

On the Contemporary Relevance and the Future of Democratic Socialism

Satish K. Jain¹

One of the important political currents during the first quarter century of independent India was that of the democratic socialist movement. Although the democratic socialist stream, so far as the Indian political spectrum is concerned, is almost extinct, the relevance of some of the core political ideas and insights of this movement is today possibly greater than ever before. The main purpose of this note is to discuss two of the core ideas of this movement from the perspective of their contemporary relevance. The note also contains some discussion on the possibilities of revival of democratic socialist ideas in a context which is fundamentally different from the one which gave rise to them.

The first of these core ideas relates to the emphasis that the Indian democratic socialist thought put on the organic unity and indivisibility of democracy and socialism. Although the democratic socialist movement, excepting for brief interludes, was quite fragmented, on the impossibility of long-term sustainability of socialism without democracy and vice-versa there were never any differences. The international upheavals of the last two decades have amply borne out the correctness of this shared belief of the erstwhile democratic socialists of the country.

When one looks at the fundamentally different political scenario in the country that prevails now compared to what it was when the democratic socialist parties were of some reckoning, what one finds particularly striking is that in the entire contemporary political spectrum there is no significant political party which is dedicated to both the ideals of democracy and socialism. Now, if one takes the thesis of organic unity of democracy and socialism to its logical conclusion, it would follow that, notwithstanding pronouncements and protestations to the contrary, it could not be the case that the political parties which did not believe in democracy or did not believe in socialism, could genuinely believe in the other. Some of the major political events of recent times in India would be incom-

¹Centre for Economic Studies and Planning, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi 110 067.

Email: satish.k.jain@gmail.com

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prehensible without understanding the profound transformation of political parties which has been going on for some time now in which their commitment to fundamental elements of democracy and socialism is getting increasingly eroded, in some cases to the point of becoming non-existent. The massive land-grab together with repression of an unprecedentedly high order epitomizes both the negation of democratic and socialist values. It is the viewing of democracy and socialism in a holistic way, a core insight of the democratic socialist thought of yesteryears, which in turn helps explain the process of transformation of political parties of the country in which they are becoming increasingly pro-capitalism, anti-socialism and repressive when in power.

The second core idea that adherents of democratic socialist ideology had was the recognition that the institutional structure and choice of technology had profound implications for both individual and social values. This insight, particularly relating to technology, the movement had inherited from Mahatma Gandhi. It is noteworthy that although lip-service was paid to Mahatma's ideals in the initial post-independence years by practically the entire political spectrum, not a single core idea of Gandhian thought was incorporated in the philosophy of any major political current other than that of democratic socialist thought. The enormous significance of the insight regarding the value non-neutrality of technology is being realized only in the wake of unprecedented environmental degradation and ecological devastation.

From the perspective of democratic values as well as of socialist values the current situation is rather grim. The regression that has taken place becomes evident if we look at the fundamental differences between the movements of the twentieth century and the struggles which are currently going on in various parts of the world including India. One constant factor underlying the movements of the twentieth century was that regardless of the immediate goals and aims they were all, directly or indirectly, affirmations of the core ideas of equality and justice. Struggles against colonial rule for independence were particularly pure cases of affirmation of fundamental principles of equality and justice. In contrast, contemporary struggles and movements of the oppressed are, by and large, essentially for survival. Whether it is the struggles of peoples of occupied territories for liberation from genocidal terror unleashed by the hegemonistic power and its surrogates in West Asia, or farmers' movements against land-grab in different parts of the country, in the ultimate analysis they are essentially for survival. It is symptomatic of the changed circumstances that survival has emerged as the core issue around which the struggles are

taking place. How has this situation come about?

Disappearance of socialistic values and weakening of democratic values have much to do with the ascendancy of market and market-induced institutional structure inclusive of technology; in addition to the changed geo-political circumstances. It is in the nature of social institutions that they articulate only some individual values and filter out the remaining ones. Market mechanism by its very nature can articulate only those values held by individuals which are backed by money. The values which are not backed by money, no matter how passionately held, cannot find articulation through the mediation of the institution of market. For instance, values conducive for preserving ecological integrity if held by millions of poor people would find lesser articulation through the market than anti-environmental values embodied in actions involving large amounts of resources undertaken by few from the profit motive. Thus, whenever the domain of a social institution expands, the domain of the values which find articulation through that institution also expands. The expansion in the domain of an institution must necessarily imply contraction in the domain of some other institution and the corresponding contraction in the domain of the values articulated by that institution. The enormous expansion that is taking place in the domain of the market consequently entails weakening of those values which were articulated by the institutions at whose expense the market expansion is taking place.

In the context of socialistic values the role of market is particularly negative. Not only is the market incapable of articulating these values, but for the smooth functioning of the market system it is important that those participating in the market be motivated by self-interest and not by socialistic values. Dominant social institutions tend to influence individual values in at least two different ways. If some values do not find articulation through the dominant social institutions, sooner or later they are bound to become weak if not disappear altogether. Furthermore, the values which are partly or wholly inconsistent with the values embodied in the dominant social institutions are unlikely to survive in the long-run. Given the fact that the institution of market puts great emphasis on self-regarding values and preferences while the socialistic viewpoint emphasizes other-regarding values and preferences, the co-existence of socialistic values in a setting in which institution of market is preeminent is well-nigh impossible.

In the contemporary context the scope and reach of market are so great that individuals, groups and communities have lost the power to decide on many matters of great signi-

ficance to them as the decisions are being arrived at through the market. If destinies of individuals, groups and communities are going to be decided by the impersonal market forces and not by themselves, it is not clear what meaning and significance one can attach to democracy in such a setting.

The overwhelming dominance of the market thus is antagonistic to both democratic and socialist values. As the expansion of market has taken place and is continuing to take place as a necessary consequence of globalization, it is clear that the revival of the democratic socialist ideas is not possible without an uncompromising stand against globalization and the associated processes. As noted earlier, the near absence in India of political groups and parties which believe in both democracy and socialism has created a situation in which large numbers of people are forced to struggle for their survival essentially on their own. As even partial success of these struggles has the potential to slow down the pace at which globalization-induced transformation is taking place, at this juncture the future of democratic socialist ideas appears to be inextricably linked with the fate of these peoples' movements for survival.