

The Growing Resistance against Globalization*

Prabhat Patnaik

All across the world, from the United States to Britain to Europe to China, a huge resistance is building up against globalization. True, this resistance is not self-consciously aimed against globalization per se; in different countries it focuses on different issues. But since each of these issues arises as a fall-out of globalization, not to see the interconnectedness of this resistance, as one that essentially and implicitly targets globalization, is to miss the wood for the trees.

What is also remarkable is that this resistance, contrary to what one might expect from the fact that its source lies everywhere in the sense of deprivation experienced by the working people, is nowhere being led by the Left. Not that the Left did not get a chance to lead this resistance in some countries, but where it did, it forfeited that chance. In Greece for example, where the people had elected a Left-wing Syriza government to fight the harsh “austerity” measures imposed by the country’s creditors, that government ultimately caved in to the creditors’ demands and accepted “austerity”. Likewise in the U.S.A. the self-styled “socialist” Bernie Sanders who had drawn wide support during his campaign for Presidential candidacy for taking a bold stand against Wall Street, ultimately withdrew from the contest. No doubt there were weighty reasons in each case why the Left caved in, but the fact remains that it did cave in, and in the process belied the hopes of large numbers of people.

Indeed the only place today where the resistance to policies associated with the era of globalization is being led by the Left is China. A strong neo-Maoist movement has emerged there that is opposing the economic policies of the ruling Communist Party which have bred large income inequalities in that society. So strong is the current nostalgia among the Chinese people for the Maoist era, notwithstanding the extraordinarily high rates of GDP growth which China is supposed to have had since then, that the neo-Maoists have a good chance, according to a report in *The Financial Times* (October 2), of beating the ruling Communist party at the polls if fair elections were to be held today. Whatever be the truth in this claim, there is no gainsaying that the neo-Maoists are a far stronger opposition to the ruling dispensation in today’s China than the “pro-democracy movement” which has traditionally played this role.

The reason for the Left’s absence from this resistance over much of the globe lies in the somewhat ambivalent attitude it has towards globalization. In Europe this ambivalence springs from the fact that after two devastating world wars fought in that continent in the name of “nationalism”, this term itself has become a dirty word for the Left. Large segments of it therefore remain avid supporters of the European Union project even though the EU is dominated by German finance capital, and even though the workers in the region have suffered not just relative impoverishment, but in some cases even absolute impoverishment, because of this domination.

True, the workers there have attributed their impoverishment to the EU policy of free migration rather than to anything else, so that their resistance has often got tinged with an element of racism. But they have, it must be said, hardly been provided with any alternative ideas or agenda by the Left. Not surprisingly, they have got influenced by the ideas fed to them by the Right which has attached itself to the resistance

against globalization. It is the Left's implicit, if not explicit, commitment to globalization, of which the EU project is an integral part, and its hostility to any delinking from this project, which has allowed the Right to cash in on the situation. Such a delinking is a necessary condition for activating the State to intervene in the interest of the workers; but the Left's fear has been that any such delinking would revive "nationalism".

If the workers were simply being racist or anti-immigrant per se then the Left's hostility to their resistance could be understandable. But since their anti-immigrant stance springs from a refracted perception of the cause of their impoverishment, an impoverishment which itself however is a very genuine phenomenon, the Left's refusal to join their resistance becomes difficult to defend. It amounts to privileging sheer moral purity over meaningful political praxis. In fact, the Left's moral compunctions about joining the resistance of the working people becomes a self-justifying move. It pushes the working people closer to the ideology of the Right and hence retrospectively justifies the distance kept by the Left from their resistance on moral grounds.

In third world countries on the other hand the Left's ambivalence towards globalization springs not so much from any hostility towards "nationalism" as from two other factors: one is a certain interpretation of Marxism that identifies it with "productionism", a view which holds that the development of productive forces must always be supported and which criticizes capitalism mainly on the ground that it ceases to develop the productive forces at a certain stage of its development. Globalization on this view, since it boosts the development of the productive forces (of which the rapid GDP growth observed in many countries is taken to be a symptom), constitutes a progressive phenomenon that should not be opposed.

The second factor behind the Left's ambivalence towards globalization is the weight of the middle class in many of these third world countries. This middle class, which has done well from globalization, is a strong votary of it, and the Left is keen to win its support. Economist Branko Milanovic has just published a book giving the results of his research into changes in income distribution in the world economy over the period 1988-2008. He shows that apart from the top 1 percent of the world's population, the other main beneficiaries of globalization have been the middle classes in countries like India and China. On the other side, the working classes in the advanced countries have been the worst hit among all the segments of the world's population during these years, while the working people within the third world have seen rather modest gains.

While Milanovic's conclusion that there has even been a modest increase in the incomes of third world working masses is questionable (among other things it must also be remembered that percentage increases get magnified when one starts from a low base), what he says about the economic gains of the middle classes in several third world countries is significant. The middle classes making these gains not only form large constituencies in their respective countries, but they also have a disproportionately large influence on public opinion because of their strong presence in the media. They typically use that influence to push for an agenda of what they call "development", which is a euphemism for the promotion of globalization and its associated neo-liberal policies. And the Left is not immune to this ideology of

“development” which benefits the middle classes, even though its flipside is the displacement of peasants and petty producers, a swelling of what Marx had called the reserve army of labour, and a general impoverishment of the working people. The fact that despite years of such “development” India still ranks 25th from the bottom in the World Hunger Index for 2014 should clearly indicate the vacuity of the concept of “development” that is being promoted this way.

There is however one important difference between the advanced countries and countries like India. Unlike in the advanced countries where the Right has got itself involved in the resistance of the working people against globalization (putting in the process a Right-wing imprint on that resistance), the Right in countries like India enthusiastically promotes globalization and unabashedly lays claim to being the force closest to the corporate-financial magnates. The Modi government in India for instance prides itself upon being closer to the corporate bigwigs than any previous government. It proclaims this as part of its “Make in India” campaign. The prospect of the Right hijacking people’s anger against globalization simply does not exist in India, the way it does in the advanced countries. This therefore allows time to the Left to overcome its ambivalence towards globalization and take its place in the resistance movement. But, for that it has to prevent itself from being steamrolled by middle class opinion.

Of course with the world capitalist crisis now spreading to countries like India and China even the middle classes in these countries which had hitherto been beneficiaries of globalization may start feeling the pinch and stop being its votaries. But no matter whether that happens or not, the tide is beginning to turn against globalization through the growing resistance of the working people everywhere.

*** This article was originally published in *The Telegraph*, October 20, 2016.**