

Evolution of India as a Nation

Sitaram Yechury

A discussion on “Evolution of India as a nation” would be misplaced from a strict scientific point of view. India is a country consisting of many nationalities. A common language, as all of us know, apart from a contiguous geographical area, a common culture and the psychological make-up of the concerned people constitute a nationality. By this definition, India consists of many nationalities and, importantly, there is no dominant nationality, i.e., with over a majority of the Indian people belonging to any one such nationality. Even if all peoples’ speaking all the dialects of Hindi are taken together, they do not constitute a population of over 50 per cent of the people of our country.

During the course of the Indian freedom movement, a Pan Indian people’s consciousness arose as a product of this epic people’s struggle which, in turn, reinforced the social consciousness of a Pan Indian nature. It is this Pan Indian consciousness that rose above the consciousness of individual – nationalities uniting them in this struggle for freedom that, in turn, set in motion the rise of what is usually described as the ‘Idea of India’.

I have argued in my contribution to this volume that this ‘Idea of India’, in a sense, transcends the Westphalian nature of the nation, nationalism and sovereignty. This essentially European concept was based on a majority in a country in opposition to a minority within the country and the majoritarian expression was synonymous with nationalism. This inherent idea of an exclusion of a set of minorities (whatever may be their denomination – linguistic, ethnic, religious etc) people was transcended during the Indian freedom struggle that had, as its objective, the inclusive unity of all its nationalities and all of India’s religious, ethnic, linguistic minorities. The dynamics of Indian freedom struggle required the consciousness of such inclusive nationhood for its success.

Certain points, however, need attention:

First, natural to this process is an inherent contradiction. While the coexistence of various nationalities has the potential to set in motion centrifugal tendencies, the rise of the Pan Indian consciousness set in motion centripetal tendencies as well. The possibility of a conflict between both these contradictory tendencies is inherent in the Indian conditions. As we shall see later, this contradiction can only be resolved with the comprehensive realization of the ‘Idea of India’. This is the current ongoing process.

Secondly, the Communists and Left in India played an important role in the evolution of this Pan Indian consciousness. During the freedom struggle, the Indian bourgeoisie, aspiring to be the ruling class post-independence, sought to develop such Pan Indian consciousness necessary for its ruling class hegemony by seeking to incorporate the leaderships of various other classes and nationalities. For instance, the Princely States and feudal landlordism was sought to be integrated into the freedom struggle through compromises and pacts with the exploiting classes– a process that eventually compelled the Indian bourgeoisie to compromise with feudal landlordism and incorporate them as partners of a ruling class coalition. Thus, were laid the roots of

the post-independence Indian ruling classes – a bourgeois-landlord alliance led by the Indian big bourgeoisie.

The Communist led struggles – some of them very powerful – the most powerful of them being the armed struggle of the Telangana peasantry, brought the exploited sections of the peasantry and other sections of rural India into the mainstream of the freedom struggle. The Telangana armed uprising, the Punnapra-Vayalar land struggle in Kerala, the Tebhaga movement in Bengal, the Warli tribal revolt, the Surma valley uprising in Assam, the betterment levy movement in Punjab are some of the examples whereby a huge people's mobilization, mainly the exploited sections, were drawn through such struggles into the freedom movement. It was the Communists that brought the land question to the centre of the agenda of our freedom struggle.

Such inclusivity was, once again, visible in the struggles of various linguistic nationalities for their assertion of an equal treatment in independent India. It needs to be noted that the Motilal Nehru Committee Report of 1928 on Congress organizational structure had recommended that the Congress organization must be based on linguistic lines and not in accordance with the British administration divisions. This, notwithstanding, it took nearly a decade-long powerful people's struggles post-independence for the linguistic reorganization of the Indian States to come into effect in 1956. The Communists, once again, were in the forefront in forging such an inclusive unity of linguistic nationalities as they led the popular struggles for Visalandhra, Aikya Kerala, Samyukta Maharashtra etc.

It is, therefore, clear that while the Congress concentrated on strengthening the Pan Indian consciousness through an inclusive process of the exploiting sections of Indian diversity, the Communists brought this into effect by drawing in the exploited majority into the mainstream of freedom movement. It is through such struggles that federalism, as a fundamental feature of our Republican Constitution, emerged.

Simultaneously, one need also to note that from the decade of the 1920s onwards, three distinct visions concerning the character of the State in independent India emerged.

The emergence of the conception of the 'Idea of India' was a product of Indian people's struggle. It arose from a continuous battle between three visions that emerged during the course of India's struggle for freedom in the 1920s over the conception of the character of independent India. The mainstream Congress vision had articulated that independent India should be a secular democratic Republic. The Left, while agreeing with this objective went further to envision that the political freedom of the country must be extended to achieve the socio-economic freedom of every individual, possible only under socialism.

Antagonistic to both these was the third vision which argued that the character of independent India should be determined by the religious affiliations of its people. This vision had a twin expression – the Muslim League championing an 'Islamic State' and the RSS championing a 'Hindu Rashtra'. The former succeeded in the unfortunate partition of the country, admirably engineered, aided and abetted by the British colonial rulers, with all its consequences that continue to fester tensions till date. The latter, having failed to achieve their objective at the time of independence, continue with their efforts to transform modern India into their project of a rabidly intolerant

fascistic 'Hindu Rashtra'. In a sense the ideological battles and the political conflicts in contemporary India are a continuation of the battle between these three visions. Needless to add, the contours of this battle will continue to define the direction and content of the process of the realisation of the 'Idea of India'.

Further, the Indian Left argued then and maintains today that the mainstream Congress vision of consolidating the secular, democratic foundations of our Republic can never be sustainable unless independent India frees itself from its bondage with imperialism and breaks the stranglehold of feudal vestiges. The Congress party's inability to take the freedom struggle to this logical culmination became clear by its serving the interests of the post-independence ruling classes – bourgeoisie in alliance with the landlords, led by the big bourgeoisie. This, by itself, weakens the foundations of a secular democratic Republic. First, it relegates the anti-imperialist social consciousness that forged the unity of the people during the freedom struggle to the background, thus permitting and buttressing a social consciousness dominated by caste and communal passions. Secondly, instead of strengthening an inclusive India, it progressively excludes the growing majority of the exploited classes. This provides the 'grist to the mill' of the communal forces, or the third vision, to strengthen itself exploiting the growing popular discontent.

The RSS/BJP objective of replacing the secular democratic modern Indian Republic with their concept of a 'Hindu Rashtra' is, in a sense, a throwback to the Westphalian model where the Hindu majority subjugates other religious minorities (mainly Muslim: the external enemy within) to foster the consciousness of 'Hindu Nationalism' as against 'Indian Nationhood'. This, in fact, represents a throwback to notions of nationalism that dominated the intellectual discourse prior to the sweep of the Indian people's struggle for freedom. Such a State, based on 'Majoritarianism' – their version of a rabidly intolerant fascistic 'Hindu Rashtra' – negates the core, around which emerged the consciousness of Indian Nationhood contained in the 'Idea of India' as a reflection of the emergence of "a political psychology of a new kind".

The complete realization of the 'Idea of India' is, hence, crucially dependent on two factors: One, the rejection of the vision based on exclusion or a throwback to the Westphalian model that the RSS/BJP continues to seek to establish as the essential pre-requisite; Two, the process of inclusion of the vast majority of Indian people to strengthen the Pan Indian consciousness is increasingly being distanced by the neo-liberal economic trajectory with its accompanied accelerated economic inequalities. This, in itself, creates an economic development trajectory that generates greater exclusion of the vast majority of our people undermining the inclusive Pan Indian consciousness, and hence, retarding the realization of the 'Idea of India' – a situation pregnant with the potential for the disruptive manifestations of the centrifugal tendencies that we discussed earlier.

In the current political conjuncture, the exclusive nationhood concept of the Hindutva forces is combined with an aggressive pursuit of neo-liberal economic reforms, thus, doubly strengthening the process of retarding the realization of the 'Idea of India'.

The ideological project of the RSS has been exhaustively analysed by the CPI(M) Party Programme which says: "the danger of fascist trends gaining ground, based on religious communalism, must be firmly fought at all levels." (para 5.8). Further, the Party Programme says; "the Bharatiya Janta Party is a reactionary party with a

divisive and communal platform, the reactionary content of which is based on hatred against other religions, intolerance and ultra-nationalist chauvinism. The BJP is no ordinary bourgeois party as the fascistic Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh guides and dominates it. When the BJP is in power, the RSS gets access to the instruments of State power and the State machinery. The Hindutva ideology promotes revivalism and rejects the composite culture of India with the objective of establishing a Hindu Rashtra..... Besides, a substantial section of big business and landlords, imperialism headed by the USA, is lending all-out support to the BJP. (Para 7.14)

However, it must be noted that in the strict scientific sense, fascism is not the replacement of one bourgeois government by another. Fascism means the replacement of the parliamentary form of democracy by, as Dimitrov says, an “open terroristic dictatorship”. The stage of jettisoning parliamentary democracy in India has not yet reached. Hence, the present BJP government is not a fascist government yet, but it is moving in that direction.

As Dimitrov says in his Report to the Communist International, “Before the establishment of the fascistic dictatorship, bourgeois governments pass through a number of preliminary stages and institute a number of reactionary measures, which directly facilitate the accession to power of fascism. Whoever does not fight the reactionary measures of the bourgeoisies and the growth of fascism at these preparatory stages, is not in a position to prevent the victory of fascism, but on the contrary, facilitates that victory.” (Emphasis in original)

In today’s conditions, therefore, it is only the strength of the people’s unity in resisting and eventually defeating this combination of the RSS ideological project and the neo-liberal economic reform trajectory that can pave the way for the realization of the ‘Idea of India’. Fascism seen as a consequence of a ‘failed revolution’ should inform us that the inability of the Left to intervene forging powerful popular people’s struggles against this lethal combination will create the grounds for a further consolidation of the political right. Like we see internationally, rapidly rising people’s discontent, if not marshalled by the Left forces, will provide the fertile ground for the political right to consolidate. Trump’s victory in the USA or the rise of the rightwing, in some places of neo-fascist forces, is a clear expression of the inability of the Left to marshal people’s discontent on a Left programme in these countries.

It is this weakness or inability to effectively marshal rising popular discontent into powerful peoples’ struggles that has to be urgently overcome in India today. Otherwise, the situation will only move in the direction of further consolidating the political right in India. A powerful movement of the Left and democratic forces in our country against the twin onslaught of Hindutva and neo-liberalism has to be urgently consolidated. This needs to be done on all fronts, primarily by vastly strengthening popular people’s struggles. Indeed, a vast army of organic intellectuals is essential in today’s conditions to first prevent the destruction of the ‘Idea of India’ and on that basis to move towards the full realization of the ‘Idea of India’. The successes in these struggles strengthen the revolutionary struggles for the establishment of socialism in India.

Prabhat Patnaik requires to continue to contribute, as he is at the peak of his activities, to consolidate this army of organic intellectuals to mount the struggles for ‘counter hegemony’.