

RADICAL POLITICS IN THE TIMES OF GLOBALIZATION:

Notes on Recent Indian Experience

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Introduction

Once upon a time, radicalism meant the politics of transformation, the desire to change the present in what could be broadly called a 'pro-people' direction. Whatever its political shade, radicalism was profoundly anti-systemic and anti-status quo. Things have changed beyond recognition now. One look at the major movements that can be considered radical in some way, will reveal that they are now primarily concerned with *saving what exists*, rather than changing.¹ So we have a range of movements which describe themselves as the Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save Narmada Movement), Azadi Bachao Andolan (Save Independence Movement), Bachpan Bachao Andolan (Save Childhood Movement) and so on. Those that have not self-consciously described themselves as such too, are really involved in nothing more than saving jobs, saving the public sector, saving industry, saving the ecology, saving traditional livelihoods, even saving 'Indian culture' from pollution...the list is endless. Radicalism, in other words, *has been reduced to the fight for status quo*. It is suddenly as if all the gain of past struggles spanning decades, even centuries, stands the threat of being lost. Some are seen as threatened directly by the globalization process, while others like ecology and traditional livelihoods, more generally by the development paradigm.

If globalization is seen as the acceleration of the general logic of capital accumulation and the development paradigm that goes with it, then it can be argued that both the categories of movements really address two sides of the same process of disempowerment and dispossession of large sectors of the population. The problem however, is that this is not so. Those fighting to save the public sector and job security in the labour market and those resisting displacement to save their traditional

¹ I owe this initial insight to a conversation with Anil Chaudhary

livelihoods, *occupy two different terrains*. In the past, the sharp divergences between the trade unions and the Narmada Bachao Andolan have come out in the open in Gujarat and Maharashtra occasionally, with the former arguing that the NBA is resisting the creation of more jobs. There has been considerable hostility in the past from the Left parties who have accused the NBA of stalling India's development and thus playing into the hands of Western powers who want to keep India backward. In their self-perception the Left parties stood for the India's progress and development and movements epitomized by the NBA represented the 'backward looking' forces opposed to modern development.

By introducing an entirely new regime of time, accelerated to breathtaking dimensions, what globalization has done is to reduce the left-wing proponents of development and progress to a kind of obsolescence - to defensive battles much of the type that many ecological movements like the NBA have been fighting. What was progress and development even ten years ago is irretrievably the past now; the present of course, is not that yet exists but one that is to be.² There is therefore, a sense in which progress and development have overtaken the Left which continues to be temporally located in that past. To understand this better, we might heuristically see the regime of time itself as differentiated between nation-time and global-time. The hegemonic nation-time of yesteryears, with the nation-state's accent on self-reliance and its refusal to be 'determined' by the global economy, consisted of a certain idea of development and progress. This idea had two coordinates: autonomy vis-à-vis the pace of global transformations on the one hand, combined on the other, with a relentless drive to homogenize all its internal 'constituents' into that singular pace that was dictated by the demands of 'national progress'. Local experiences and apprehensions of time, and their related ideas of pace were considered as 'drags' on the nation's progress. With the insertion of the nation-state into the regime of global-time and its attendant pace, those who inhabited the domain of nation-time, found themselves becoming as rapidly obsolete – just as they had found the likes of NBA to be. In relation to the new situation then, there has also arisen a basis for the thawing of relations between such diverse and often mutually antagonistic movements. The re-appearance of imperialism as the 'main enemy' on the scene has provided the possibility of united resistance of all 'nationalist and patriotic forces'. The theory of the 'lesser evil' comes in handy in this new demonology. There has to be a hierarchy of evils and, so goes common wisdom, you often have to make common cause with

² Rajiv Gandhi's metaphor of the 21st century referred to such a present-to-be. Even though, technically we have now arrived 'into' the 21st century, it is still a state that we aspire to.

the less dangerous one in order to defeat the bigger threat. The far-off, unknown imperialist, who always evokes the memory of colonial rule, is easily seen as the greater threat in comparison to the more familiar domestic enemies - khadi-clad³ or industrialist, it matters little. This could be one simple explanation of this change in the meaning of radical politics in contemporary India. But is that really all there is to it? Why despite such favourable situation, despite the consequent thawing of relations among these diverse movements, do all these forces find it difficult to offer such a united resistance? Why, on the contrary, does such a possibility seem more remote with each passing day?

This paper will tentatively explore the shifts in meaning(s) of radical politics and the need for radical political theory to grasp their significance if it is to effectively challenge onslaughts on peoples' livelihoods and rights. Clearly this paper cannot even pretend to be a complete catalogue of the changes, let alone provide an exhaustive analysis. In a sense, the notes here represent a preliminary attempt at raising some of the pressing issues with all its attendant risks. Do the twin processes of globalization and of the 'increased political assertions of identity' advance or undermine the cause of Indian democracy? This paper argues that neither process is actually univocal and is therefore, full of contradictory potentialities for the future - both, of Indian democracy and of radical politics. Today, even the most hidebound position will find it expedient to assert that socio-historical processes are neither univocal nor unilinear. And yet, what does it mean beyond that express level of banality? What do I mean, for instance, when I say that the process of globalization speaks with more than one voice? I think there are at least two things implied in the assertion. First, that the processes referred to as globalization are many and despite the existence of a unipolar world, they present anything but a monolith. The question really, is of the vantage point from where we choose to look at them and here, I will argue, the vantage point of the nation-state cannot be the ground for erecting any radical politics and that the greatest defeats of recent times can be at least partly (I would say, largely) attributed to this circumstance. Second, that the perceptions of and responses to these processes are likely to be just as diverse, depending once again on the social location of the agents.⁴ Just as early colonial capitalism did not begin writing its script on a fresh and clean slate, so the present round of

³ *Khadi* is a kind of hand-woven coarse cloth popularized by Gandhi and worn by the politicians of most political parties.

⁴ By social location, I mean the entire complex of structures that determine our subjectivity. Clearly, these cannot be simply identified with any one, supposedly non-discursive, 'structural' attribute like class or gender. I use it as a shorthand therefore, to refer to the location that any actor identifies with in her own self-definition. In fact, much of the argument in the paper is directed at emphasizing precisely the instability of these locations/positions.

'globalization' will have to negotiate its advance in each region separately. Therefore, whether or not globalization has a single author, there is really no point debating that authorial intention which is undoubtedly imperialist. But if ours is the epoch of the death of the Author-Subject, it is also the epoch of the emergence of a new type of subject - the reader-subject. This is a crucial shift even in cognitive terms, and makes it possible to see history as something more than a mere outcome of the grand conspiracies of imperialism. What is crucial in this instance, is the way the readers - the new players - understand globalization, twist its meaning, play it around for their own purposes. Which potentialities fructify will therefore, eventually depend critically upon the strategic options adopted by the politics that identifies itself as radical. And the efficacy of these choices will depend upon a thorough rethinking of the entire hierarchy of evils that permanently fixes enemies and friends and allies in such a way that constrains rather than enables. Needless to say, this hierarchy of evils can only be thought afresh, if we undertake the stupendous task of rethinking our entire conceptual paraphernalia on which it is based.

Political and academic opinion is quite clearly divided into a pro-globalization and an anti-globalization camp. And Indian radicalism is largely identified with the latter. The more strident one's opposition to globalization, the greater one's claim to radicalism. The pitfalls of this position, I will suggest, are such that they are bound to lead to a defense of the status quo, and eventually even of the nation-state.⁵ Radicalism appears here to be talking a language similar to that of many other defenders of the status quo, or worse, of right-wing parties - however much it may feel uncomfortable about the fact. That the anti-globalization/anti-imperialist banner is being claimed equally by the Hindu Right is demonstrated time and again. This was the case with the *Swadeshi* platform of the RSS 'family'; and it was so in the aftermath of the nuclear explosions by India, when 'anti-imperialist' sentiments seem to have burst forth.⁶ Left and radical parties still have to repeatedly tell themselves that *theirs* is the genuinely anti-imperialist position; that the Hindu Right *is not sincere* about its position and will eventually compromise with imperialism or that it is already preparing to 'surrender'.⁷ There is a

⁵ Witness for instance, the strident defense of 'national sovereignty' by the parliamentary left on different occasions, but especially after the Pakistani nuclear blasts. It is interesting that even the non-parliamentary ultra-left groups, despite their declared hostility to the 'comprador' nation-state, have started raising the slogan of the defense of 'national sovereignty'.

⁶ It is of course debatable whether this anti-imperialism is not really a disguised nationalist hysteria - but then that is precisely the point about contemporary anti-imperialism that I want to make.

⁷ Issues of left party organs like the *People's Democracy* (the CPI-M organ) are full of write-ups expressing 'fears' (and relief?) that the BJP led government will after all sign the CTBT. The *Political Resolution* adopted at the party's recently concluded congress also reflects this position. The CPI-ML (Liberation)

certain discomfort in pushing the anti-nuclear argument, itself arrived at after considerable prevarication, because of this apparent fear of imperialism.⁸ Surely, there must be something more to differentiate a radical from a right-wing position: they cannot possibly be identical in every other respect except for the 'sincerity' of one and the 'insincerity' of the other. One may argue in times of an ascendant tide of radicalism that its opponents find it difficult to formally rebut their position and therefore disguise theirs in radical verbiage, but this is not an argument that can be sustained in the present conjuncture of worldwide retreat.

There is, to be sure, a core of injustice to globalization, as it involves a restructuring of global power relations to the benefit of metropolitan capital to the disadvantage of all others. And yet, there are possibilities that present themselves to third world radicalism and the labour movement, precisely because it lacks a single voice. For instance, the whole debate on labour rights could be brought back on the agenda of a government that was steamrolling the structural adjustment programme, post-Marrakesh (i.e. after the signing of the GATT agreement), almost entirely due to the fact that the spectre of the 'social clause' was raised by representatives of the metropolitan powers. It was they, and surely not out of altruism, who raised the question of universal labour standards and in so doing, forced the issue on the agenda of the trade unions too. Until then, the questions raised in the idea of 'universal labour standards' were just there as routine questions in resolutions criticizing the labour policy of the government. The urgency with which the question of the defense of the public sector was taken up was hardly visible on questions of child labour or unorganized labour, for instance. How the fact of the metropolitan powers raising these issues is viewed depends upon the vantage point one adopts and from the vantage point of the nation-state it is bound to become an inevitable constraint. The radical project, I will argue, can only be revived if and when it can delink its fate from that of the nation-state. This can be accomplished only through a thorough going critique of the nationalist project in India, as such and by *rethinking the generally posited easy and necessary relationship between nationalism and anti-imperialism*.

In this context, the renewed political assertions of identity themselves need to be seen as interrogations of the dominant project of Indian nationalism embodied in the post-independence state.

bulletin, *ML Update* (Vol. 1, No. 10, 22/7/98) also expresses identical sentiments. If, for some reason the government does not sign, the identity crisis of the Left is likely to increase manifold.

⁸ Of course, anti-imperialism is not the only reason for this lack of conviction. The almost ridiculous extent of ideological investment in "Science" and "Technological advance" accounts for it no less, as was evident in the salutations offered to "Indian scientists" (for 'discovering' the bomb fifty years too late?)

This nationalism actually continued to preserve an upper-caste Hindu hegemony in an abstract universalist constitutional language. Once that project is problematized, questions are likely to emerge in very different light with very different priorities, as they indeed are. It can then throw into question the very hierarchy of evils defined by radical, left-wing common sense and lead to the emergence of a very different agenda. These interrogations then, already occupy a postnationalist terrain in that sense, even though they are not yet theoretically articulated as such. I will return to this question later.

Labour, Social Clause and Nationalism

One of the most classic instances of the 'aporias' of radical politics (if I may use that term)- thanks to its implication in the politics of the nation-state - is the Indian debate on the social clause. The most interesting aspect of this debate is the amnesia that frames radical/left-wing responses. There seems to be no recollection of the fact that the first faltering steps towards introduction of factory and labour legislations in this country were the product of a 'trade war' in the penultimate decade of the nineteenth century. Those were the days when the textile barons of Manchester and Lancashire were pushing for factory reforms within India, faced as they were with competition from India's nascent textile industry.⁹ This amnesia is itself a feature that needs to be theorized. How did the immediate enemy whom the worker faces everyday, recede so far into consciousness? Why did the 'Indian working class' not remember this crucial aspect of its history? How do communities remember their pasts? Was it the case that it was not the worker who forgot but those who claimed to represent her/him? Or, was it because the working class never became a community with its own folklore, its own oral culture, its songs and dances, through which such communities remember? Was it really something that existed only in the marxist imaginary without any corresponding 'real imagination' by the community of itself? We cannot pursue these tantalizing questions in this note as they call for a separate investigation; let us therefore return to our narrative.

⁹ Recall here that the original Swadeshi movement was an appeal to use domestically-made cloth. Gandhi's insistence on khadi skillfully combined this urge of the native bourgeoisie with the artisanal aspiration of the classes destroyed by British industry. Bipan Chandra in his *The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India* (People's Publishing House, New Delhi, 1966) documents how the "first impulse towards legislative action to mitigate the harshness of the evils of capitalist industrialism in India came from England, whose philanthropists and textile manufacturers joined hands to demand statutory protection for the health of the women and children employed in Indian factories."p.327

As the final negotiations to the Uruguay Round on the General Agreement of Tariffs and Trade (GATT) came to an end and the accord was to be signed, the representatives of the metropolitan countries produced their trump card: Trade could genuinely be free, they argued, only when all conditions were equal.¹⁰ Third world exporters have the 'unfair advantage' of cheap labour whom they endlessly exploit through the existence of practices like bonded and child labour, through non-payment of minimum wages and the denial of trade union rights. They can therefore outprice their competitors from the first world, they averred. Hesitatingly and falteringly, the third world elites and government representatives registered their mildest protest. On April 13, on the eve of signing the GATT accord, the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and Pacific (ESCAP) did unanimously adopt a declaration. Cautiously worded, the document "emphasized the need to combat protectionism and to avoid its assuming new forms in the future", while taking into account "the fact that many opportunities and challenges were arising from positive developments in the global economic situation particularly with the successful conclusion of the Uruguay Round."¹¹ Official statements from the Indian government were few and far between. It was only in August, almost four months after the signing of the accord that the government set up a commission headed by Subramaniam Swamy, a former Commerce Minister, to deal with the issues arising out of the social clause and recommend what position to take. Soon after taking up the responsibility, Swamy argued for taking the middle path. He argued that "the shrill denunciation of what is now known as the social clause does not benefit India since even if such a clause does not become part of the to-be-formed WTO, de facto, US and European companies have started to sign export contracts with Indian companies after ascertaining if they meet acceptable labour standards...In my view, rather than flatly rejecting or completely surrendering on the issue of social clause, we must pursue a middle path of seeking to modify the US and European countries' rigid stand..."¹² Only very gradually did the third world/developing countries governments manage to come out with a collective position in the form of the Delhi Declaration. In the Fifth Conference of the Labour Ministers of Non-Aligned and Other Developing Countries, held in New Delhi in January 1995, the declaration was adopted that expressed

¹⁰ The 'social clause' included, apart from universal labour standards, universal human rights and environment standards.

¹¹ *Indian Economic Diary*, New Delhi, May 14-20, p. 14097, 1994.

¹² *Social Clause in Multilateral Trade Agreements (A Dossier on Social Clause)*. Centre for Education and Communication, New Delhi. p. 163. All documents quoted in relation to the social clause debate, unless otherwise stated, are from this dossier published by the CEC. (Henceforth, CEC Dossier)

"deep concern about the serious post-Marrakesh efforts at seeking to establish linkage between international trade and enforcement of labour standards through the imposition of the social clause."¹³ Ironically, the most "forthright position" in defense of the national capitalists was taken by the trade unions who claimed to steadfastly stand for workers' interests and rights. All the major trade unions attending the 32nd Session of the Standing Labour Committee, namely the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS), the Bhartiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS), United Trade Union Congress (UTUC), Trade Union Coordination Committee (TUCC) and the UTUC (Lenin Sarani) gave their unstinted support to the government in the name of anti-imperialism. "Though normally on all other policy matters, given the direction of overall government policy, the unions and the government are at opposite poles," said the CPI-M organ, "*the social clause is a singular issue on which there is unanimity not only among the trade unions and employers, but also on support to the government for wanting to reject the US move.*"¹⁴ The central trade unions even went to the extent of appealing to the Fifth Conference of Labour Ministers of Non-aligned and Other Developing Countries, expressing their resolute "opposition to the linking of 'labour standards' to trade as a non-tariff protectionist measure."¹⁵ The position of the trade unions was therefore, not simply a tactical one taken among themselves but amounted to an unconditional declaration of support to the government, leaving no bargaining possibility whatsoever. It did not matter at all that precious little had been done by the government on this front for close to five decades. It did not matter that for almost five decades the Indian nation-state had no time or inclination to think either about its toilers or its children. What mattered was the 'fact' that imperialism was blackmailing the 'nation' and the 'working class' was historically destined to play its 'anti-imperialist' role. Never mind of course, the fact that no one ever asked this mythical 'working class' what it wanted. Parenthetically, we may note that while the advocates of globalization, including industrialists, waxed eloquent about the 'immense possibility' contained within it for third world industrialists/exporters, it was the left-wing economists and theorists who argued practically from the standpoint of the national bourgeoisie that such was not the case. They claimed that it would mean

¹³ Ibid. p.161

¹⁴ *People's Democracy*, December 4, 1994, New Delhi. That this unanimity was a fiction existing only in the imagination of the Left, is evident from the positions adopted by the government and industry.

¹⁵ K.L. Mahendra, "A Protectionist Measure" in J. John and Anuradha Chenoy (Ed) *Labour, Environment and Globalization*, Centre for Education and Communication, New Delhi, 1996. p. 47

unmitigated disaster for the nation as a whole. And if it is disastrous for 'the nation' it must also be so for all those who comprise it. All this of course, even as the 'national' bourgeoisie continued to negotiate its alliances and collaboration with transnational companies. One relevant case here is that of the owner of the Ranbaxy pharmaceutical group Mohan Singh, who provided the financial back-up and the office space for the National Working Group on Patent Laws (and intellectual property rights) peopled mostly by CPI-M activist-intellectuals.¹⁶ At least for a section of the Ranbaxy group, however, this was the way to increase bargaining pressures for international collaborations which they finally pulled through and then subsequently lost interest in the issue.¹⁷ It is interesting therefore, that neither the government nor the industrialists, against whom the social clause was aimed, ever attacked the social clause in a forthright manner. Their strategy was more of finding and utilizing the spaces within. It was left to the trade unions then to do the same.

There were however, certain dissenting voices from the margins. For instance, Srilatha Swaminadhan of the Rajasthan Kisan Sangathan argued that the fight over the social clause was between two sets of exploiters wanting a larger slice of the pie at the expense of the toiling peoples of the world and that if the Indian workers wanted to improve their lot they should use this opportunity. They should "*fight and insist on the linkage of the social clause with multilateral trade agreements*" and to "continue to add more and more demands of the workers to be linked to multilateral trade agreements."¹⁸ Sujata Gothoskar of the Workers' Solidarity Centre, Mumbai even recalled the anti-worker attitude of the nationalist leadership to the move for factory legislation and the enactment of the Indian Factories Act (1881) and argued that the workers could not possibly have a stake in such a nation. She did see problems in the institution of the social clause, its monitoring, its use or misuse and underlined the need for evolving an independent worker-oriented position.¹⁹ Thomas Kocherry, Chairperson of the National Fishworkers' Forum, which has been leading militant struggles of the fisherfolk in the wake of liberalization gave expression to his ambivalence: "On the one hand, it is clear that the real motivations of the developed countries are dubious, on the other hand, the failure of our government in protecting workers makes one wonder whether it is an opportunity to be

¹⁶ This information is based on discussions that I had with members under the jurisdiction of the South Delhi Local Committee of the party, in 1989-90. There was considerable anxiety over this at that time, as the local CITU was involved in a struggle in the same Ranbaxy's industrial unit there.

¹⁷ An interesting aside of this dynamic was that one of the sons of Mohan Singh actually pulled through the deal, representing as he did, the new ethos, and finally the old-fashioned father was forced out.

¹⁸ Srilata Swaminadhan, "Towards International Solidarity" in Ibid. Pp. 57-58

¹⁹ Sujata Gothoskar, "The Social Clause - Whose Interest is it Serving", Ibid. Pp.59-65

exploited."²⁰

I may also mention here that the Indian case represents a higher degree of hegemony of the organized, public sector working class organizations over the trade union movement and they enjoy relatively better living and working conditions. In many other third world countries, the situation is such that even the mainstream trade unions might find it difficult to take such a straightforward nationalist position. For instance, take the case of the Malaysian Trade Union Congress. In March 1994, it announced in anticipation, that "it supports a GATT social clause" according to the International Metalworkers Federation. The MTUC statement went on to argue that "if the world's companies can have common global rules, then so too, can the world's workers."²¹ According to the International Metalworkers Federation, the MTUC statement was only one more position in a chain of similar stances adopted by trade union leaders in Singapore, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Uganda, Ghana, Chile, Argentina and Venezuela.²² Even more interesting and symptomatic of the difficult conditions of struggle in the third world, is the instance of the Peruvian government threatening union leaders with life imprisonment, branding their action of depositing before the United States Trade Representative (USTR), as "treason against the state". Three union leaders including Teodulo Hernandez, the Secretary General of the Confederacion General de Trabajadores del Peru (CGTP) and representatives of Center for Labour Counsel (CEDAL) and Coordinadora de Centrales Sindicales del Peru, had earlier met representatives of the USTR to give their perspective on their government's response to a complaint before the US Generalized System of Preferences sub-committee. They had argued that Peru "failed to qualify for the programme, which provides duty-free access to the US market because it is not affording workers the rights of association and collective bargaining."²³

One extreme reaction has also come from some NGOs, particularly those working on issues of child labour. Notable among them is the Bachpan Bachao Andolan and the South Asian Coalition Against Child Servitude (SACCS) which included groups from Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh, who decided to use the social clause in what appears to be quite a naive and unproblematic way. The SACCS is one of the NGO groups that were officially represented on the Rugmark Foundation, which was

²⁰ Ibid. p.162. Thomas Kocherry has since taken a position in opposition to the social clause. However, the fact that it did present a dilemma in the initial stages, before the overall position of the trade unions hegemonized this space, is important.

²¹ "Asian Unions Join Call for Social Clause" *Workers' Rights News*, Issue No. 9, Spring 1994, p.6

²² Ibid. p.6

²³ "Testimony at USTR Draws Attacks on Peruvian Labour Representatives", Ibid. p.3

supposed to certify that carpets carrying their 'Rugmark' labels, were not made by the use of child labour. This would enable foreign importers to then decide on whether or not to buy. The UNICEF in India too decided to support this controversial label. Though, to be fair, SACCS representatives claim that they had been considering some form of a labelling system long before there was any talk of a social clause.²⁴ The position adopted by these NGOs was more pragmatic and they did not seem too worried about trying to define their stand on globalization.

On the other side, it soon became clear that the working class and workers' organizations, trade unions and NGOs, of the first world countries were rallying around the positions of their own governments²⁵ demanding the enforcement of the social clause, the linking of labour standards with international trade. The ostensible logic of their position was pro-labour - they wanted third world labour to have minimum rights too. Yet, there was something more to it which was revealed in the American case during the NAFTA debate. The fear that NAFTA would lead to the movement of US capital to the low wage areas of Mexico aggravating domestic unemployment, was played upon by the maverick presidential candidate Ross Perot in his metaphor of the "giant sucking sound across the border". This was the stand of the US unions, like the AFL-CIO. In fact, as Michel Chossudovsky, one of the first world critics of the AFL-CIO points out, this stance continued well into the Seattle drama recently. Chossudovsky, in fact, has a more damning indictment of these organizations:

"The AFL-CIO joined by trade union bosses from around the world, has called upon the WTO to 'enforce minimum labour standards...in the global market...A carefully drafted petition urges the ministerial conference [of the WTO] to adopt 'trade and investment rules which protect workers' rights and the environment' ...In turn, the AFL-CIO has been put in charge of the organization of a mass rally which serves the purpose of deflecting the international protest movement on the streets of Seattle."²⁶

The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), which had indeed, been in the forefront of campaigning for a social clause, naturally was the most vociferous in its support, even

²⁴ Kailash Satyarthi, "Perceptions with Child Labour in Focus: Rugmark as an Alternative" in John and Chenoy, Op. Cit. p. 84. This piece gives a truthful account of the position by its main spokesperson.

²⁵ This in itself is an oversimplification, for it became clear at the first Ministerial Conference of the WTO, important European countries including Germany and UK took the position that the International Labour Organization and not the WTO was the appropriate body to deal with the question. Italy and Austria too, took an indifferent position and the EU trade commissioner, Leon Brittan remained non-committal. The final statement recognized that the labour standards issue was to be dealt by the ILO (Anjuli Bhargava, *Business Standard*, 10 and 13 December 1996, reporting from Singapore)

²⁶ Michel Chossudovsky, "Seattle and Beyond – Dismantling New World Order", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Jan 15, 2000, p. 101

trying to rally its local affiliates like the INTUC and the HMS, though to no effect. The ICFTU argument was that the 'trickle down theory' does not work and therefore, "in an increasingly competitive world trade market, governments should agree to a minimum floor level of labour standards."²⁷ Willy Wagenmas, representative of the Federation of Dutch Trade Unions (FNV), the largest confederation in the Netherlands, also saw the social clause as "a big step forward, and one that is urgently needed due to the deterioration of working conditions all over the world."²⁸ NGOs like InZet of Netherlands and Miseror of Germany also saw the need for a social clause as "increase in competition worldwide brings with it the danger that the minimum labour standards for production will be reduced both in the developing countries and the industrialized countries as well."²⁹

But in the middle of this apparently unified voice of metropolitan labour and capital, there came another, from the World Bank. This position was spelt out in its annual *World Development Report, 1995* entitled *Workers in an Integrating World*. While the Bank celebrates globalization in the report by claiming that "these are revolutionary times in the global economy", in the same breath it expresses unease that "there are fears of rising insecurity as technological change, expanding international interactions, and the decline of traditional community structures seem to threaten jobs, wages, and support for the elderly."³⁰ These are precisely the type of changes that have led to growing casualization and informalization in countries where structural adjustment programmes and neo-liberal economic policies have been implemented, including the United States itself. These are also changes that, in countries like India, are bound to aggravate conditions that the 'social clause' seeks to 'rectify'. But the Bank is opposed to the social clause: "it is best to keep multilateral trade agreements confined to directly trade-related issues to prevent protectionist interests from misusing such links to reduce the trade that workers in low and middle-income countries need if their incomes are to rise."³¹ So it suggests that the best way to ensure optimum labour standards in any given country, is to institutionalize "free trade unionism" and collective bargaining. Workers' organizations can then themselves negotiate with the employers and the government. The Bank's position needs to be studied and understood more seriously, but it does seem that because it is entrusted with the task of forcing the debtor countries to open up their economies, it probably finds it difficult to sustain

²⁷ CEC Dossier, p. 136

²⁸ Ibid. p. 140

²⁹ Ibid. pp. 145-151

³⁰ *Workers in an Integrating World - World Development Report 1995*, Oxford University Press (for the World Bank). p.1

³¹ Ibid. p.6

its propagation of the free-market *and support the social clause* at the same time - a constraint that does not exist for the Western nation-states. There are also indications that there has been an acute awareness that, if the experience of the past is any guide, structural adjustment programmes cannot be simply railroaded and that high degrees of destitution can lead to political instability and eventually jeopardize the very success of these programmes. In fact the arch conservative journal *The Economist* devoted two full articles on the recommendations of the WDR '95, advocating 'free trade unionism'³².

Whether or not these are proposals that the Bank will ever push any government to adopt, depends not just on how serious it is about them but also on how serious others are about them and how much they can push it in that direction. Take for instance, the pressure brought upon it on the Sardar Sarovar Dam issue that forced it suspend funding to it for some time and concede some ground at some level. If the World Bank has finally been forced to set up a World Commission on Large Dams to examine the entire question of big dams, which includes Medha Patkar and L. C. Jain, it is precisely because of the pressure brought upon it - not only from the movements within but also internationally. We do not yet know what will come out of it but it is certainly an important development.

So we now have basically five different positions actually being articulated in very interesting ways.

- 1) The *pro-globalization, pro-social-clause* position of the Western powers
- 2) The *anti-globalization, anti-social clause* position of the Indian trade unions and Left parties
- 3) The *pro-globalization, anti-social clause* position of the Indian government and elites and the World Bank. Supported by a section of conservative opinion represented by say, *The Economist*.
- 4) The *anti-globalization, pro-social-clause* position articulated by some representatives of the unorganized sector workers in India as well as many important trade union voices in other third world countries like Malaysia and Peru mentioned earlier. This is not always a 'pro social-clause' position as it often argues for making use of the opportunity but does not repose any faith in the powers that seek to impose it. It also includes many ambivalent voices. Included in this category of responses

³² *The Economist*, July 1 1995, Vol. 336, No. 7921. The two articles, "The future of Unions" pp. 15-16, and "Trade Unions: Adapt or Die" pp. 56-57, take off on the WDR's advocacy, though they do not directly talk about the social clause.

should also be the Northern trade unions and NGOs, many of whom stand opposed to globalization in more complicated ways but support the social clause discussed above.

5) The somewhat *unclear stand on globalization, combined with a pro social clause* position of some NGOs working on child labour, like the SACCS, Bachpan Bachao Andolan and the UNICEF.

It is interesting that the organized trade unions representing the organized sector workers, especially the public sector, have adopted the more unhesitatingly outspoken nationalist position. They are after all, not affected by any of the issues being raised in the package on international labour standards. Child labour, bonded labour, below subsistence wages and lack of union rights are not what they are fighting for. It is precisely where these issues are of critical importance, and where precious little has been done in the last five decades, that the attitude to the social clause is more complicated. It is precisely there that the stake in the 'nation' is the least- at best it is ambiguous. It is reminiscent in many ways, of the situation at the time of the nationalist movement when important leaders of the backward castes and dalits exhibited a similar ambivalence towards the nationalists. It reminds us once again of the ways in which hegemonic constructions of nationalism work to exclude the already marginalized. It may in fact, be useful to mention here that even the attitude to the GATT agreement itself, has not elicited the unanimous opposition that would have been expected. Sharad Joshi's Shetkari Sangathan has, for instance been arguing that Indian farmers should make use of the opportunities presented by the accord, suffering as they have so long from negative subsidies.³³ I may also mention in parenthesis that, the NBA which leads the movement of another marginalized, even excluded section, displays a likewise ambiguous stance towards nationalism and has not hesitated to use international forums to raise what many would consider "India's internal matter".

If there was any merit to the dominant nationalist position during the anticolonial struggle - though this is itself a matter of serious contention in our troubled present - there is no way it can be seen as a simple embodiment of anti-imperialism today. If it was possible then to indefinitely defer the claims of the subaltern/marginalized sections in the name of national independence, it was because there was at least a possibility that free India would mean the emancipation of these sections also. Fifty years after the independent Indian nation-state came into existence, precisely at a time when it is

³³ Writing on the proposed Dunkel draft, Sharad Joshi even went on to say that its proposals "read like the charter of demands of the farmers' movement", though he underlined that the Kisan coordination Committee did not feel it necessary to spend time defending it. See *Indian Express*, April 25, 1994.

being challenged by the very excluded sections, the desire to do so can only be seen as a suspect effort to defend the privileges of the Indian capitalist elite and worse, the *brahminical Hindu* elite.

What the entire debate brings out, in my opinion, is the highly complex nature of the present conjuncture. It underlines the impossibility of defining radicalism with reference to the stance on one or even a set of issues. Most importantly, it throws into question the entire nationalist radical project that: (a) sees the nation-state as the only locus of conducting an anti-imperialist struggle and (b) privileges anti-imperialism as the defining feature of radicalism. It also demands a questioning of the very idea of actually existing Indian nationhood and the place it assigns to the toilers in it. It is important to recognize that it is precisely such an idea of nationhood that makes it possible for the ruling elite to brand the Narmada Bachao Andolan also as anti-national, on the ostensible plea that they are blocking "national development" and "progress".

The Unravelling of the Indian Nation

That the stand of the Left parties is not simply a knee-jerk position but backed by a kind of theoretical articulation is evident from the following formulation by a theorist of the orthodoxy. Aijaz Ahmed, despite his deep marxist suspicions of nationalism says, "(But) a blanket contempt for all nationalisms tends to slide over the question of imperialism. I think that those who are fighting against imperialism cannot just forego their nationalism. *They have to go through it*, transform their nation-state in tangible ways..."³⁴ Or further, that "*...there is something profoundly democratic about anticolonial nationalisms*" because they politicize populations that have hitherto remained outside the domains of modern politics.³⁵ This understanding of anticolonial nationalisms, though not entirely untrue, can be described as partial and one-sided at best, today. For while they did draw in large sectors of populations into the domain of politics, we can hardly ignore the fact that they have equally, *excluded and silenced* the already marginalized and underprivileged social groups in the name of anti-imperialist unity. That, at least, is the lesson of Indian nationalism and its exclusion of Dalits and Muslims – not to speak of women – except when they have been mobilized under upper-caste bourgeois hegemony.

³⁴ Aijaz Ahmed, *Lineages of the Present - Political Essays*, Tulika, 1996. New Delhi. p.399 (emph. added).

³⁵ Ibid. p. 401. In case these seem to be stray thoughts, let me state that Ahmed makes the same points, in almost identical terms in *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*. Oxford University Press, Delhi 1994. p.11

Thus the idea that *'they' have to go through 'it'*, that it is only through the nation-state that the struggle against imperialism can be legitimately conducted is precisely what is at issue here. This is so because the postcolonial nation-state is but the embodied form of the upper-caste bourgeois nationalism of the colonial period. In this section, I intend to briefly examine this kind of claim in the context of the assertion of Dalit identity and hope to show how utterly misdirected such a view of radicalism can be.

The world of Aijaz Ahmed and the left he represents is defined precisely by the hierarchy of evils that I have discussed above. In this world, imperialism is the central category, the fundamental evil - and every struggle against it must go through nationalism and the nation-state. What this also means is that those which don't identify the nation-state as the locus of their anti-imperialist struggle, are like-wise suspect. There are two crucial problems with such an understanding that are immediately relevant. First, it completely obliterates the specificities of local oppressions, *the lived experiences* of people. The experiences of the tribal population uprooted by mega development projects in different parts of the country are as irrelevant to it as the memories of thousands of years of outcaste and brutally dehumanized existence of the Dalits. Of course, Ahmed is talking here of "those who are fighting against imperialism" and it can easily be said in his favour, that this condition does not apply to those who maybe fighting against local oppressions but as my second objection will show, where the two have to be combined, the local must always be subordinated to the global. Second, the idea of 'nationhood' and its embodied form in the nation-state is further *unproblematically assumed* here along with all the inherent hierarchies and inequities.³⁶ Once that happens, "passing through the nation-state" means passing through *this structure*, which effectively means a subordination of the local. This is particularly significant in the context of India whose past is as much torn with contests over nationhood as its present.

To take the instance of nationalism itself. In the same period of the anticolonial struggle, we have, in opposition to the dominant *savarna Hindu* nationalism, the emergence of what is known as the

³⁶ Just how dangerously close to a Swadeshi Jagaran Manch type position this brings us is evident from the leaflets issued by "Navadhanya" – a forum floated by Vandana Shiva, whose radical credentials need hardly be doubted. Issued in the wake of the dropsy outbreaks in Delhi, these leaflets entitled "*Sarson par hamle ke khilaf Mahila Vidroh*" (Women's Revolt against attacks on mustard) and "*Soya Satyagraha*", these leaflets are aimed at women and invoke all the traditional roles that unite women with mustard: massaging "our children" with mustard oil, our food culture and our women's heritage "of cooking various different kinds of dishes". The leaflets liken the new satyagraha to the salt satyagraha and call for a second freedom struggle.

two-nation theory by the Muslim League and later, the communist enunciation of the idea of India as a multinational state as alternative constructions of the idea of Indian nationhood. Kancha Ilaiah has recently argued that “Ambedkar constructed a distinct mode of nationalism in opposition to the ...other...nationalist schools...For him, the contradiction between Dalitbahujans (in his words, depressed classes) and the brahminical (exploitative) castes was the principal contradiction. He saw anti-caste struggle as fundamental, *within the context of which* the anti-colonial struggle to overthrow the British had to be addressed... His agenda of anti-colonialism was therefore intertwined with the agenda of annihilation of caste.”³⁷ In other words, there were already different imaginations of the nation of which only one became hegemonic and through the complex negotiations in the Constituent Assembly, became the basis of the independent nation-state. The hegemonic 'secular-nationalism' that thus came to be the dominant mode of nationhood, I believe, actually reinforced *brahminical hegemony* in a modernist, secular language, thanks to its blindness to these other oppressions and the struggles against them. This is a lesson we cannot miss, if we are to hear the voices being articulated through so many little voices - including Ilaiah's - attentively.

If the discussion in the earlier section on the social clause shows that there is already a challenge to the notion of a unified national interest and that correspondingly, there are different responses to globalization, then that should lead us to ask further questions about the idea of nationhood. For, it shows that there is no single unified ground - the 'working class' - from where radicalism can speak, and that the responses can be most effectively formulated from the social location of the actors. It shows that existence as an unorganized sector worker or an organized public sector worker can crucially determine the extent of one's stake in the nation. But then we are already on sticky terrain. Why would the location of an actor as an unorganized sector weaver, for instance, be more important as the ground from where s/he would choose to act? If the weaver is simultaneously an OBC, or a Muslim or considers him/herself a Hindu, situated further in some specific geographic, linguistic or ethnic locale, could s/he not respond as a member of any of these social groups/communities? And if it is possible that as a Muslim or a Dalit, the problem more pressing is not really one of an abstract threat called globalization but, say of self-respect or the right to life, would that aspiration be any less legitimate or radical? By what authority can it be decreed that X and not Y should be the focus of radical political mobilization? Can we continue to smugly inhabit a transcendental space from where

³⁷ Kancha Ilaiah, “Towards the Dalitization of the Nation” in Partha Chatterjee (Ed.) *Wages of Freedom*. Oxford University Press, Delhi 1998. p.269

we can lay down the agenda of radicalism, which must, as a matter of fact, be based on the denial of lived experience? In other words, the unravelling of the nation itself implies the ‘coming out’ of issues proscribed by hegemonic nationalism so far - with all its concomitant problems. If that happens, it is doubtful whether our assumption of imperialism being the main enemy/danger/threat for all can remain intact. And what if the time of global integration is perceived as the moment of loosening of the suffocating grip of the nation-state? After all, we only have to see how the leaders of the backward castes/dalits were branded anti-national due to their ambiguous relation to both colonial rule and the national movement, in order to understand this. We only have to see how the people of Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur, or the religious minorities feel alienated from this nation-state and are therefore also branded anti-national.

This brings us back to the question posed at the beginning of this paper: why has the ‘possibility’ of a nationalist, anti-imperialist mobilization against globalization not materialized? Precisely because, it seems, the ‘main-ness’ of the threat is felt differently now that the proscribing authority is crumbling. Ironically, the trajectory of left-wing radicalism is moving in the opposite direction to that of the Indian nation. For left-wing investment in Indian nationalism has been growing in inverse proportion to its unravelling. Since the decade of the 1980s, this assertion has assumed forms and has adopted a language that has marked a serious rupture from those of popular struggles of earlier decades. The struggle of the ‘sixties and the ‘seventies arose around issues of price-rise, corruption, wages and land, but despite their militant forms, they remained within the framework of the Indian nation. At best they challenged the class domination of the capitalists and landlords in their rhetoric and in the transgression of the institutional mechanisms of redressal but never went beyond the confines of the idea of nationhood. The culturally coded power of the upper castes and their continuing stranglehold could never be challenged within the sanitized secular language of Left politics. So, for example, the slogan of ‘land to the tiller’ that became the hallmark of agrarian radicalism from the days of the Telengana movement of the 1940s, remained a movement that never touched the Dalits. Kancha Ilaiah has argued that because they were not cultivating castes who owned at least the implements of cultivation, the Dalits remained outside the pale of such radicalism.³⁸ Along with nationalism then, it is probably the unreflexive use of imported categories like ‘class’ that are being challenged today. Naturally then, left-wing nationalism would tend to have increasingly diminishing purchase on such protests of the subaltern and marginalized sections.

³⁸ Kancha Ilaiah, Op.Cit. p.272

In a sense, Dalit politics had to await the arrival of a Kanshi Ram - however unaesthetic he may seem to urbane minds - to emerge in all its strength. Kanshi Ram, it should be noted shares none of the assumptions of the old secular-nationalist discourse and his readiness to shift alliances according to the needs on the ground knows no bounds. When most parties of the Left and the Centre are concerned with stability, his slogan is “*hamein mazboot sarkar nahin, majboor sarkar chahiye.*” (We want a vulnerable government, not a strong government). Clearly, neither does he privilege the anti-imperialist struggle, or the nation-state and its stability, for in his calculus, it is the dynamic of internal struggle for power for the Dalits that is crucial. It may appear opportunistic in the grammar of our erstwhile secular-nationalist politics, that he goes into an alliance with Mulayam Singh Yadav today and with the BJP the next day. Kanshi Ram however, knows that the Dalits by themselves, constituting less than 20 percent of the population, will always be kept out of power if they permanently throw their lot with any single combination. From the point of view of the ordinary Dalit who knows that brahminism and *manuvaad* are the main oppressors who have crushed them for centuries, the fact is no less important that *today* it is the social base of the likes of Mulayam Singh Yadav that is oppressing them brutally. From the perspective of that ordinary Dalit, it would be suicidal to permanently fix the hierarchy of enemies: neither Mulayam nor the BJP, nor indeed anybody else should be able to take their support for granted. This is not to say that Kanshi Ram’s political-electoral manoeuvres are free of his own cold power calculations but that is the common denominator of all electoral strategies in contemporary India - in fact, of politics as such - and need not be separately considered in his case.

There is however, another sense in which the politics of the Dalit movement may be called ‘postnationalist’: it refuses to inhabit the domain of nation-time and its insistence on the subordination of all others to the pace of the singular logic of the ‘progress of the nation.’ This is evident in Kanshi Ram’s insistence on the ‘here and now’ of the struggle, the refusal to defer the question of Dalit emancipation any more, in any larger interest. This insistence, in fact is a revival of Ambedkar’s – and in fact, Periyar’s – refusal to subordinate the ‘here and now’ of Dalit/adi dravida/panchama liberation to any other goal, to any other future time. Take for instance, the following extract from Ambedkar’s speech at the First Round Table Conference, where he says:

“We know that political power is passing from the British into the hands of those who wield such tremendous economic, social and religious sway over our existence. We are willing that it may happen, though the idea of Swaraj recalls to the mind of many of us the tyrannies, oppressions and injustices *practised upon us in the past* and the *fear of their recurring under Swaraj*. We are prepared to take the inevitable risk of the situation in the hope that we shall be installed, in adequate proportion, as the

political sovereign of the country along with our fellow countrymen. *But we will consent on one condition and that is that the settlement of our problem is not left to time. I am afraid the depressed classes have waited too long for time to work its miracle.*"³⁹(emphasis added)

It is possible to quote chapter and verse from the history of the Dalit/backward castes struggle, from almost all important leaders of the movement, to illustrate my above contention that the refusal to surrender the present was almost without exception a characteristic feature of this history. With the attainment of independence, however, this was precisely what did not happen. The Nation's progress took over and once again, their demands were pushed to the realm of the perpetually deferred. Kanshi Ram's revival of this insistence is in fact coeval with the feminist refusal, especially in the 1980s, to defer any more the questions of gender equality. The emergence of ecological movements in the same period, like the NBA, we have already noted, like-wise refused this deferral, more so, because they were to be sacrificed at the altar of the Nation's development; for the tribals of Narmada or Subarnarekha, it was a question of immediate life and death. Seen in this sense, a united struggle against imperialism, based on a privileging of the nation-state, seems to be quite a remote possibility, if at all.

The emergence of these particularistic assertions of identity underlines the rupture that has occurred in the grammar of Indian secular-nationalist politics has another significant dimension. Sudipta Kaviraj, for example, has recently argued that,

“(W)ithin twenty years after Nehru's death, central conflicts of Indian politics and the discourses expressing them changed unrecognizably. Politics in the Nehru years appeared a tolerable imitation of Western political styles, in which the main disputes occurred between the ideological groups of the left, right and centre. In the eighties, it appeared that *these were insubstantial differences within a modernist bloc of privilege* which was opposed with increasing energy, vehemence, irritation, insolence by a bloc of social groups who were outsiders to the etiquettes of westernized modernity.”⁴⁰

Though Kaviraj seems to lament the developments in a later essay⁴¹ there seems little doubt that the changes described by him have irreversibly changed the entire paraphernalia of representational democracy in the country. They signal, as indicated above, a sharp decline in the mobilizational significance of abstract secular categories like ‘class’, ‘people’ and even ‘nation’⁴². The fate of the ‘working class’ is symptomatic of this. This is not to argue that questions of class oppression are any

³⁹Quoted in D.C. Ahir (1990), *The Legacy of Dr Ambedkar*, B.R. Publishing Corporation, Delhi. p.195

⁴⁰ Sudipta Kaviraj, “Crisis of the Nation-State in India” in John Dunne (ed.) *Contemporary Crisis of the Nation-State*, Blackwell, Oxford (UK) and Cambridge (USA). 1995. p.125

⁴¹ See Sudipta Kaviraj, “Culture of Representative Democracy” in Partha Chatterjee (ed.) *Op. Cit.*

⁴² The fate of the ‘nation’ as a category is more complex, but clearly its ‘secular’ variant seems to be as threatened.

less important today than they were at any time in the past. What it does mean is that their perception is likely to be mediated through the myriad other identities and issues – much as they are likely to mediate them. What it also indicates is that it is not enough for class oppression to simply ‘exist’ in order for it to become an instrument of political ‘mobilization’. In fact, it points to the fact that the category of mobilization - if it means middle class political elites ‘mobilizing the masses’ - fails to capture the fact that political subjectivities are created in the course of social groups or communities imagining their collective selves in particular ways. The working class in that sense, as a political subject, probably never existed in India. What existed was the class as a sociological entity - fighting at best for its immediate demands like wages and working conditions, which is necessarily limited to the factory or industry level. The imagination of a class-being even at a state-level does not exist, leave alone the national or international.

We are then brought face to face with the fact that there is no pre-given entity that is to be then represented through organizations, parties and leaders, but that the very processes of articulation of claims and strategies involve the construction of collective selves within which mechanisms of political representation are lodged: that there is no political representation possible outside that process of identity construction, i.e. self-representation. This is, presumably, the meaning of the Gramscian insistence on the ‘organicity’ of leadership. We are finally led now to estimate the dimensions of the breathtaking claim made by Ahmed: that “there is something profoundly democratic about anti-colonial nationalisms” because they politicize populations that have hitherto remained outside the domains of modern politics. This is being said precisely when it is this claim that is contested from every direction today.

There is something particularly blind and insensitive about such an assertion particularly when it comes at such a juncture of Indian politics as the one described above. Its insensitivity and blindness might really go a long way in explaining why the story of the anti-colonial struggle will not be repeated in the times of globalization.

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