

# **Through Theory and Politics: A Trajectory for the New Socialist Initiative**

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# Look back before looking ahead...

- **NSI started with a realization that the Marxist-revolutionary Left needs to be reoriented to the changed times:**
  - **Emergent Capital under Entrenched Capitalism in a Post-colonial Nation-State**
  - **Stable Bourgeois Democracy with Popular Legitimacy**
  - **System-Society Interface Mediated by Competitive Electoral Politics and by Mass Movements (economic as well as social-cultural)**
  - **Globalization of Capital in a Unipolar World of Sovereign Nation-States Dominated by a Declining but Sole Superpower**

# Look back before looking ahead...

- **Contrast with the conditions in which Left was born:**
  - **A World of Colonial Imperialism**
  - **Societies with Feudal, Semi-Feudal Order**
  - **Largely Agrarian Economies**
  - **Systems with Colonial, Militarist-Authoritarian, Monarchical States**
  - **Revolutions through Predominantly Military Strategies Commanded by Vanguard Parties**

# Look back before looking ahead...

- **Pragmatism and Diversity of the Actually Existing Left:**
  - **Parliamentary Left** – major communist parties in the arena of electoral politics; mass base through trade unions, student organizations, social and cultural fronts etc.
  - **Maoist Left** – armed struggle in the periphery; limited mass base in the mainstream society and polity
  - **Fragmented Radical Left** – Marxist-Leninist Groups with limited activity and very limited mass base
  - **Non-Party Left** – in radical social movements; largely opposed to the idea of a communist party
  - **Individual Marxists of diverse kinds**

# Look back before looking ahead...

- **Issues and Challenges that led to the idea of NSI:**
  - **Pragmatism helps the Left survive the day, but does not help navigate through the times towards its goal**
  - **Theory must grapple with the Present and revisit the Past to outline a possible and desirable Future**
  - **Politics must be reconfigured to intervene in the Present in the light of the reworked Theory**
  - **Colossal task for the Left to cross the valley of historical time; NSI to be a miniscule but significant beginning**

# Look back before looking ahead...

- **Two Key Realizations:**

- **A successful revolutionary strategy against entrenched capitalism, which is protected by bourgeois democracy with popular legitimacy, is yet to be formulated**

- **Twentieth Century Socialism was a socialism of emergency conditions in largely pre-capitalist countries; it cannot be a model for a future Socialism capable of superseding Capitalism**

# Look back before looking ahead...

- **The Manifesto:**

- **Comprehends *Class* in a changed world**
- **Reorients to the Social Dimension**
- **Recognizes that Capital damages Nature and destabilizes ecology**
- **Underlines intensive and extensive changes in the modus operandi of Capital**
- **Contextualizes Socialism of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century**
- **Envisions a Future Socialism**
- **Articulates Beliefs, Aims and Objectives of NSI**

# Issues at Stake for the Left

- **In the Arena of Theory:**
  - **To have a robust *Marxist Theory* that can guide *Revolutionary Practice* while learning from it –**
  - **Distil the core theory of history and of revolution from the debates, experiences, practices and innovations of the 20<sup>th</sup> century**
  - **Differentiate the contextual from the core in the 20<sup>th</sup> century experience; de-canonize past revolutions while learning from them what is relevant**
  - **Formulate revolutionary programmes against contemporary capitalism that is protected by bourgeois democracy with popular legitimacy**
  - **Work out a principled proposal for *Future Socialism* that is viable as well**
  - **Rework the concept of *revolutionary agency*; rethink the nature, shape and the role of the *communist party* for the coming times**



# Issues at Stake for the Left

- **In the Arena of Politics:**
  - **To work out an overall political strategy in accordance with the new framework for revolutionary programmes –**
    - **New strategies for building class base and mobilizing the grass-roots under the conditions of contemporary capitalism – e.g. new trade unions to stake claims to participation in management and share in the surplus while fighting for traditional labour rights and improvements in the conditions of wage-labour; organizing the unorganized through cooperatives; etc.**
    - **Rework the relationship with social movements and modes of participation in the mass movements**
    - **Rework objectives and strategies of participating in the parliamentary politics – e.g. occupy a stable left position with emphasis on enlarging the emancipatory, egalitarian and democratic framework of a welfare state while resisting the neo-liberal onslaught; rework the strategies of winning elections without resorting to populism, gimmicks, demagoguery or strong-arm methods; etc.**
    - **Reclaim the high ground of culture; build movements and institutions of cultural emancipation; promote creativity and scientific achievements**

# Issues at Stake for the NSI

- **Self-Awareness** – what NSI is, and what it is not (what do we mean by ideological-political platform); to do so without being legalistic about it
- **Context and Environment** – how it opens up at two ends and connects with what it is not – i.e. (i) to link up with movements and with society at large, and (ii) to trigger processes to constitute the revolutionary agency for the new times
- **Theory** – Intensify efforts towards gaining a robust theoretical understanding (of history, society, economy and politics) and prepare teams to articulate and communicate our positions
- **Politics** –
  - (i) **Stand Apart, Shed Light, Be Visible**
  - (ii) **Resist (through critique as well as struggle)**
  - (iii) **Build (models, institutions, organizations)**

## Issues in Theory

# A General Framework

- **Marxism:**

- A Theory of History (Historical Materialism; Class-struggle)
- A Theory of Capitalism (Mode of Production in general)
- A Proposal for Socialism
- A Theory of Society
- An Approach to Culture, Knowledge and Science
- A Theory of Politics
- A Strategy for Revolution

[Obviously, all this cannot be covered here. We will be concerned with a general outline with focus on Society and Politics]

## Issues in Theory

# A General Framework

- **Mode of Production:**

- Various meanings in literature; even in Marx – technical mode of producing material things vs. a system of production, distribution, and surplus appropriation
- **We adopt the definition – a system of appropriating surplus through production and distribution of goods and services**
- **Comprises of *Forces of Production* and *Relations of Production*; the latter determine a mode of production**
- **Forms the core of society but does not constitute the social totality; gives rise to a corresponding political superstructure but not everything in the society has to be generated by it**

## Issues in Theory

# A General Framework

- **Mode of Production:**

- Forces of production are part of the human world but they also depend on Nature (through Laws of Nature as well as through dependence on natural resources ); the *mode* opens to and connects with the external world of Nature through the *forces*
- Relations of production are social relations among groups of persons (*classes*) who are also enmeshed in other social relations; through *relations* the *mode* opens to and connects with the rest of the social world that is external to itself
- The dynamics of a *mode* is primarily determined by the contradictions within the *relations*, but it is strongly influenced by the external worlds of Nature and of the rest of society

## Issues in Theory

# A General Framework

- **Mode of Production:**

- A society may harbour more than one mode of production; usually there is a dominant mode in a given society; capitalist mode of production is the dominant mode in most societies on the planet
- *Relations (the Base)* characterizing the dominant *Mode* give rise to and are protected by a political *Superstructure*
- In addition to the political *superstructure* corresponding to the *base* of the dominant *mode*, there are other components of the political structure relating to social, cultural and personal aspects of life (e.g. laws about religious customs, minority rights, marriage etc.) and relating to customs and practices corresponding to the non-dominant *modes*

## Issues in Theory

# A General Framework

- **System and Society**

- Dominant and non-dominant (if present) *modes* together make up the *Economy (the economic system)*
- *Political superstructure* together with rest of the political structure make up the *polity (the political system)*
- The *economic system* and the *political system* together make up the *System*
- System does not exhaust the Society; Rest of the Society (Society – System) is a large part of life consisting of relations (non-mode), practices, customs, beliefs and ideas
- Ideas comprise of the ideological superstructure associated with the system and the ideas and beliefs in the non-system aspects of life
- Non-system relations, practices and ideas do not necessarily arise from the system, although they can be articulated strongly or weakly, as the case may be, into the system

## Issues in Theory

# A General Framework

- **Another Way to Look at Society: Differentiation of Life into Distinct Realms**
    - **The Objective Realm** – natural world with corresponding reason and science; objective social world with its characteristic reason and science (social/class interests are implicated in it but can be separated in principle)
    - **The Practical-Normative Realm** – much of the social world enmeshed in interests, values, norms and practices
    - **The Aesthetic-Evaluative Realm** – the realm of personal tastes, choices and freedom where one can decide for oneself what is *Good Life*
- [This three-way differentiation has had a hallowed intellectual history from Immanuel Kant to Jurgen Habermas]**



## Issues in Theory

# A General Framework

- ***Differentiation*** contd...
    - The realms are separated and distinct but also inter-connected
    - Politics and Revolution are subject-matters primarily of the middle domain – i.e. the normative-practical realm
    - A system should be judged on two counts:
      - Does it enhance and promote objectivity and creativity in the Objective Realm of Nature, Science and the objective social world? (Remember, a subjective and interest-enmeshed part of the social world can be amenable to objective study and intervention.)
      - Does it enhance the realm of freedom for the individual? Does it enlarge the aesthetic-evaluative realm?
- [It can be said that these criteria are distilled from the ideals of modernity and social emancipation]

## Issues in Theory

# A General Framework

- **Marxist Theory of History**
  - **A vast and controversial subject**
  - **A robust and practical understanding needs to be attempted through reclaiming and updating the Marxist framework**
  - **The long-wave history is driven by the dynamics of the *Mode of Production***
  - **At the intermediate time-scale history is driven by the dynamics of the *System (the economy and the polity)***
  - **At the shorter time-scale the interaction of the system with its social environment (rest of society) comes into play**

## Issues in Theory

# A General Framework

- **Marxist Theory of Revolution**

- Defined by the objective of replacing one mode of production by another
- Starts by political revolution (overthrow of existing State) and moves on to revolutionizing the economic system (instituting new relations of production corresponding to the new mode)
- The system-society interface matters in organizing the political revolution; this interface differs from mode to mode
- The non-system part under the new mode evolves differently; post-capitalist societies will subscribe more consistently to the ideals of modernity and move closer to the social-emancipatory goals

## Issues in Politics

# A Few General Points

- **Politics is primarily an intervention in the System**
- It can be an intervention from without as well as from within
- It can be aimed at overthrowing the System or at protecting and strengthening it; it can also improve the system in the short run and overthrow it in the long run
- **Three layers of Politics:**
  - **Mode of Production – class demands; class-based struggles and movements**
  - **State Power – intervention in the political system**
  - **System-Society Interface – resistance against oppression; social-emancipatory movements**

## Issues in Politics

# Major Challenges for the Indian Left

- **Indian capitalism is doing very well**
  - **Despite global recession (~5% GDP growth rate now; ~9% during UPA 1; fastest ever during the last decade)**
  - **Despite widespread poverty and low quality of life (the causes of popular resentment are very different now from 30 years ago)**
  - **Despite corruption and “bad governance” (corruption is an aid to capital accumulation; “good governance” will further accelerate accumulation)**

## Issues in Politics

# Major Challenges for the Indian Left

- **Indian Capital is doing exceptionally well**
  - **A labour surplus economy with low wages and largely unorganized working class; first generation of young, increasingly skilled, and largely apolitical workers with interests tied to a growing economy**
  - **Most of natural resources, land and other assets owned by petty owners are yet to be turned into capital – a particularly rapacious stage of capital accumulation**
  - **Global restructuring of capital favourable to emergent economies such as China, India, Russia and Brazil**
  - **Churning of Indian polity aimed at carving out a state and a governance structure suitable for an extraordinarily rapid pace of capital accumulation**

## Issues in Politics

# Major Challenges for the Indian Left

- **Bourgeois democracy is well entrenched**
  - The Left – traditional, radical or populist – cannot ignore the arena of parliamentary politics; at the same time this arena cannot be turned into a vehicle of radical or systemic change
  - The Left-of-Centre part of the political spectrum is occupied more effectively and wisely by some of the bourgeois parties than by the Left
  - The System-Society interface is managed well by the bourgeois parties; it is a place of great discomfort for the traditional Left; it is managed childishly, if not opportunistically, by the radical and populist left
  - The great election machinery (corporate money and media, system of patronage to layers of political functionaries from Luytens Delhi to the villages and the slums, etc.) disfavours Left; it may temporarily favour the populist-opportunist left only to throw it away after the system's purpose is served

## Issues in Politics

# Problems Internal to the Left

- **Traditional Left is by and large outdated (absence of strategy against capitalism and bourgeois democracy; lack of vision about future socialism)**
- **Radical Left is juvenile in addition to being outdated**
- **Populist Left is just that – Populist!**
- **Overall, Left suffers from both Dogmatism and Populism**
- **Entire Left is sectarian, although variously and in different degrees**
- **Most of the Left believes in the necessity of a revolutionary communist party, but such a party for the changed times is currently missing**



## Issues in Politics

# Prospects for the Left

- **The Left cannot be wished away; it would be reinvented if it were to disappear –**
  - **No system can be final; left to be defined afresh by critique of capitalism, visions and proposals for socialism, and effective strategy for overthrow of bourgeois state and replacement of capitalism**
  - **Movements arise continuously from the systemic and social dynamics, but the “possible” (reformist) demands can be linked to or turned into “impossible” (revolutionary) demands only under through the politics of the Left**
  - **A military commander of revolution may no longer be needed, but an ideological leader and political strategist is needed all the more**

## Issues in Politics

# Reinventing the Left: Steps to be Taken...

- **Class Politics**

- Rework the strategy for the working class in the formal sector; reinvent trade-unions for conditions characterized by entrenched capitalism, emergent capital, labour-surplus economy and global ascendance of neo-liberalism (sell-out to capital is fatal, but mere fire-fighting will not do; thoughtless sporadic radicalism of fringe groups is often harmful)
- Strategy for the informal sector (including the agrarian sector and rural economy) that is completely missing at present must be forged; e.g. economic empowerment through cooperatives of the asset-less and of the small asset-holders can be a good starting point
- **Realistic Strategy against capital accumulation through private grabbing of public resources and dispossession of the small asset-holder**

## Issues in Politics

# Reinventing the Left: Steps to be Taken...

- **Social, Sectional, Environmental, Mass Movements**
  - **Focus on the content and the issues; shun populism, 'diplomacy' and lip-service; (relationship with the existing movements, organizations and leadership is a secondary issue; movements arise from society and belong to the people affected by the issues and not to the existing leadership)**
  - **Comprehensive and consistent positions and policies; intensive groundwork at macro as well as micro levels; principled leadership at all levels; (shun opportunistic techniques of snatching leadership from others in the existing movements and organizations; establish linkages with these movements on the basis of positions, policies and commitment)**
  - **Objective evaluation on the basis of previous track-record of the movements ; (existing movements have a long history and should be evaluated on that basis; the failures or shortcomings are not because what Left did or did not do)**

## Issues in Politics

# Reinventing the Left: Steps to be Taken...

- **Parliamentary Politics**

- **Occupy a robust, consistent and strategic left-of -the-centre position; (welfare state; people's rights framework; opposition to neoliberal onslaught and to accumulation by plunder and dispossession; health, education and basic services to be state responsibility; emancipatory and modernist stand in social, ethical and cultural spheres etc.)**
- **Principled alliances with appropriate bourgeois parties on this basis to oppose the economically rightwing and socially reactionary parties**
- **Stay away from opportunist-populist parties and movements of uncertain ideologies led by messianic leaders even if they are popular at a given time**
- **Shun populist, opportunist and strong-arm methods for winning elections even if it makes electoral success more challenging; do not seek quick and miraculous success and be ready for working patiently and consistently for long periods**

## Issues in Politics

# Reinventing the Left: Steps to be Taken...

- **Culture, Science, Ideas, Theory, Creativity...**
  - Left is mediocre; its contribution is second-rate
  - **Must learn to differentiate among realms of the *objective*, the *normative*, and the *creative-aesthetic* (e.g. the criteria of partisanship and commitment cannot be applied uniformly to all realms)**
  - **Shun populism, traditionalism and communitarianism in this domain; stand apart by excelling; challenge the bourgeoisie by creating the best**
  - **Re-invigorate the cultural, scientific, literary and theoretical movements and institutions of the Left on this basis**

## Issues in Politics

# Reinventing the Left: Steps to be Taken...

- **Revolutionary Programme**
  - The principal task of the Left is to forge a Programme for Revolution and to set it in motion
  - All the steps counted so far and more have to be put together and consolidated into a robust revolutionary programme
  - This is a fresh challenge; requires objectivity, creativity and daring; lessons from past revolutions are applicable in very limited ways

## Issues in Politics

# Reinventing the Left: Steps to be Taken...

- **Towards Building a New Revolutionary Party**
  - Draw lessons for determining the shape of a future Party given the nature of times and in the light of past experiences; relate these lessons with the steps suggested for re-inventing the Left
  - Rework the theory of a revolutionary communist party – its necessity, its role and its internal functioning
  - Re-conceptualize the relationship of the Party with class organizations, mass movements, electoral politics and cultural organizations
  - Rework the mode of leadership for setting in motion the revolutionary programme and its role in a post-revolutionary society

## Issues in Politics

# Reinventing the Left: Steps to be Taken...

- **For re-inventing the Left and for building the new Party the forces are to be drawn from within the existing Left as well as from without**
    - **Initial Emphasis on the Existing Left:**
      - **Traditional**
      - **Maoist**
      - **Radical**
      - **Populist**
      - **Individual**
- [Difficulty of this task should not be underestimated; the level and nature of difficulty will vary from one set to the other]**



# A Trajectory for the NSI

- **Consolidate on the basis of a minimalist programme:**
  - **Intensify theoretical efforts** [whatever has been said here as well as in the past is sketchy; it needs to be fleshed out; many other issues need to be thought over]
  - **Communicate and be visible** [publications, websites, translations, study circles, seminars etc.]
  - **Organize** [build units; develop leadership; work out modes of internal functioning and communication; etc.]
  - **Connect with others in the Left and in the social movements**

# A Trajectory for the NSI

- **After Consolidation, Move on to the Regular Programme:**
  - (i) Stand Apart, Shed Light, Be Visible**
  - (ii) Resist (through critique as well as struggle)**
  - (iii) Build (models, institutions, organizations)**

# To conclude...

- **Apologies for sounding preachy**
- **Most of what I have to said is sketchy; take it as a starting point of an analysis, as an argument, and as an outline of a proposal**
- **All this and more requires further thought, a lot more work, and continuous engagement**

**In the end...**

**Thank You!**