

## WHAT IS THE NEW LEFT?

THE 'NEW LEFT' IS IN serious danger of being destroyed, or rather betrayed, by a phrase. And that phrase is its name. So much emphasis is being placed on its 'newness', its 'distinctiveness', its 'uniqueness' and the like that it is being literally prodded to shrivel into a sect. The endeavour is to obliterate the fact that there is a veritable revolt proceeding against the capitalist system in the USA and western Europe—the heartlands of the system. The endeavour is to depict this revolt as a revolt of 'generations', against 'all establishments', as an alternative and rival to the traditional left. And it is hoped—as well as acted upon—that the new forces entering the area of anticapitalist revolt would be flattered into concentrating upon the eccentricities which are among its characteristic features, as well as upon demarcating itself from the traditional left, above all the working class.

One must not fail to ask the question why it is that there has been such an eruption in the so-called 'affluent' societies of the west only in the past five or six years? The young, after all, we shall always have with us. Any sociological analysis of a specific phenomenon has itself to be specific. And it has to avoid contenting itself with appearances only. One, therefore, has, above all, to explain the space-time limits of the phenomenon of the New Left. It began in the sixties and is confined to the developed capitalist countries of the west.

One cannot afford, therefore, to leave out of the analysis of this phenomenon what exactly was happening in the developed capitalist countries in the sixties. What was happening, and continues to happen, is the qualitative deepening of the general crisis of capitalism. The capitalist system was vividly demonstrating its incapacity to cope with the two basic

revolutionary challenges of our times—the scientific-technical revolution and the steady progress of socialism. Internally, the slowdown in economic growth, increasing inflation and unemployment leading to a cut in the real wages of the employed and employable taken as a whole combined with the failure of the attempt to browbeat the rest of the world to accept the hegemony and domination of the USA.

The 'cold war' era began to approach its demise with the serious breakdown of the entire postwar world structure built up by the US imperialists. The sputnik of 1957 heralded the new stage of this postwar crisis of world imperialism and the virtual devaluation of the dollar in 1968 proclaimed its existence for even the blind to see. And right at the centre of it all stood heroic, embattled Vietnam. Nothing demonstrated better the brutal bankruptcy of world capitalism than the failure of its barbarity in Vietnam. And nothing demonstrated better the strength of socialism than the unparalleled valour and tenacity and skill of the Vietnamese people and the stupendous material help they received from the Soviet Union and other socialist countries, despite the serious disadvantages imposed by the split in the socialist camp and the world communist movement.

It can be said that, although on a world scale it has not been clearly decided that socialism has won over capitalism, the socialist system and the world anti-imperialist forces have amply proved their capacity to defeat the plans of imperialist expansion and their capacity to act as the decisive force shaping social developments on a world scale. It is this spectre that is haunting the capitalist west and part of its shadow is the New Left.

This analysis alone supplies the necessary condition for understanding the phenomenon. But not all the sufficient conditions. It needs to be explained as to why the eruption of the sixties did not flow into the traditional left channels. It should be mentioned here that a good part of it, of course, did. The increased strength of the communist movement in Italy,

France, Spain (taking the last decade as our time-span) is a clear testimony to this. However, a good part of it did not—as the nature of the eruptions in the USA, the UK, France, Italy, Spain and Latin America evidently demonstrate.

There are a number of reasons for this specific turn to the left. The first and most important reason is its social composition. The leadership and the majority of the supporters of the New Left come from the urban petty bourgeoisie. And though this class is itself in a transitional stage, it is inexorably being proletarianised. As Pierre Hentges, the French communist leader, actually observed, the students of the developed capitalist countries who were formerly the prebourgeois now find themselves in the position of the preproletariat. Its protest, therefore, has a dual character—against the capitalist system which is ruining them and against the push towards proletarianisation which they wish to avert. Almost a century ago or more Marx and Engels had discovered the class roots of anarchism in the objective fact of the ruin of the petty bourgeoisie. *Mutatis mutandis*, the analytical framework, helps us to appreciate the neanarchist propensities of the New Left.

The social composition of the New Left explains why it is not left enough. Contrary to the clamorous propaganda, the New Left does not break sharply enough with the establishment, i.e., the entrenched monopoly capitalist power. They are more in the nature of rebels rather than revolutionaries. Sometimes and unconsciously they act as safety valves. The real break with the establishment, the real 'extreme left' position is the adoption of the standpoint of working-class socialism. This looks more prosaic and would certainly deprive many of the New Left leaders of TV and press publicity but it is this alone that will enable them to end the establishment and not have it around as a whipping boy.

The second important reason is the somewhat tardy and contradictory recovery of the world communist movement from the phase of Stalinism which was itself a contradictory phenomenon. It was involved in a process of selfclarification

accompanied by deep internal conflicts, which absorbed a great deal of its intellectual energy precisely at the time when new anticapitalist forces were emerging. In spite of this the world communist movement made steady advance but this could not compensate totally for a certain loss of momentum and lack of an integrated comprehensive theoretical framework. The 1960 Moscow Statement was an extraordinarily important landmark, itself the result of the creative impulse of the twentieth congress of the CPSU. But its further elaboration, modification and development have been held up too long. As a result the phenomenon of the New Left, much less the prognosis of its possibility, was analysed only after considerable delay and the analysis is still far from complete.

The third important reason is a paradoxical one. The very strength of the world communist movement has resulted in a greater degree of independent articulation on the part of the nonproletarian strata or of strata which are on the brink of proletarianisation. As it were, the world communist movement has engaged, held at bay and forced a retreat upon the forces of imperialism and loosened up the moorings of the various classes and strata in the capitalist countries. Its allies have increased but not so have their independent movement and articulation. The task of hegemony has been rendered far more difficult and complex. The forces of the left have proliferated both horizontally and vertically. The work of unity as well as struggle within the forces of the left has become far more complex as a result.

It needs to be underlined that the communists, who have always been accused of sectarianism and who have been sometimes guilty in that sphere also, alone pose and attempt to answer the problem of left unity. The other segments are blissfully unaware of the problem and proceed along their chosen path with unhelpful selfrighteousness.

Further, the western-centred nature of so much of political commentary in our country has resulted in reducing the

problem of the New Left to the different types of movement in the USA and western Europe. At best, to the extent that it is inescapable, some marginal mention is made of Latin America, of Castro and of Che. But there is another segment of the New Left which is of equal if not greater significance. This is the force of revolutionary democracy in the vast and immensely populated continents of Asia and Africa. To put it in terms of personalities, Sukarno, Nkrumah, Nasser, Nyerere, Ne Win, Ben Bella, Boumedienne, Atassi, Oginga Odinga are surely, at least, as important as Cohn-Bendit, Rudi Dutschke, or Stokely Carmichael. It will not do to reduce their significance by confining them to the plane of Afro-Asian solidarity. Very specific, contradictory forces of socialism and of the left are embodied in these personalities and their programmes.

In this connection it is gratifying to note that the communist movement has done some work—in the theoretical and practical sphere. Outstanding in this regard are the contributions of the Soviet, Yugoslav and Italian communists. But here too the creative start of the 1960 Moscow Statement has not yet been thought through into a comprehensive theory. Yet, we in India would do well to be a little less fascinated solely by the movements in the capitalist west whose importance is unquestioned. It would do no harm to pay as much, if not more, attention to the seething Afro-Asian and Latin-American movements and their contradictory experiences.

What about India? The situation is highly specific and quite extraordinarily interesting. It outwardly would appear that the New Left of either the western or the Afro-Asian variety does not exist. While it is true that there was a massive student upheaval in the past two or three years and that the students played an important role in routing the Congress in a number of states, an independent organised force outside the traditional forces has not emerged. Nor do we find any particularly significant set of personalities with their programmes and followers who could be said to be the Indian variant of the revolutionary democrats of some of the other newly-

independent states. There are potentialities for their appearance at a later date but as of now they do not exist.

The peculiarity of the Indian situation is that the New Left has made its appearance within the communist movement itself. The so-called Naxalbari communists can be termed the Indian variant of the New Left. Their appeal extends far beyond the limits of their organisation. They are representative of an entire mood of the petty bourgeoisie in the urban areas—desperation, rage and penchant for short-cuts. The split in the Indian communist movement took final and defined shape only with the definite emergence of the Naxalbari communists.

The New Left trend was thrusting itself forward ever since independence. It looked as if it had arrived when a major section of the CPI separated itself in 1964. But soon enough a major section of the CPM found that the New Left tactic did not fit the Indian scene and moved over to positions which did not materially differ from those whom they had termed and continue to term the 'revisionists'. It means then that the New Left broke through and constituted itself as a distinct entity. There is a stream in the national movement which finds its natural continuation in the Naxalbari party. This is the trend of anarchism, popularly designated as terrorism. It will be recalled that in the jails and the underground days of colonial rule many of the best terrorist or anarchist leaders came over to the Communist Party. Now, from the communist movement some have trekked back.

It scarcely needs emphasising that, as in the case with the New Left in the western countries and in the Afro-Asian and Latin-American continents, the Naxalbari communists are an integral part of the left as a whole. Those who are drawn by their ideas are as intrepid and selfless and visionary as their counterparts in the CPI or CPM. Their ideas and their actions will do a certain amount of damage to the left movement in the shape of diversion, disruption and offering of pretexts to reaction. But if the communist movement could argue and persuade the terrorists of the past, there is no reason why it

cannot again do so now and with even greater success. The 'power of the gun' is appealing, romantic and fascinating but the power of the stormy mass movement can be even more so. The New Left is inherently sectarian but it need not be emulated on this score as on so many others.

The communist movement in India split to a great extent because of the split in the international communist movement. This happened in almost all the countries where a communist party existed. What is specific about the split in India is the fact that the two CPs were almost equal in strength. In other countries the overwhelming majority went either with the leaders who took their stand on the new course initiated by the 20th CPSU congress or with those who supported the line of Mao Tse-tung. The remainder were a splinter group. Not so in India.

The split in India while occasioned by the division in the international communist movement had its roots in the ambivalent situation of the country in the postindependence period. It was, to change a phrase of Marx, an Italy placed in Asia and not merely of Asiatic dimensions. It is quite unlike the developed capitalist countries and yet unlike the other newly-independent states as well. It suffers from the living and growing evils of the capitalist path of development but also from the dead, the inherited evils of continuing imperialist and feudal structures. The former grows and with it come to the fore new and modern contradictions; the latter persists and with it the old contradictions retain their insistence.

A proper combination and strict evaluation of the weight of these contradictions is difficult enough to establish in a theoretical framework (a good beginning has been made in the programme of the CPI). It is far more difficult to build and extend a mass movement on this basis and provide an educated, vanguard nucleus for such a movement. This 'subjective' difficulty provides a rather large loophole for those who are impatient to rush to the New Left of Naxalbari. But

this rush brings fairly quick nemesis as Indian reality refuses to submit to procrustean treatment. This rush can be stemmed finally, however, when the communists discover the law of motion of contemporary Indian society. Praxis is, indeed, supreme but it should never be confused with pragmatism.

To put it in a nutshell, the problem of the New Left in India is the problem of definition and shaping of the Indian communist movement. Our problem is nearer that of some Latin-American countries like Brazil, Mexico and Chile. In India, as well, New Left or the Naxalbari trend gathered strength only with the visible collapse of the capitalist path of development and its transformation into development with dependence and then into dependence without much development. This added to the already dreadful burdens imposed on the common people and hit especially hard the urban middle strata, many of whom had ample illusions about the capitalist path due to the new opportunities that had come their way. Here, as well, the inability of the communist movement to reorder itself to meet the new challenges of the rapidly evolving situation helped the growth of a trend within it which eagerly harkened to the beat of antique drums.

Another, and as yet far less defined, trend of the New Left in India is that of left nationalism, the heirs of the pioneers who built the Congress Socialist Party believing it to be the alternative to Gandhism, communism and anarchism. This trend is a rather conglomerate one consisting of Nehruite congressmen, SSPers, parts of the PSP, the many small left parties and partly the DMK. Some rethinking and rearrangement is proceeding among the adherents of this trend. There is a noticeable breakaway from the traditional anticommunist moorings. But, by and large, there is an incredible amount of confusion amounting almost to chaos. There seems little prospect of any coherence emerging here which is self-generated. Coherence in the form of definite realignment will come under the pressure of the growth in power as well as wisdom of the communist movement.

A further aspect of new emerging patterns in the left movement in India is the manner in which the white-collar mass organisations are evolving. The central government employees (leaving out the industrial segment proper), NGOs, journalists, teachers, bank employees, doctors and the like have certainly adopted forms of organisation and of struggle which bring them into the ambit of the left. This is only natural considering the objective compulsions of their class position. Yet, ideologically and politically their position is extremely ambivalent and contradictory. In certain areas the left parties do exert considerable influence. In other places the position of the Jana Sangh is equally strong, even predominant. In still other places there is a prevalence of ideological-political noncommitment, an almost apolitical approach. The likely trend of development, however, does not seem to be in the direction of an independent configuration but rather of a measure of polarisation and choice with the balance tilting heavily in favour of the traditional left parties.

The peculiar shape and influence of the New Left in India—its confinement to a segment of the broad communist movement of the country—is to be explained by the balance of forces. In India it would seem that the working class is sufficiently strong and articulated, with a communist movement of over 40 years' standing, to attract to itself and its ideology the bulk of the left. It is, however, neither sufficiently strong nor ideologically-politically mature enough to absorb all of it. And between the twin pressures of the forces of capitalist development and those of working-class socialism, the petty bourgeoisie can have its fling but seems to lack the ability or the strength to produce even temporarily stable political formations. The New Left would seem to have an even bleaker and shorter future before it in our country than in the developed capitalist countries or other regions of the 'third world'. Its life may be somewhat prolonged if the CPI and CPM are unable to hew their course of action in terms of the Indian reality and are unable to come to terms with each other to begin with in the

sphere of united action. But then this failure would have much more far-reaching and disastrous consequences than prolonging the existence of the New Left.

By itself, the New Left offers very little that is either original or likely to be permanent. Its economic programme is not different from the programmes of communist parties in the long-term. As for the short-term it disclaims having any immediate manifesto. The political power—its base and structure—it envisages is again the same as those of the CPs though with all short-term *via media* ruled out. Even its ideological offerings are based on a particular voluntarist interpretation of Marxism with a gross underplaying of the key role of the proletariat.

What is new about it is the manifestation of a mood, of a certain movement of the petty-bourgeois mind at a historical conjuncture where the working class has the potential of hegemony but not yet the reality of it. It is likely to be a transient and transitional phenomenon all over the world and much more so in our country. It will cause excitement, draw in many into some kind of left politics and movement and then make way for the real discipline and struggle of scientific, working-class socialism. The far more interesting prolonged development will be the transformation of the revolutionary democrats of Afro-Asia into scientific socialists. But that is another story.

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