

Redefining Secular Agenda

If the Congress and other political formations really want to salvage secularism, they will need to take a hard look at the current alliance between 'reform' and Hindutva. Any secular project that is not informed by a considered programme to reinstal people's right to collective secular resistance, not just to Hindutva but to 'reform', is unlikely to go far.

BADRI RAINA

As 'mission 2004' – to use the pseudo-messianic discourse of the BJP – draws near, some restless new political churning seems underway. Already, for instance, as the one and only Kalyan Singh seeks to return home, three Dravidian compatriots of the NDA part company. Even as the exciting uncertainties of the coming months titillate the palate of the professional observer, what formations may or may not fructify bear momentous implications for the mass of ordinary Indians. Indeed, the very shape and genius of the Republic may be at stake.

First of all, there is bad news for the wishfully disposed who speculate that, after all, the BJP has turned the corner and embraced the Constitution. The naivete here results from a simplistic confusion between the BJP's tactics as a political player and its strategy as an unvarying ideological force. At the level of tactics, let it be acknowledged, political India has rarely experienced the adroitness with which the BJP is now able both to create and manipulate opinion. This owes principally to its nimble ability to get the better of verity and scruple; it deploys half-truth, misinformation, nagging iteration of rehearsed phrases and talking points with tireless self-assurance; it services an idea in one theatre of operation with energy even as it repudiates the same idea in another theatre with matching energy. Clearly, the party can be trusted to use or misuse just about any concatenation of tactical tools to capture state power.

Notice, however, that notwithstanding its electoral propaganda about 'development' and 'governance,' the inaugural actions of its chief ministers in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan already speak loudly to its strategy. These actions make unmistakable announcement that, oath or no oath, it holds the 'basic structure' of 'secularism' in fascist contempt. In Madhya Pradesh, for example, all elected

MLAs of the party were first and foremost bundled off to seek the blessings and guidance of the RSS – that 'purely cultural' organisation which is now busily visible everywhere and everyday from public pulpit to media channels. As between the Constitution and the RSS, thus, nobody is left in any doubt as to where the true allegiance of the BJP lies. Next, the swearing in ceremony was awash with saffron sadhus and sants, something the Constitution frowns upon. To clinch the style of the new government, coordination committees between the government and the RSS have been set up to oversee ministerial functioning. The very first governmental edicts followed the same line of thought: banning cow-slaughter (which one had supposed was already under a ban in MP since 1957) and making mandatory the recitation of 'vande mataram' in government schools. Last in the series thus far, comes the declaration of a two-day state mourning for a party functionary whose locus standi vis-a-vis the state remains unclear. One can be sure that in the days to come mainstream educational institutions will see the same kind of wholesale 'Hinduisation' that the 'shishu mandirs' and 'vanvasi kalyan kendras' have been effecting among the tribals and other subaltern populations. Even as, therefore, the Uma Bharti government may find time for the 'sadak, bijli, paani' variety of development, one need be in no doubt that the main agenda will remain the recuperation of the lost Hindu soul of Madhya Pradesh. To that purpose, the Bhojshala site is already fast on the road to being dressed up as the next Ayodhya, and Jhabua as the successor to the events in the Dangas district of Gujarat. And, last but not the least, liquor and mutton has now been banned in three cities of the state.

In Rajasthan, the government seems to have declared a Hindu Rashtra; in a brazenly theocratic move that government has doled out to all temples in the state

a special grant for the celebration of the new year and the victory of the BJP. Indeed, a cabinet minister, announced on the visual media that since that victory was a 'miracle' wrought by the devis and devtas, it is the least the new government could do to register gratitude. And all this while one had thought that not the gods but the people of Rajasthan had voted the BJP to power. As for the mosques and churches – the so-called deities who reside there could hardly have pumped for the BJP; thus, no grants to them.

Facing Reality

In the meanwhile, it is just as well that the oldest party seems on the way to embracing some home-truths, the first of those being that the possibility of an imperious single-party return must be discounted. Concomitantly, the president of the Congress, if not all its bigwigs and satraps, seems to have recognised that the constitutional principles upon which the Republic was founded face terminal threat if the Sangh parivar is permitted unfettered access to state power. There is some hope that it is this realisation rather than a baser wish to party-aggrandisement that now informs the declared desire of the Congress to forge a secular front. Not a day sooner, one might say. The theoretical and operational imponderables here, nonetheless, are formidable.

For a start, the question that must be pondered is whether the save-India-for-secularism slogan can be considered sufficient in itself to obtain a return of the polity to rational, republican sanity. Or will secularism as an ideal need to be infused with a reformulated material content. Currently, the oldest party is at the receiving end of all kinds of advice from all and sundry. Apart from the gratuitous advice, even from Sangma, as to who its leader should be – a matter properly left to the party itself – the input follows two opposed axes: one that seeks to push the party more to the right (meaning outdoing even Arun Shourie at selling family silver in the name of 'reform'), and the other that counsels a shift to the left (meaning reworking its economic predilections and programmes more to benefit the mass of Indians rather than the corporates and the stock brokers). Predictably, the lines within the Congress must be equally contentious with respect to the desirability of one or the other option.

It might help to consider how economic 'reform' has tended to be intimately linked to the disappearance of secularism. Put another way, unless Hindutva comes to be evaluated not merely as a superstructural, theocratic phenomenon but as a devastating aid to the political economy of 'globalisation' no worthwhile or far-reaching secular vision is likely to emerge. There is little doubt now even among the erstwhile prophets of 'globalisation' that it requires an increasingly oppressive use of state machinery to curb, if need be to crush, forms of collective resistance which had seemed, till the other day, legitimately intrinsic to the project of democracy. Thus, the right to association, to public demonstration, indeed to strike work as an extreme recourse now comes to be seen as essentially anti-state dispensations. As capital concentrates across boundaries, as the maximisation of corporate profits and bouncing stock markets come to be projected as indices of 'national prosperity', all impediments to these proceedings are sought to be liquidated with vicious impatience; Thus, law-enforcement comes to mean holding the people at bay and leaving market 'players' free reign. 'Globalisation' is quite obviously an anti-democratic project nationally and internationally.

What has not been so obvious is that the 'reform' process finds in Hindutva an ideological tool which deflects democratic consciousness into communal consciousness at the grass roots. Hindutva says to the dispossessed and the unemployed that their oppressor is not 'reform' but the communal 'other.' Thus, erstwhile mill-workers across communities, now constituting the reserve army of the unemployed, are taught to hate each other rather than jointly resist 'reform.' As collective forms of protest, legitimated by the Constitution, are clamped down, that reserve army finds elevation as the VHP/Bajrang Dal hooligan who acquires the self-image of after all belonging to the dominant class. Thus, even as the state bears down hard on public demonstrations on democratic issues, it allows the very same multitude free reign should they appear on the streets as religious zealots. In the former shape they are seen to constitute a threat to public order; in the latter as exemplars of 'cultural nationalism'. It will be seen that the dominant media have tended to go along with that manipulated dichotomy.

If the Congress and other political formations, therefore, truly desire to salvage secularism, they will need to take a hard

look at the unholy alliance between 'reform' and Hindutva. Any secular project that is not informed by a considered programme to reinstall people's right to collective secular resistance, not just to Hindutva but to 'reform', among all sections of the dispossessed, in country and town, is unlikely to go far. That, however, requires that the production and distribution of wealth, of social and educational opportunity, is seriously sought to be reoriented to address the material welfare of the mass of Indians. This is not to ask for a leap to 'socialism'. But, yes, secularism cannot be retrieved at the present juncture unless Indian capitalism is made to service a welfare state at the least.

What of the organised left? Here as well the problem seems now less intractable than it is made out to be, both by the left and the Congress. In a significant interview with Karan Thapar recently, Prakash Karat of the CPI(M) made a refreshingly candid admission, under some very business-like questioning no doubt. He said, "what do you think we have been doing in West Bengal since 1977 – building capitalism." Karat went on, of course, to mitigate the interviewers' real or faked consternation by offering due qualifications: that the attempt in Bengal had at least been to develop and distribute productive resources to benefit the vast rural masses, even as the government was now turning its attention to urban populations; and that in no case, as far as working within the constraints of a state government could

render it possible, would the Bengal government embrace 'privatisation' in quite the same way as the centre wished it. Some mention of capitalism with Chinese characteristics also came up as a paradigm. Given that the organised left has, as necessary tactics, been working to safeguard from fascist onslaught India's secular Constitution and parliamentary democracy, and seeking to accord a human face to economic policies and priorities, the meeting ground between all that and a reformulated Congress can be a real one, provided, as has been argued, the latter fully accepts the interlinkages between economic doctrine and secularism.

The task then will be to forge a theoretical paradigm that can deliver, and channel these into systems of transparent and non-greedy power-sharing and dissemination that can match and defeat the blitzkrieg of forces that seek to recast the state and the polity away from rational and democratic forms of thought into robotic followers of the myths of hate in the service of global capital.

In conclusion, it should not be gratuitous to remind the oldest party of what it must already know: should it dither now, or get greedily bogged down in half measures, it not only risks sinking itself but will bear a major responsibility for sinking the Republic which, whatever anyone might say, it had brought into being through long decades of memorable struggle. Nor can any of the smaller secular formations be absolved of that responsibility. **EPW**

Mid-Year Review of the Indian Economy 2003-2004

Suman K Bery and Research Team, NCAER
8175411880 2004

Rs 295

Indian Steel Perspectives 2025

R.K. Sinha, S.C. Suri (Centre for Policy Research)
8175411317 2003

Rs 600

Dynamics of India's Textile Economy

Towards a Pragmatic Textile Policy
K.D. Saxena (Former Secretary, M/o Textiles)
8175410779 2002

Rs 850

Cement Industry in India

Policy, Structure and Performance

Madhu Bala (IGNOU)

8175411244 2003

Rs 450



Shipra Publications

115 A, Shakarpur, Delhi-110092

Ph.: 91-11-22458662, 22500954

e-mail: info@shiprapublications.com, www.shiprapublications.com