



Policies & Perspectives



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The Oxymoronic Left-Liberal Nomenclature

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In the frontline of the attack on Prime Minister Narendra Modi, his Government, the Bharatiya Janata Party, the RSS and its affiliates, and sundry other Right-of-Centre organisations such as the Shiv Sena, are what are commonly referred to as Left-Liberals. Their reach and power must not be underestimated, for they are like the mythological hydra-headed monster — when one of its head was cut, it grew back as two — which can be tamed only by a Hercules-like character. The Left-Liberals are everywhere: In the political system, in universities, in civil society, among the non-Government organisations, inside news television studios, part of the intelligentsia. In short, they straddle just about every medium that has the power to influence public opinion. And because they have been there for decades, patronised by various regimes since independence, their footprint is all-pervasive. It will take a while for the damage they have caused to be undone. The process has already begun, and the recurring friction in recent years that we are witness to in this ideological battle, is evidence of that churning. The fortress is under attack — and not just by a new political order but also by the masses as well who have finally lost patience with the bluff and bluster.

The Left-Liberals revel in the nomenclature for two reasons: One, it pits them squarely in ideological terms against what they perceive as fascism personified; and two, it gives them a halo of credence which comes in handy when they are doing the lecture circuits here and abroad or adding fuel to fire — as in Kashmir or in Maoist-affected regions. They — or at least the better read among them — are aware of the irony that is provided by the terminology, but they would rather not spoil the party where secular glasses clink and the guests are intoxicated by the spirit of tolerance, the definition of which they alone have the authority to determine.

The hyphenation of Left and Liberal is an interesting phenomenon, not least because it's oxymoronic in nature. One suspects that it has come about due to sheer indolence of commentators who prefer to tag the two along rather than deal with them separately. It may also be because, since both Liberals and Leftists have a common enemy, analysts believe it is quite appropriate to place them in one basket as fruits of the same tree. The truth, however, is that the Left-Liberal term is one of convenience and convenience only, which no bipartisan person with some understanding of political history or theory will venture to use, except to mock the recipients. Of course, there are also those who actually believe, either naively or in defiance to lived experience, that there isn't much to differentiate between the Leftists and the Liberals and that the two are bound by a common goal. Unfortunately for these proponents, there is nothing in common between the two — rather they are not just poles apart but also antagonistic to each other. That over the decades the two are seen to have merged into a common denominator, is indeed a



measure of success of the deviousness with which the cohesiveness has been achieved.

In the Indian political context, the Left comprises the Marxists and other communists, and the Liberals are supposed to be everybody else except the Centre-of-Right parties, right from the Congress to a bunch of regional outfits that usually thrive on parochial calling relating to caste, region and religion — and yet grandly fit in the Liberal mould. That none of the latter, including the Congress, is truly Liberal in the sense Liberalism as a theory has found its place in democratic nations across the world, is considered a minor detail fit to be glossed over. The really amusing part is that the Marxists — the big brother of the Leftists in the country — also seriously believe they are Liberals. There is little that can be done to reason with an emperor who wears no clothes but is convinced that he is fully dressed because a cacophony of submissive voices says so.

Liberalism and Marxism have been two competing dogmas for a couple of centuries and they are as different from each other as chalk and cheese. In fact, Karl Marx propounded his theory as an anti-thesis to liberalism which, he believed, had promoted a capitalist system of the most exploitative nature. Let's look at just a few of his 'liberal' thoughts: He wanted private property abolished; he called for a revolution of the working class against the capitalists (the owners of resources such as land, labour, machinery), even if that revolution led to spells of dictatorship and violence; he dreamt of a classless society in which the capitalists would be ground to dust; he saw no scope of a synthesis — his initial inspiration, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, had enunciated that a clash between thesis and anti-thesis (or counter-thesis) could be resolved through synthesis; and Marx resolutely distrusted the state and held its authority in contempt because he believed that the state often was an instrument for the promotion of capitalists. In fact, Marx had the intellectual honesty to acknowledge, if not in so many words, that his theory was that of illiberalism. Thus, for commentators of today to attire him with an ill-fitting liberal coat, is to make a caricature of that original, if in many opinions a misguided, thinker, politico-economic philosopher and activist.

But Marx merely propounded theories, and at best in practical terms mobilised the working class during his sojourn in England; many of those others who became his believers went on to craft totalitarian regimes that left in their wake decades of human misery and grief for millions. Mao Tse Tung is one such example; Vladimir Lenin is another. Both these leaders appropriated the Marxist quest to destroy patrons of 'class' and tweaked Marx's ideology to 'unite' peasants and workers under their party banner in the name of communism-socialism. Here, they did deviate from the German thinker's core: That revolutions are to be raised spontaneously and won by workers, and not dictated by parties or states. Both Lenin and Mao used their respective political outfits to milk the working class sentiment and disgruntlement against the prevalent exploitative system. And yet, both these leaders were no different from Marx when it came to the essence of intolerance. Marx was also the fountainhead for revolutionary leaders such as Che



Guevara and Fidel Castro — both of whom had their share of charisma but also contributed to the betrayal of dreams they led their followers to bask in.

Closer home in India, Marxist philosophy has wreaked havoc in States where the Communist Party of India (Marxist) has ruled or rules, whether it is Kerala or West Bengal. The CPI (M) has institutionalised violence as state policy, and since it is quite beyond them to take on the bourgeoisie with the passion and ardour their political saint had recommended, the Marxists have resorted to physically maiming or eliminating their rivals. This has become their demented revolution. It happened during the three-decade uninterrupted rule in West Bengal and it's happening now in Kerala where the Leftists are seeking to eliminate rising opposition from the Right to their hegemony, through physical intimidation, and even killings.

Illiberal to the core, the Marxists may not have objected to being clubbed with the Liberals, for reasons given before. But what of the Liberals themselves? How have they been complicit in this linguistic skullduggery that goes by the Left-Liberal name? There can be two explanations for the conspiratorial silence. The first is that the Liberals find themselves weak as standalone entities — even the combined might of these Liberals, the Congress and non-NDA regional parties included, is not a patch on the arc of influence the Marxists have drawn across the Indian horizon. They, therefore, have co-opted the Marxists in their fight. The second is that the Liberals — and this laughingly includes the Socialists; laughingly because socialism is just a step away from the rigid and fundamentalist nature of Marxism with all the disasters attached — are not really Liberals. They are in reality paraders of sophistry. They have fallen in love with Liberalism without having liberated themselves of dated mindsets. They have convinced themselves that vehement, and even better, virulent, opposition to Prime Minister Modi or the Right-of-Centre, is in itself a certificate of Liberalism. The fact is that they are certain to fail even the most primitive test of Liberalism vis-a-vis the political theory as it was conceived, and as it has evolved over the last two centuries.

*Neither the Congress nor like-minded other parties, including the Socialists and the casteist organisations, can be called liberal in the true sense. Political scientist Andrew Hacker, in his important book, *Political Theory*, identified four kinds of liberalism: utopian, free market, democratic, and reformist. Take the Congress for instance. Internal democracy is a farce in the party which still swears by the dynasty. The Shah Bano case is a classic example of its anti-reformist credentials. The party's position on free market is hazy at best. The only leader within the party who truly believed in free market reforms was PV Narasimha Rao, and he was pilloried for it. In his 10-year reign, the other proponent of free market in the Congress, Manmohan Singh was tied to the lamp-post of what went by the name of National Advisory Council, which was a euphemism for a bunch of Left-leaning academics and NGOs whose sole purpose was to stall, in the name of welfarism, the march of liberal economics.*



It can be argued that welfarism is another form of liberalism where the state needs to assume responsibility, for the larger social good, of ensuring basic services in the areas of health and education, for example, without impinging on the individual's quest for basic rights that come with his birth and are not given as a favour by the state. But even here, the Congress and those others who profess to seek a welfare state, have failed. Under their dispensations, the state's foray in these activities have only worsened matters. Despite massive state interventions, India over the decades has lagged behind many countries in the health and education indices. Even if one were to not indulge in a polemical exercise, it must be pointed out that welfarism of the misguided kind has over the years attracted the ire of Libertarians — who are Liberals to the core, even if of an extreme kind. The Libertarian philosophers have argued that welfarism compromises the freedom and autonomy of the individual because it results in coercion.

Notwithstanding the different strands in Liberalism — such as Classical Liberalism, Welfare Liberalism, Libertarianism and Utilitarianism (of which Jeremy Bentham was the foremost advocate and is credited with having coined the term) — there isn't any doubt that Liberalism in its holistic sense is the anti-thesis to Marxism — or is it the other way around? While Liberalism laid great emphasis on individual rights, including the right to property, Marxists termed private property as nothing more than “theft”. They have wanted the complete abolition of private property and of the capitalists too. While the Congress in its Socialist days of Jawaharlal Nehru did not go to that extent, it did every other harmful thing which gladdened the Marxist heart. Indira Gandhi took that step which her father had not — nationalisation of banks, and ensuring that private enterprise — and by extension individual rights — remained fettered for the good part of her tenure. This was a rare coming together, but it was certainly not of Liberalism and Marxism, but of populism and economic disaster.

It may be said that Liberalism, with its underlined individual freedom and free market system, has failed in many respects across the world. But Marxism has failed too, and in more monumental ways, with India being no exception. Barring three States, the Marxists have no political heft anywhere else in the country. The CPI (M) is virtually reduced to being a regional outfit. In contrast, its polar opposite, the Right, is resurgent all over. This cannot be explained away in simplistic terms of communal versus secular; of polarisation; of brainwashing people with disruptive ideologies; of misguided nationalism. The rise of the BJP and the fall of the Marxists and the Liberals (now we can call them so-called Liberals) is a phenomenon that needs a more honest analysis bereft of ideological prejudices. Besides, it needs to be remembered that India was liberal in many of its earlier manifestations much before Liberalism struck roots in the Western world.



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