

Does the Left have an Alternative?

Prabhat Patnaik

Some people say that the Left does not really have an alternative to the economic policy being pursued in India in the current conjuncture. If it was only the critics of the Left who said this, then the matter could be ignored: they after all are bound to say such things. But such a view exists even among some who are otherwise sympathetic to the Left, which is why it needs to be discussed.

The crucial point here is: what does one mean by an “alternative”, or a “practical alternative” (the other term often used)? Any economic policy is based on a certain correlation of class forces; it is reflective, within an overall bourgeois setting, of the balance of class strengths. The fact that the Manmohan Singh government has allowed FDI in multi-brand retail, introduced massive price hikes in the midst of an inflationary upsurge, and is opening up crucial sectors like insurance and pension funds to globalised finance capital, is reflective of its desperate desire to appease global capital, the need for which arises because of the trajectory it is following. This trajectory in turn reflects the international correlation of class forces and the Indian bourgeoisie’s relation to it. The pursuit of any alternative policy therefore must mean breaking out of this correlation, of initiating a change in it which will set up an alternative dialectic. Hence any alternative must mean a disturbance of the given situation, a struggle within it with a view to breaking out of it.

If the term “alternative” is used to refer to something which is “practical” in the sense that it can be pursued without any disturbance of the given situation, that it can only be a substitute for what the Manmohan Singh government is doing within the given situation, without causing “disruptions” that might “rock the boat”, then it is true that the Left does not have an alternative in this sense. And we should be glad that it does not, for if this was the mindset with which the Left was proposing alternatives, then the Left would have ceased to be Left; it would have become a “Blairite” (after Tony Blair) camp-follower of international finance capital, “gazing with awe upon the posterior of international finance capital” (to paraphrase Plekhanov’s memorable words).

The alternative proposed by the Left cannot of course be just a call for socialism, for that would be empty rhetoric (as the correlation of class forces required to achieve it does not exist at present and has to be built up); the alternative will be in the nature of what Lenin had called a “transitional demand” which does not go beyond the system but which the ruling classes are incapable of fulfilling in the given situation. Such a transitional demand necessarily means not internalising the constraints accepted by the ruling classes, for if the Left accepted those very constraints within which the ruling classes operate, then it would merely end up replicating the very same policies that the ruling classes are following. The Left’s alternative therefore, while not asking for any immediate overthrow of the system and hence being in principle realisable within the system, must visualise a trajectory that is different from the one being pursued by the ruling classes, but that carries forward the interests of the people, and hence strikes a chord with them, besides also being credible from their point of view. The Bolshevik slogan of “land, peace and bread” was such a transitional demand. It

did not ask for socialism but was incapable of being realised by the Kerensky government, even though it was exactly what the people wanted and believed to be capable of realisation.

Transitional demands, while being instruments of struggle, do not necessarily have to be such that the system cannot realistically implement them. But, if perchance the ruling classes themselves accede to these transitional demands, or if the Left can implement some of these demands with the limited access to power that is allowed to it within the system, then so much the better: the benefits that come to the people through such implementation will only embolden them to raise their transitional demands even further. And the Left can place before them, in the event of the realisation of one set of transitional demands, an even more radical pro-people agenda, around which they can be mobilised for further struggles.

The real question therefore is: does such an alternative programme of the Left which can both strike a chord with the people and be accepted by them as a credible programme, around which they can be mobilised for struggle, exist today? The answer is obviously yes. The Left has over the last several months raised a number of demands which together amount to an alternative economic agenda. Indeed its criticisms of the “reform” measures announced by the Manmohan Singh government are integrally linked to this agenda which it has been demanding. Its position therefore is not just one that rejects these reforms; while it rejects these reforms, it puts forward at the same time as an alternative, a “transitional demand” whose initial character is the institutionalisation of universal access of every citizen to a set of basic minimum provisions. The Left has demanded universal access to food (on which it has carried out powerful agitations), universal access to employment (with the Left-led governments taking the initiative to introduce urban employment guarantee schemes), free and compulsory primary education, and free and universal access to healthcare, old-age pensions and care for the handicapped and disabled (where it has occasionally shared platforms with other organisations for pressing these demands).

To be sure, these do not constitute the core of the Left’s alternative agenda where radical land redistribution and other similar structural measures, occupy pride of place. But the alternative only starts with the institutionalisation of universal access to a set of basic provisions. Public discussions in India have come to demand these in any case, with the Manmohan Singh government trying desperately to water them down to inconsequentiality. But the Left’s initial agenda begins with these. The institutionalisation of universal access to a set of provisions is immediately realisable though not within the constraints accepted by the ruling classes.

The proposition that the ruling classes cannot provide universal access to a minimum bundle of goods and services, of the sort suggested above, may be contested by some: have they not introduced the MGNREGS, the RSVY, and the Right to Education, and are they not at this very moment engaged in working out a food security legislation? Not only are none of these measures introduced by the ruling classes universal, but the effort in each case has been to cripple the measure sufficiently to make it inconsequential. Despite enactment of the right to education for instance, a huge proportion of children continue to be out of school, doing odd menial jobs for survival, as can be ascertained at every traffic intersection in our metros. The RSVY, far from being a means of universal access to healthcare, is actually a means of siphoning government resources to private hospitals and insurance companies. And

even the MGNREGS which the UPA-I government, dependent on Left support, had introduced with a degree of immediate success, is now being strangled to a point where it has become a shadow of its former self. The trajectory of the ruling classes in short does not allow universal access to such provisions, and if perchance they are forced to introduce some limited measures of this sort, they also take steps to dismantle them with alacrity, the moment the spotlight is off.

The Left's alternative can begin with the immediate realisation of universal access to a set of minimum provisions, whose importance is recognised by all including the spokesmen of the ruling classes. Let us just consider the following: universal access to foodgrains at the rate of 35 kilogrammes per household per month at Rs. 2 per kg.; universal access to employment through a strengthening of the MGNREGS and its supplementing by an Urban Employment Guarantee Scheme; the effective implementation of free and compulsory primary education through the setting up of a sufficient number of neighbourhood schools by the government with appropriate provision of meals to children; universal access to free healthcare through a National Health Service of the kind that even Social Democratic governments had introduced in Britain and the Scandinavian countries (let alone what prevailed in the Soviet Union); and a universal old-age pension plan and support for the handicapped and disabled. Let us make a rough estimate of the expenditure required for ensuring universal access to these provisions.

The food subsidy required for ensuring the provision of 35 kgs of grains per month to every family at Rs. 2 per kg was estimated a couple of years ago at Rs.100,000 crores per annum. If allowance is made for inflation, this may increase to Rs.120000 crores. Universal Employment Guarantee, properly implemented, will cost another Rs.80,000 crores. (This is just double the Union budget's allocation, of which only over half was spent, for 2010-11; since then the allocation itself has been reduced). The implementation of the Right to Education Act was estimated by the Ministry of Human Resource Development to cost Rs. 173000 crores over the period 2010-15, which, allowing for inflation, would come to around Rs.40000 crores annually. A comprehensive healthcare coverage is likely to cost Rs.100000 crores annually and a universal old age pension scheme, which provides a pension of Rs.2000 per person per month for around 8 crores beneficiaries, will cost an additional Rs.192000 crores. The total comes to Rs.532000 crores. If State support for the handicapped is also taken into account (on which we have hardly any data) then the figure may be around Rs.6 lakh crores per annum.

We should remember however that some expenditure, such as on food subsidy, on MGNREGS, and on the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan is already being incurred, so that the additional annual expenditure for institutionalising these universal access schemes will come to no more than around Rs.5 lakh crores annually, which is roughly 5 percent of the GDP. An expenditure target of this order of magnitude is entirely realisable. Indeed over the last few Union budgets the total tax concessions handed out to the rich and the corporate sector, have been estimated at Rs.5 lakh crores. Institutionalising universal access to food, employment, healthcare, primary education and old age pension and disability-support therefore is likely to cost no more per annum than the largesse given to the rich and the corporates over the last few Union budgets.

But that is precisely the reason why the ruling classes will not implement these schemes of universal provisioning. You cannot both give tax concessions to the rich and also implement schemes for universal provisioning. One precludes the other; each is part of a different economic trajectory. The Manmohan Singh government which has put the economy on one trajectory, the neo-liberal trajectory, will necessarily deny these universal provisioning schemes; on the contrary it will increase the burden on the people. The Left trajectory, the alternative trajectory, that will begin by ensuring such universal provisioning, can sustain itself only if it reverses the neo-liberal policies, puts capital controls in place, and also trade restrictions to curtail the burgeoning current account deficit (instead of having to entice financial inflows from abroad to finance such deficits). The Left trajectory however can supplant the neo-liberal one only through a process of struggle. One can consider it “impractical” only if one abandons the perspective of struggle.

* This article was originally published in the *People’s Democracy*, Volume XXXVI, No. 43, October 28, 2012.