economies offer much needed shelter and profitable opportunities to the capital from advanced countries and, in turn, the latter offers them finance, technology and markets needed for faster growth and the security that comes from partnering in a global system.

While being internally driven in the main, the accelerated capitalist development in India is also correlated with the globalization of capital.

## 10

*Economic* is not the only factor that causes a revolution. The *political* and the *social* play equally important roles. Economy, however, remains the key arena where subterranean causes and basic driving forces of revolutions arise. The favourable economic conditions for capitalist growth as witnessed in contemporary India do not rule out the need and the potential for radical and emancipatory transformations. It is not necessary to wait for the terminal crisis of capitalism for making a revolution against it. The statement that a new mode of production does not appear before the room for development of productive forces has been exhausted in the previous mode should not be interpreted dogmatically. One does not need to be paralyzed by doubts about whether or not it is time to prepare for an anti-capitalist revolution.

## 11

These times are very different from the previous century when revolutions happened against a capitalism that was bogged down on the global scale. In the countries where they happened, revolutions did not face capitalism directly. None of them took place in a capitalist economy and against a bourgeois nation-state; none had to deal with the political conditions characteristic of a bourgeois democracy. Future revolutions will be faced with altogether different conditions. For the first time in history they will be directly confronted with capitalism and bourgeois democracy. And many of them, especially the initial ones, would have to be made against a capitalism that would still hold growth potentials – one that would still be on the move.

## 12

It matters a great deal whether one is fighting against a moribund capitalism or a capitalism that still retains growth potentials. Revolutionary strategies against a capitalism that is on the move would be very different from those against a capitalism that is bogged down. Strategy is always shaped by a combination of causality inherent in the objective dynamics of the system and the preparedness of the agency for change. In a system that is absolutely crisis-ridden – where its dynamics comes across an insurmountable barrier – the agency seems to arise from the dynamics itself. History seems to move by its own force. Absolute crises occur, however, only in abstract models. In a real social system crisis is always a relative term. There are always escape routes for the system to survive and even gain strength. Revolutionary agency needs to block these escape routes with a combination of *resistance* and *advancement*.

### 13

*Resistance* as a component of revolutionary strategy means resisting those steps and policies that further aggravate the exploitative conditions of the working people. Such resistance, in itself, is seldom revolutionary. In most cases it can be managed within the system. That is why it is to be taken as just one component of the overall strategy. In India it would mean resisting the onslaught on and the curtailment of workers' rights, wages and working conditions. In addition to strengthening and radicalizing the existing trade union movement it would require organizing the unorganized workers in the informal sectors. It would also mean struggle for health, education, food security, housing, civic amenities and basic minimum quality of life for all. The state must be forced to accept that ensuring all this is solely its responsibility. Capital must be forced to accept the norms of a modern and civilized society.

### 14

In the Indian conditions, a more important part of such *resistance* would be to stand against the onslaught of capital on the resources and livelihoods of workers and small producers in the informal sectors. These are the largest frontiers for further expansion and growth of capitalism. This is where the most effective resistance to capitalism can be put up. But it cannot be done by trying to block the entry of capital and preserve traditional modes of economic life. Instead, working people will have to organize themselves and force the big capital to negotiate with them on their own terms. This is where the working people will first learn to collectively own and manage productive assets and take charge of their economic activities. These will be the first seeds of the socialist principle – *collective producers must be the collective appropriators*. Experimentations and mobilizations that would lead towards control of these sectors by the working people and their development along future socialist lines would not amount to revolution and bring about socialism today. All this would still be a part of the capitalist economy. But it would strengthen the position of the working class and prepare it for running a future socialist economy. As this kind of movement gathers steam, it would also come up with demands and struggles against the state too. For example, legal and economic protection for the cooperative and collective sectors, access to cheap finance and subsidies, and favourable terms of trade with big capital and large manufacturing sectors would be among the major demands.

### 15

*Resistance*, thus, leads to *advancement*. Advancement, here, means creating models of the future within the present. This must be an integral part of the revolutionary strategy against capitalism

that prides itself in bringing about material prosperity unprecedented in human history. Its ideologues highlight its record of developing productive forces and creating wealth. All inequities and injustices inherent in the logic of capital are justified on this basis. Critics of capitalism, on the other hand, often focus exclusively on equity and justice. Progress through development of productive forces resulting in material prosperity and higher quality of life is either taken for granted under socialism, or under certain ideological dispositions it is not even considered desirable. Capitalism, however, cannot be defeated just because it is exploitative and unjust. Humanity has lived for millennia under systems that were brutally oppressive and unjust. Revolutionary transformations become possible only when systemic alternatives offering better material conditions of life become available. Justice and progress are the twin objectives of revolutionary change, and their relative importance may vary from one instance to another. In the long run progress acts as the material foundation for justice. In the final analysis, enhanced freedom for every human being is the ultimate driving force of history. It is often recognized, and correctly so, that injustice inherent in social bondages, exclusions and deprivations are barriers to human freedom. But it is often forgotten that low level of material progress is also a fetter on human freedom. A revolution against capitalism can succeed only if it can offer a passage to a system that can do better than capitalism both in the realm of justice and in that of progress. It is challenging to defeat capitalism precisely because it has been the most successful system so far in advancing material progress. Even its victims are enchanted by it. *Advancement*, therefore, has to be an integral part of revolutionary strategy against capitalism. Models would be of critical importance in generating confidence among the working people that capitalism can be superseded not only in the realm of justice but also in the realm of progress.

## 16

Capitalism succeeds not only by the *economic* and the *material*. Its success depends equally on the *political*. While dealing with the political domain, it is crucially important to keep in view the difference between the *model* and the *reality*. *Economy* and *polity* are both embedded in the *society*, but their embeddings are not identical. Both contain a blend of the *formal-institutional* and the *social-cultural*, but this blend is differently operative in the two domains. The formal-institutional structure of the Indian polity is unmistakably modern and capitalist. Constitution, political institutions of the state, legal framework, governance structures – all conform to the basic principles of bourgeois democracy. But in actual working this structure must wade through a society that is far from modern. Such a gap between the formal-institutional and the social-cultural exists in varying degrees in all countries. In the advanced capitalist countries of the west it has been bridged more than anywhere in the rest of the world. In many of the third world countries, on the other hand, such a gap has not emerged in a significant way because the formal-institutional structures of bourgeois democracy are yet to get entrenched in the polity and the society. Indian polity is nearly unique in this respect. Here this gap is most pronounced. A formal-institutional framework, whose bourgeois-democratic character is as pure as any on the

planet, can come to life only if its skeletal structure is padded with and nursed through the flesh and blood of the largely pre-modern society and culture. It must embed itself in the processes, relations, identities, customs, traditions and practices that constitute the complex and multi-layered Indian social organism.

## 17

The fact that the Indian polity spans both the modern and the pre-modern gives rise to a complex web of political processes. The modern and formal components can be shown to arise from the material base of the capitalist mode of production. It is difficult, however, to understand the pre-modern components within a simple model. Interests, relations, identities and many other local-temporal-contingent factors all combine into the making of a political arena that cannot, as a whole, be reduced to causes residing in the material base in a simple model. To take the case of identities, there are multiple axes along which social identities have been formed through the ages. An identity solidifies further when it is faced with another social group with a different identity. Even benign identities, which can internally be reduced to mere customs and traditional solidarities of relatively homogeneous communities, turn into social relations of conflicts and contradictions when one such identity is confronted with another. Something that arises as a *superstructural* feature within a group becomes the basis of a new social relation and gets adsorbed into the solidity of the *material base*. Scholars have often looked for material basis of *caste* in the *class relations* of some ancient time. It would be more fruitful, in such cases, to investigate the processes through which mere identities of earlier times turn subsequently into concrete social relations. Given sufficient time such relations accrete on to the material base of a real society. Such a *base* is much larger and much more diverse than that of an idealized society modeled on a pure mode of production. Indian polity arises out of a material base that has been enlarged and made immensely complex through adsorption of social relations based on multiple identities such as caste, gender, ethnicity, religion, language and nationality. This complex embedding of the *political* into the *social* is one of the prime reasons behind the surprising success of capitalism in a society like India.

## 18

The formal structure of the Indian polity, among other things, is also modeled as a *nation-state*. It does have a partially federal structure and there is an implicit recognition that India has a *multi-national* make up. In most cases, however, the integration of diverse national and linguistic identities into the political framework of an approximately unified nation-state has gone a long way. The question of seceding from the Indian Union, in most cases, is no longer a live political issue. Exceptions do exist, such as in Kashmir and in parts of the North-East. Apart from genuine national aspirations, roots of such exceptions also lie in the history and politics of the

subcontinent. But, the process of integration into the Indian Union has been underway in these parts too – a process that often entails acts of suppression of national and democratic aspirations and one that is littered with frequent episodes of brutalities. In some of these cases political integration is hindered by the social and ethnic dimensions of the polity. Near racist attitudes and discriminatory and exclusionary practices that exist in the mainstream Indian society against many such nationalities and ethnic communities find their way into the political processes and actions, creating serious obstacles in the path of integration.

## 19

The Indian ruling classes have no interest or desire for actively seeking an emancipatory-modernist transformation of the Indian society. The process of such a transformation is not absent altogether, but it proceeds at a slow pace and at the subterranean levels. It comes more from a gradual seeping of the effects of economic and political processes into the society and not as a consequence of an active engagement with the social dimension. The ruling classes have established a working equilibrium between the modern bourgeois political structure and the largely pre-modern social structure. The latter does not obstruct the march of capitalism and, hence, does not need to be actively interfered with. In fact it has been successfully harnessed into the political process as evidenced, for example, in the active role of caste and religion in electoral politics. This does not mean, however, that there is no room for socio-cultural transformations within the existing framework. To some extent, an emancipatory modernization of the society may even serve the interest of the capitalist system. But, in the short run, such a process would give rise to social conflicts and instabilities. This would be an unnecessary risk for the ruling establishment which has put in place a socio-political mechanism for running the system rather smoothly. It yields to the demands of political and legal backing for the social reforms only when victims of the oppressive socio-cultural structures and practices are able to threaten it with serious political consequences for acting otherwise.

## 20

Emancipatory social movements have their origins mostly in the age-old socio-cultural structures of oppression. Ideological and political make up of the modern times has greatly helped in the emergence of these movements during the last one century. Remarkable victories have been won and successes achieved by these movements in removing or greatly weakening myriad forms of oppressions based on identities such as caste and gender. However, there have been serious limitations too. Successes have been mostly confined to the elimination or weakening of more brutal and explicit forms of identity-based oppression. Dissolution or weakening of the primordial identities has not taken place to any significant degree even after oppressions based on them have been eliminated or greatly diluted. Also, internal modernization and

democratization of communities – even of those which have fought to free themselves from external oppression – have not made much progress. Perhaps the most serious limitation comes from the failure to go beyond the immediate demands and to have a larger vision of a future society. They do not have a radical and systemic critique of the existing order and refuse or hesitate to link up with ideologies and movements opposed to the capitalist system as a whole. The left movement has often been criticized – and rightly so – for ignoring the social dimension of Indian reality and for its mechanical approach that attempts to reduce all social phenomena to the economic or the class dimension. The social movements, on the other hand, can be criticized for their limited horizons, for ignoring the class-political dimension, and for their willingness to remain within the bourgeois framework.

## 21

Modernity cannot be equated with capitalism or colonialism, nor can it be rejected because of its western origins. There has been endless scholarly scrutiny of modernity aimed at revealing its European provinciality and exposing its complicity in the crimes of capitalism and colonialism. In this part of the world, where anti-colonial struggles were often fought by mobilizing the people on the basis of cultural roots and civilizational pride, modernity has often been presented as an alien ideology from which the indigenous cultures must be protected. Despite all scholarly warnings of the kind and despite all oppositions from the cultural conservatives and political opportunists, modernity has made irresistible progress in the postcolonial societies. Despite all theoretical exertions to show that the norms for evaluating a culture can only be internal to that culture, all cultures have begun to judge and improve themselves on the basis of modern criteria such as equality of all individuals or democratic constitution of the institutions of power. Despite all efforts to prove that science and the reason underlying it are nothing more than a cultural practice originating in parts of medieval Europe, and that each culture is entitled to having its own science and reason, all postcolonial societies have adopted the same modern science and reason as their own. All this has taken place not under imperialist-colonial dictates but during the times of decolonization and emergence of sovereign nation-states. The behavior of the Indian left has been problematic in this regard. It has been inconsistently modern, has oscillated between dogmatic-scientistic and populist-relativist attitudes, and, in search of popular acceptability, it has often shunned from critiquing the oppressive and dehumanizing aspects of Indian culture and civilization. The ideological-political approach of the revolutionary agency must be readjusted and refined in accordance with a consistently modern viewpoint.

## 22

Revolution in a rapidly growing capitalist economy, against a bourgeois democratic state, and in a modernizing society that still has deeply entrenched pre-modern socio-cultural-civilizational

structures, has many challenges never faced before. It would require fresh strategies never tried in the history of revolutions. It would require creating a new political culture in which it would become possible to raise demands and conduct struggles that cannot be accommodated within the ideological-political-economic space available to the capitalist system. It is time for the revolutionary agency to reinvent and reconstitute itself from this perspective.

**Ravi Sinha**

**February 20, 2012**

---