

14/09
C.C. 138

Pravāda

Vol. 1 No. 9

September 1992

SL Rupees Ten

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Pravada in contemporary Sinhalese usage has a range of meanings which includes theses, concepts and Propositions.

THE DEAD END OF POPULISM

Populism, that elusive ideology so immensely flexible as to be present in and useful for every shade of politics, is again on the rise. On a global scale, one might add. A whole variety of political forces—the New Right and ex-progressives, ethno-religious fundamentalists and Third Worldists, nationalist fighters carrying guns and respectable academics sitting before word-processors, rulers and their oppositionist critics—that are locked into a collision course at the current world historical juncture, are appropriating populism towards seemingly contradictory political goals. Populism as an ideology promises panaceas; as a program it caters to elementary sentiments producing shallow differences; as a world view, it hides the complexity of the human predicament by offering simplistic explanations and solutions to profoundly disturbing problems.

Take, for example, the 'new radicalism' of the Third World intelligentsia. Refusing to come to grips with the fundamental processes that have led the developing world to a perpetual state of predicament, many progressive academics are giving increasing currency to a simplistic dichotomy of the West and the Rest of Us. Couching their theories primarily in a post-modernist theoretical language, the malcontents of capitalist modernity are engaged in a romanticist project of juxtaposing 'our own local traditions' against the 'hegemonizing Western thrust.' 'Indigenous knowledge systems' are now being posited as more authentic and, as far as their particular societies are concerned, as superior to the 'dominating knowledge systems of the colonizer.' Technology that has raised the productivity of labour immensely is rejected on the basis of a desire to voyage into

an 'eco-friendly' primitivism. Development projects based on such technologies are condemned out of hand as 'anti-people'.

This is just one side of the story of the new populism. There is another side to it, which is not very new, yet crops up again and again in new contexts. When repressive regimes of the 'third world' are critiqued and exposed by human rights communities, these governments seek to insulate themselves from such criticism by adopting a posture of deceitful innocence and concern, claiming that Western standards and values can not, and should not, be applied to Asian and African societies. A philosophical abstraction of this claim to immunity by authoritarian regimes would be that non-Western societies, in loyalty to their 'traditions', should not bother about the liberal individualism of the West. 'We are for the people, not for individuals.' True enough, most Asian societies have not had strong traditions of recognizing individual rights and liberties as they are privileged in Western liberalism; it is also true that human rights standards and values have largely come to non-Western societies from the capitalist West. However, there is a fundamental fallacy in an argument based on such a West/non-West categorization in that it totally ignores the universalist essence of human rights and political civility. Hence the reactionary appropriation of 'indigenous peoplism' by the state.

Populism has also acquired a new dimension of regressive nativism against the backdrop of the spread of ethnic and religious conflicts, specifically in South Asia. At one level, majoritarian religious and ethno-communal groups are trying to re-build existing political



Pravada

Vol 1 No 9
September 1992

Editors
Charles Abeysekera
Jayadeva Uyangoda

Pravada is published monthly by:

Pravada Publications
129/6A Nawala Road
Colombo 5
Sri Lanka
Telephone: 01-501339

Annual subscriptions:

Sri Lanka	Rs. 110
By Air mail:	
South Asia/Far-East	U.S. \$ 20
Europe/Africa	U.S. \$ 26
Americas/Pacific countries	U.S. \$ 30

systems through a 'discovery' of the 'true past.' Concepts of 'Hinduthva' in India and 'Sinhala-Buddhist ethos' in Sri Lanka have emerged as a rejection of both the recent political history of ethnic formation in the sub-continent and what is perceived to be the legacy of colonialism and its post-colonial consequences. Religio-communal fundamentalism of the contemporary South Asian form finds its affirmation in the negation of several centuries of recent history and in the preference for primarily a mytho-history of preceding periods several millennia ago. As much as the Hinduthva concept derives its emotional fervor from the parables-turned history of Ram, the notion of a Sinhala ethos has discovered Ravana as the representative of a 'glorious civilization' and the anchor of ethnic pride. The recent history that is rejected is in fact the history that has largely shaped our societies into what they are today. The forms of that transformation, even when they may be unsatisfactory, cannot be corrected by turning our societies into mono-religious or mono-ethnic entities, as envisioned in populist-fundamentalist projects.

Confronted with the phenomenon of intense religio-communal mobilization and the attendant conflicts, some pro-

gressive intellectuals of yester-year too have begun to summon the past in an antediluvian spirit. Meera Nanda's essay published in this issue provides a fundamental critique of this academic populism currently fashionable in India. Rejection of the European enlightenment tradition is at the philosophical and intellectual core of this populist enterprise. It is a truism that Western nations have dominated, and continue to dominate, the non-Western world in a variety of spheres, economic, political, military, cultural and intellectual. In a historical period of increasingly globalizing capitalism, humankind can fight global structures of domination only by means of a universalist strategy. Retreating to islands of 'national traditions' cannot provide more than temporary solace.

Contemporary 'anti-systemic' populism has a certain historical context. As in the phenomenon of ethno-nationalism, anti-systemic populism is also a response to the failure of both capitalist and socialist projects in non capitalist and developing societies. These twin failures have left the developing world in a quandary, because the 'socialist' project has temporarily failed, capitalism, triumphantly and arrogantly projected by the West, is making its menacing presence now felt all over the globe. Meanwhile, the traditional challengers to capitalism within national boundaries—the working class, trade union movements and the Left—have become ineffective and insignificant political forces. The working class challenge to capitalism at least posited a social order which was believed, though in a dated idiom, to be more progressive and advanced than the capitalist organization of production and exchange. At the moment, no such vision of historical progress and advancement that could look beyond the limits of capitalism is available. In this great political and intellectual vacuum, there have emerged projects of fragmented resistance to the globally homogenizing forces of capitalism. Because of the very fragmented and atomized nature of this resistance, anti-systemic populism can critique capitalism mainly through pre-capitalist imageries and imagined categories which are derived from isolationist perspectives.

A telling example of this politically regressive response is the critique of secularism developed by a number of leading Indian scholars. Their argument, simply put, is that the official and elitist ideology of secularism has

failed to recognize the liberating potential of religion. The anti-religionism of an elite minority, sanctified at the level of state policy, has, then, led to the erosion of the legitimacy of the state, because the masses perceived the world through religious, and not secular, categories. The critique further states that this secularism is essentially a part of Western rationalism which has never been a part of the South Asian cultural and epistemological tradition.

Apart from the cultural relativist assumptions of this argument, it deliberately refuses to present a critique of religion and religio-politics in South Asia. While it is true that believers understand the world through religious categories, it is also true that structures of social oppression, inequality and political authoritarianism have been historically and are presently reproduced through the mediation of religion. All South Asian religions in their present form have not produced a single social liberationist perspective that can contribute to the progress of humankind. Hence the need to re-appropriate secularism by democratic forces, instead of capitulating before populist religious obscurantism, couched in a critique of Western categories. Nigat Khan's essay appearing in this issue of *Pravada* is a pointer to the pitfalls inherent in such simplified notions as cultural identity, tradition and indigenous self.

The world is not black and white; categories of division are not as simple as West and East, or coloniser and colonised. Reverse orientalism can be as intellectually disabling as was European orientalism. Simplistic post-colonialism too is not an adequate strategy to deal with colonialism and its more pervasive contemporary manifestations. Similarly, essentialist isolationism is not a worthy substitute for liberationist universalism.

We live in a historical period where there is a deep political vacuum created by the absence of a comprehensive intellectual and political critique of all the forces of hegemonic globalization and homogenization which have produced disabling, and not enabling, differences. Perhaps it is time to return to the Old Master, Karl Marx, in order to enable ourselves to understand its kernel beyond the mystifying shell which appears to appeal so much to 'radical' populists of our age.

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