

2008
DURGABAI DESHMUKH MEMORIAL LECTURE



Dr. Durgabai Deshmukh
1909-1981

**INDIAN POLITICS IN THE
AGE OF GLOBALISATION**

Prof. Randhir Singh

COUNCIL FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT
AND
INDIA INTERNATIONAL CENTRE

DURGABAI DESHMUKH

A brief life-sketch

PERSONAL

Date of Birth : 15 July 1909 (At Rajamundry, Andhra Pradesh)
Maiden Name : Durgabai Rao
Date of Death : 9 May 1981 (at Hyderabad)
First Marriage : At the age of eight (separated after three years)
Marriage to : 22 January 1953
Dr. C. D. Deshmukh

ACADEMIC QUALIFICATIONS

1939 : M. A. Political Science, Andhra University
1941 : B.L., Madras University

SOCIO-POLITICAL ACTIVITIES

1921 : Protest against status of devadasis,
Muslim women and widows
1930 : Salt Satyagrah Movement
1931-33 : Imprisoned thrice. Insisted on staying in class C
1946 : Member of Parliament

IMPORTANT INSTITUTIONS BUILT

1922 : Balika Hindi Pathasala Kakinada
(at the age of 13)
1937 : Andhra Mahila Sabha, Chennai/Hyderabad
1944 : Blind Relief Association of Delhi, New Delhi
1953 : Central Social Welfare Board, New Delhi
1964 : Council for Social Development, New Delhi

AWARDS/DISTINCTIONS

1946 : Member, Constituent Assembly
1952 : Member, Planning Commission
1963 : Doctorate *honoris causa*, Andhra University
1971 : Nehru Literacy Award
1975 : Padma Vibhushan
(Dr. C. D. Deshmukh also received this award
in the same year)

INTERNATIONAL AWARDS

1978 : Paul G. Hoffman Award
1978 : UNESCO Award

COUNCIL FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

The Council for Social Development (CSD) started as an informal group of social scientists, social workers and planners committed to the national ideals of social justice and equality. The late Dr. (Smt.) Durgabai Deshmukh, the guiding spirit of the CSD, organised a Study Group of Social Welfare to review the situation in the developing countries and suggest ways for promoting social development. The CSD was given a formal status as an affiliate of the India International Centre (IIC), New Delhi, in 1964. When the activities of the CSD increased, the Board of Trustees of the IIC decided that the CSD should be an autonomous organisation and accordingly the CSD was registered in 1970 under the Societies Registration Act of 1860. It, however, continues to have a special relationship with the IIC.

The main objectives of the CSD are :

- (a) to undertake and/or promote the study of social development;
- (b) in furtherance of that end, to undertake studies;
 - (i) in the national/regional policies of social development;
 - (ii) in the process of planning in social development; and
 - (iii) in the interaction between social and economic development at various stages of national growth in developing countries; and
- (c) in particular to plan and promote;
 - (i) studies in techniques of social planning and programming;
 - (ii) interdisciplinary research;
 - (iii) socio-economic/occupational surveys;
 - (iv) motivation for social change; and
 - (v) socio-psychological studies in rural areas.

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1993	Dr. Vina Majumdar	Women and the Political Process*
1994	Dr. Karan Singh	Population and Social Development in India
1995	Dr. Kiran Bedi	Concept of Management in Government
1996	Dr. Vandana Shiva	Trading Our Lives Away: Free Trade, Women and Ecology*
1997	Ms. Leila Seth	The Girl Child and Social Development*
1998	Swami Agnivesh	Towards a Spiritual Society* (text in Hindi)
1999	Justice Shri M. N. Venkatachaliah	Human Rights and Women in India
2000	Professor Leela Dube	Social Development and Social Research*
2001	Dr. N. H. Antia	Women and Health*
2002	Professor Mushirul Hasan	Islam, Culture and Politics: Awadh Society in the 20th Century*
2003	Dr. Pushpa M. Bhargava	The Promise and Problems of Today's Biology and Biotechnology and Their Applications*
2004	Professor Anil Sadgopal	Globalisation : Demystifying its Knowledge Agenda for India's Education Policy*
2005	Professor Ram Dayal Munda	Globalisation and the Challenges of Tribal Development*
2006	Aruna Roy	Democracy at Work*
2007	Mahasweta Devi	Fundamental Human Rights for the Nautch Girls of Purulia*

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by

Prof. Randhir Singh

15 July 2008



COUNCIL FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

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Professor Randhir Singh

Randhir Singh is a leading Political Philosopher of India who has made a significant contribution to the understanding of theory and practice of socialism in the modern world. As Professor of Political Theory he has trained two generations of Political Science students at the University of Delhi from where he retired in 1987.

After studying in Foreman Christian College, Lahore in undivided India he moved to Delhi where he started teaching first in the Camp College and then Delhi College (later renamed as Zakir Husain College) and after a brief period of teaching in JNU he joined the Department of Political Science at the University of Delhi in 1973. As a teacher he has a legendary reputation. As a concerned scholar and social activist he has stood for democratic rights of struggling people throughout his life courageously defending the cause of oppressed groups. He has been a popular figure lecturing in university campuses and public forums all over the country.

Randhir Singh's well-known works, **Reason, Revolution and Political Theory, Of Marxism and Indian Politics** and **Five Lectures in Marxist Mode** have gone into many editions. His recent magnum opus is **Crisis of Socialism: Notes in Defence of a Commitment.**

INDIAN POLITICS IN THE AGE OF GLOBALISATION¹

Professor Randhir Singh

One must from time to time repeat what one believes in, proclaim what one agrees with and what one condemns.
– Goethe

The thinker's function, to contribute our share to the description of reality, to improve (so far as we may) the modes of getting things chosen and done. This is everybody's guarantee of honour in other people's thoughts. It is the sole true objectivity, namely, a bias in favour of mankind.
– Barrows Dunham

I am grateful to the Council for Social Development for inviting me to deliver this year's Durgabai Deshmukh Memorial Lecture and share an argument with you. I did not have the privilege of knowing Dr. Durgabai Deshmukh personally, but I belong to a generation which saw and respected her as one of a select group of men and women who not only participated and suffered in India's freedom struggle but also worked, both before and after freedom was won, of course within the limits of the situation and the limits of their understanding, to put some meaning into this freedom for the long marginalised and excluded sections of our people. It speaks volumes for the kind of 'development' or 'progress' we have had in the country that even after 60 odd years of freedom Durgabai Deshmukh's concerns remain unrealised. These not only remain our concerns but with the country's ruling establishment going in for globalisation as their new strategic option, their realisation has become all the more difficult and distant. Globalisation is not the opportunity it is made out to be, but an option that confronts our people with possibly the hardest and most fateful choices of their long history.

I must confess that I was and remain diffident about delivering this lecture. Not only because I lack the scholarship or credentials as an activist that my predecessors

¹ Durgabai Deshmukh Memorial Lecture, delivered at India International Centre, New Delhi, on 15 July 2008.

could legitimately claim but also for two specific reasons. The audience I am normally used to addressing is young teachers and students in the universities and colleges trying to make sense of what they are doing in the academia or groups of young radicals struggling to find their bearings in a world now almost universally dominated by capitalism and an India now openly committed to the capitalist path of development. And I am going to speak of things one does not speak of these days, things forgotten or forbidden in our postmodernist, globalised times.

But before I do so, force of habit as a teacher, compels me to make a point, which, even otherwise, every audience deserves to have it made.

Among the excitingly significant slogans and practices of the rebel students of Paris in the late 1960s was one where they used to ask of everyone who would address them to first tell them: 'where do you speak from?' For every speaker inescapably speaks from a particular philosophical-political standpoint and owes it to his audience to publicly state it. It is only fair to acknowledge that I am going to speak from the standpoint of Marxism, rather Marxism as I understand it. For I have no pretensions to scholarship in Marxism. I picked up some on the way and have found it useful not only in my politics, or profession as a teacher, but in living my life as well. This last is not just a formal statement. Knowing Marx does make a difference to what sense you make of life, how you understand, live and act in the world. 'Indeed, I must confess that Karl Marx made a man of me' is how George Bernard Shaw once put it. Marx, therefore, is important to me and, I believe, he is important to all of us, today more so than ever before, if for no other reason than this: the world we are living in is a capitalist world, more capitalist than ever before after the Soviet collapse, and Marx more than any other human being, then or now, devoted his life to explaining the reality of this world and his achievement here remains unrivalled.

As a Marxist I also speak as a socialist ².

2 This is not the occasion to discuss Marxism or socialism whose friends and enemies today are thus taken note of by the poet Hans Magnus Enzensberger in his moving short poem, Karl Heinrich Marx:

I see you betrayed
by your disciples
only your enemies
remained what they were.

Immediately, I would only suggest that the 'Marxism of Karl Marx' with its scientific spirit, critical and humanist thrust needs to be distinguished for the scientific, economic and deterministic 'official Marxism' that once, flooded in from Moscow and remains recognised as Marxism in most places. As for socialism, one is socialist because of capitalism and not the Soviet Union, and socialism is not what came to be built in its name in the erstwhile Soviet Union but as visualised by its classical tradition: a humane, democratically functioning society providing a superior and advanced form of freedom and self-determination to the people.

I am going to share only a basic argument with you. For me it is important that the wood is not missed for the trees, that is, the *basics* have to be clearly stated and understood to make proper sense of the details, which, however, is not to in any way underestimate the latter's importance, for that is the level of which life is lived and the reality has to be ultimately grasped and engaged with.

Again, I am not going to burden or bore you with statistics. The evidence for my argument is there, scattered all around us if only we are willing to see – a little reason and ability to interconnect is all that is needed.

I may add that my argument is based on my book, *Marxism, Socialism, Indian Politics – A View from the Left* (being published by Aakar Books, New Delhi).

I

To understand 'Indian Politics in the Age of Globalisation', we obviously need to be clear about what is globalisation which, a buzzword for 40 odd years now, is far from being an unambiguous or conceptually clear theoretical construct. Given the fuzziness of language over it, Peter Marcuse has even called it a 'non-concept': 'a simple catalogue of everything that seems different since, say, 1970, whether advances in information technology, widespread use of air freight, speculation in currencies, increased capital flows across borders, Disneyfication of culture, mass marketing, global warming, genetic engineering, multinational corporate power, new international division of labour, international mobility of labour, reduced power of nation-states, postmodernism, or post-Fordism'. But this is not all. As Peter Marcuse adds: 'The issue is more than one of careless use of words: intellectually, such muddy use of the term fogs any effort to separate cause from effect, to analyse what is being done, by whom, to whom, for what, and with what effect. Politically, leaving the term vague and ghostly permits its conversion to something with a life of its own, making it a force, fetishising it as something that has an existence independent of the will of human beings, inevitable and irresistible.

Thus, for its ardent ideologue Thomas Friedman – a big time columnist of the *New York Times* – globalisation is a new technological-economic system based in the microchip and ruled by an 'electronic herd' of financial investors and multinational corporations, sweeping away everything that came before – capitalism and socialism, the nation-state, imperialism, class struggle, everything. And we have even well-meaning mainstream scholars coming up with what can at best be described as deceptively confusing interpretations.

For John Harriss, for example, ‘globalisation’ is a recent phenomena. He views the use of the term ‘in the last ten years or so’ as ‘an indication that something has been happening out there’, and goes on to describe it in conventional fuzzy terms: ‘...the world is more interconnected and supposedly more interdependent than it was formerly, as a result of changes in the global economy – notably rapid movements of large volumes of money and the increased volume of trade – as well as of changes in communications and in information technology. These trends are related in turn and more controversially, with a variety of political and cultural changes, including perhaps especially the ideas of ‘deterritorialisation’ of the decline of the nation state and of a shift to politics of presence.’ For Amartya Sen globalisation is almost as old as civilisation itself: ‘Over thousands of years, globalisation has progressed through travel, trade, migration, spread of cultural influences and dissemination of knowledge (including of science and technology)’. Sen recognises ‘the dual presence of abject misery and unprecedented prosperity in the world in which we live’ – ‘incomparably richer than ever before, ours is also a world of extraordinary deprivation and staggering inequality’ – to end up urging support for globalisation ‘in the best sense of that idea’, and pleading: ‘what is needed is a fairer distribution of the fruits of globalisation’. Globalisation’s historically specific reality today is evaded through an appeal to its so-called ‘idea in the best sense’, which only adds to the prevailing fuzziness and confusion in the use of this term or concept.

Be that as it may, there are many reasons to doubt that ‘globalisation’ represents an accurate account of the phenomena it purports to describe. On the other hand, there are good reasons to treat it, in its current usage, as an ideological mystification.



As a theoretical concept, globalisation came up in the late 1960s and early 1970s to account for a recent complex of developments in the global economy, particularly the major expansion and conquest of markets by the multinationals, seeking to present this international capitalist expansion in a favourable light, an alternative to Marxist vocabulary with its concepts of imperialism, capitalism, etc. In its current widely accepted usage, acquiring new credibility with the collapse of ‘Soviet socialism’, the concept is characterised by two distinct emphases. In the first place, linked to what has been called the third technological revolution, this internationalisation of capital has come to be viewed as a tide sweeping over borders in which technology and irresistible market forces

transform the global system in ways beyond the power of anyone to do much to change. The view is often buttressed by a kind of technological determinism where the new electronic technologies make globalisation not only possible or necessary, but inevitable. Globalisation is viewed as an entity in itself, an inevitable, irreversible natural process, which independently of any human will or politics is now taking over and transforming the world. In its second distinctive emphasis, globalisation is seen as a historical rupture of a qualitative kind from the changes that have been occurring in capitalism since its inception. The changes now taking place represent a distinctive and unique kind of 'epochal shift' – a notion which these days runs as a kind of *leitmotif* through a wide spectrum of intellectual currents, where 'post' is the presiding buzzword. We are told that we are now, since the early 1970s to be precise, living through an epochal shift, the birth of a new era, a major qualitative leap so different from the earlier changes in the process of capitalist development that the very logic of capitalism stands superseded. In the globalised world of today there is no capitalism with its exploitation and oppressions, its classes and class struggles, its structural defects and explosive antagonisms, its chronic problems or crises. Imperialism too is now a thing of the past. As such, globalisation is also argued for as a benevolent phenomenon, an almost automatic solution to all the encountered problems and contradictions of our economy, if not our society as a whole – very much like the once similarly hailed and revered notion of 'invisible hand', Adam Smith's assurance that went so grievously sour as soon as the logic of *capitalist* market asserted itself.

Around this notion of a technology-driven 'globalisation' has grown a new orthodoxy, that of 'a dematerialised world', which yet again suggests supersession of capitalism as an economic system and therefore obsolescence of the associated categories of analysis. In a recent article, speaking of 'the Myth of Weightless Economy', Ursula Huws has written:

'The Death of Distance', 'Weightless World', the 'Connected Economy', the 'Digital Economy', the 'Knowledge-Based Economy', the 'Virtual Organisation'. All these phrases were culled from the titles of books published in the six months prior to writing this essay, in spring, 1998. They could have been multiplied many times: 'virtual', 'cyber', 'tele-', 'networked' or even just 'e-' can, it seems, be prefixed interchangeably to an almost infinite range of abstract nouns. Without even straying from the field of economics, you can try 'enterprise', 'work',

'banking', 'trade', 'commerce', or 'business' (although the device works equally well in other areas: for instance 'culture', 'politics', 'sex', 'democracy', 'relationship', 'drama', 'community', 'art', 'society', 'shopping' or 'crime').

A consensus seems to be emerging – in economics as in other fields – that something entirely new is happening: that the world as we know it is becoming quite dematerialised (or, as Marx put it, 'all that is solid melts into air') and that this somehow throws into question all the conceptual models which have been developed to make sense of the old material world. We are offered a paradoxical universe: geography without distance, history without time, value without weight, transactions without cash. This is an economics which sits comfortably in a Baudrillardian philosophical framework, in which all reality has become a simulacrum and human agency, to the extent that it can be said to exist at all, is reduced to the manipulation of abstractions.

The ideological-political implications are obvious. As in the current conventional conception of 'globalisation', capitalism, the historically specific capitalist processes, the capitalist exploitation of human beings and natural resources, simply disappear. The frenetic and feverish manner in which the information revolution is hyped, makes it appear that the entire system of organised capitalism dating back to the Industrial Revolution (and even earlier) is being displaced by a new age of 'the electronic republic' and 'digital futurologies' where information or 'knowledge' is the only source of value and work is something contingent and delocalisable if not dispensable, where the demand or need to produce material means of living, indeed any assertion of the physical claims of the human body in the here-and-now is an old-fashioned concern, where 'the computer', lord and master of it all, refashions economy and society, human beings themselves, in its own image.

As capitalism goes out of sight, 'globalisation' as a universal category of analysis displaces the critical socialist concepts of 'capitalism', or 'imperialism', and together with its technological determinism undercuts any notion of radical or systemic transformative politics. Any kind of anti-capitalist project is ruled out. A natural, inevitable process, any resistance to 'globalisation' is futile. There is no alternative but to accept its dictates. 'Globalisation' thus disarms any opposition to almighty capital, becomes an ideological tool instilling a certain

fatalism in the working people, nations and states to induce them to follow policies of adjustment to the demands of global capitalism, at home and abroad.

The conventional theorising over ‘globalisation’ – ‘globaloney’ it has been called – mystifies the reality of our world. Postulating an utterly fictitious world of superseded capitalism, it makes capitalism safe against criticism and opposition and using the argument of ‘inevitability’, it wants us to believe that in this globalised world there is no alternative to the meek acceptance of the conditions necessary for its trouble-free functioning, which in effect means trouble-free functioning of the global capitalist system.

It only needs to be added that today quite a few on the left, indeed a painfully large majority, too has succumbed to the infashion ‘globloney’ of the right. This left has presently joined the right in accepting that ‘There Is No Alternative’ – not just no alternative to capitalism but to a more or less (the right goes for more, the left somewhat less) ruthlessly ‘flexible’ capitalism.



Globalisation, however, is nothing qualitatively new in the history of bourgeois society, it is a process that has gone on for a long time, in fact ever since capitalism came into the world as a viable form of society four or five centuries ago. An ever-changing system, capitalism was born and grew, and grew to maturity only as a world system. In other words, capitalism has always been a global or globalising system, one moving inexorably towards ‘globalisation’ from its very inception. The most significant elements of what is called globalisation have always been part of capitalist development, even if the specific forms and features of this development including globalisation – that is, the global process of capital expansion and accumulation – have been different in different periods (including our own). That capitalism is in its innermost essence an expanding system both internally and externally was pointed out by Marx a long time ago. Once rooted, propelled by the law of accumulation of capital, it both grows and spreads. The classic analysis of this double movement is of course Marx’s *Capital*. But the *globalising* nature of capitalism was diagnosed and emphasised by him more than 150 years ago in the *Communist Manifesto* itself. Marx has been proved uncannily right about many things but perhaps nowhere has he been vindicated more completely than in his account of capitalist expansion or globalisation. Here, for example, are a couple of passages from the *Manifesto*: ‘The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country ... All

old-established national industries have been destroyed or are being destroyed. They are dislodged by new industries, whose introduction becomes a life and death question for all nations, by industries that no longer work up indigenous raw material, but raw material drawn from the remotest zones; industries whose products are consumed not only at home, but in every quarter of the globe. In place of the old wants, satisfied by the productions of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes... in place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal interdependence of nations...'. Again: 'The need of a constantly expanding market for its productions chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere...'. Yet again: the bourgeoisie 'batters down all Chinese walls' and 'compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilisation into their midst, i.e. to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image.' Of course, these passages from the *Communist Manifesto* (1848) are not a simple description of contemporary reality. A statement of general and long-term processes that have been part of capitalist development from the beginning, they are more an anticipation of the future that is ours today. They represent an analysis which is much truer today than when the *Manifesto* was composed. It is true that Marx underestimated the durability of capitalism and how long it could keep on expanding. But for all today's fashionable talk about 'globalisation', it would be hard to find a more effective description of what is happening today than what he wrote 150 odd years ago.

Marx's is analytically the most sophisticated recognition of capitalism as a system that is uniquely expansionary and international, one tangentially 'global' since the very beginning, but a more than working recognition of this dimension of capitalism was common to classical thinkers such as Adam Smith, and later to most mainstream economists before the First World War. Multinational manufacturing firms appeared in the middle of the 19th century and were well established by the beginning of the 20th century to make internationalisation of capital a common preoccupation not only of Marxist theorists like Luxemburg, Lenin or Bukharin. Analysts have pointed out that foreign trade and overseas income was a greater percentage of GNP in Europe during the late 19th century than at the end of the 20th century, that world financial markets in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were more fully integrated than they were before or have

been since. As a commentator for the *Financial Times* of London has recently put it: 'Before 1914 the world economy was in many respects as integrated as it is today and in certain respects more so'. This integration, with capital and commodities freely traversing the globe, had also made for internationalisation of social and economic life. This is how John Maynard Keynes saw it: 'The inhabitant of London could order by telephone, sipping his morning tea in bed, the various products of the whole earth, in such quantity as he might see fit, and reasonably expect their early delivery upon his doorstep; he could at the same moment and by the same means adventure his wealth in the natural resources and new enterprises in any quarter of the world, and share, without exertion or even trouble, in their prospective fruits and advantages; or he could decide to couple the security of his fortunes with the good faith of the townspeople of any substantial municipality in any continent that fancy or information might recommend. He could secure forthwith, if he wished it, cheap and comfortable means of transit to any country or climate without passport or other formality. But, most important of all, he regarded this state of affairs as normal, certain, and permanent, except in the direction of improvement... The internationalisation of (social and economic life) was nearly complete...' Thus, if 'globalisation' is no novelty in the history of capitalist development, the associated notion of 'a borderless world' too is no recent invention.



There is an unending hype, 'infobabble' really, over information technology which, together with globalisation it has so remarkably facilitated, is supposed to usher in the epochal shift that takes us into a world beyond and better than capitalism, indeed makes the very notion of capitalism historically irrelevant. Involving two closely linked technological departure points, the computer and instantaneous communication system, a fusion as it were of computing and communications (networks) that has developed in an explosive trajectory in recent years, this technological development has been not unjustifiably described as a revolution, 'information revolution', that is. The importance, however ambiguous, of this revolution for our economy and social life is not to be denied. For good or ill, it has enormously significant implications for the present and future of humankind – implications that socialists need to take serious note of. As Reg Whitaker, in a most perceptive essay on the subject, has insisted, 'this revolution cannot be ignored by those seeking real alternatives. Cyberspace is a new

reality, a spectre haunting the world. As some of the old terrains of struggle shrink, cyberspace expands as a new terrain to be studied, and to be acted upon.' But this revolution itself does not either change the structural logic of capitalism or offer, or make for, any alternatives to the present social order.

New information technology, as with technological innovations in the past, certainly makes people better at doing things they have always done. But even here we don't need to be breathless about it. It is difficult to see how, as claimed, the nature of manufacturing has been 'fundamentally altered' by it. The evidence so far shows only a very small impact on productivity from the large investment made in information technology in the United States or for that matter elsewhere. Production has indeed been globalised, but it remains doubtful if the telecommunications revolution has really had a major impact. It has been suggested that 'the invention of relatively simple things, like steamship transport, did more for world trade than digitalised data transmission through fibre optic cables.' In other words, its truly remarkable technological innovations and the hype over them notwithstanding, in the ultimate analysis, 'information revolution' is only another case of incremental change in the way we do things.

'Information revolution' is emphatically *not* itself an answer to the problems we face – problems primarily born of capitalism and its structural logic. These are problems we ourselves have to solve, with or without the aid of technology. 'Information is power', or the computer as 'empowerment' do have a certain, though ambiguous, validity. But 'infobabble' over such propositions has little to do with any notion of redistribution of wealth and power in our society. A computer in every office or home will not somehow solve the problem of unemployment or economic crisis or regional economic decline and imbalances. The poor cannot 'unload' from the NET food and shelter or equitable economic development they are denied by the capitalist market. Information technology does not and cannot in any way alter capital's drive to accumulate or its quest for higher profits and stock prices. Instead it has only served to make this quest more penetrating and effective. As with other technologies under capitalism, information technology too is today subservient to capitalist imperatives of accumulation and profit maximisation. Command over information and its transmission has already become the key to success in the capitalist marketplace. A wholesale commodification of information by capital is on and the much celebrated

‘cyberspace’ is taking on the appearance of a ‘vast mysterious collection of data looming like mega-fortresses fiercely guarded by giant corporations – while the “real world” wallows in urban squalor, petty criminality, violence and tawdry escapism.’ This is how Reg Whitaker has posed and answered the key question: ‘Does the Information Revolution offer an alternative? Yes and no. It does offer an *alternative* capitalist future, but it is unlikely, under present circumstances, to offer an alternative to capitalism’.



Capitalist development, given the contradiction inherent in capitalism, has always been a crisis-ridden, bumpy and uneven affair. It is no different with globalisation as a capitalist process. Its progress too has been essentially bumpy and uneven, and shot through with local, regional and more than regional crises. There have been periods of ‘high’, globalisation and periods in which economic flows have, to a greater or lesser degree, turned inward in response to changed economic and political conditions. Thus, the second half of the 19th century witnessed an escalating thrust of ‘globalisation’ as a part of capitalism’s normal existence. It continued in the 20th century and globalisation was really intense until 1914. Two world wars, a great depression, revolution in Russia and working class struggles somewhat interrupted this trend, creating what Hobsbawm has described as an interlude of national economics between eras of international economics. This interlude saw the domestic economies turn in on themselves and there was a prolonged shift to a period of ‘national development’, of ‘largely delinked, managed national economies’, as one description has it – the so-called Keynesian era which was the unique product of a catastrophic period for capitalism in the first half of the 20th century. Once a certain degree of economic and political recovery was achieved, there was an increasing and uneven effort from the 1950s onwards to return to active globalisation. The effort picked up with the onset of the crisis in the 1970s, when together with a return to its normal functioning at home, capitalism resumed its path towards internationalisation with a vengeance, to be soon provided a new specific thrust by the collapse in the East. The erosion and disintegration of Keynesianism (with its regulated capitalism and welfare state) and the onset of so-called ‘globalisation’ not only reflected the depth of the new crisis but also demonstrated capital’s inherent, and now increasingly desperate, drive to create a world economy ‘in its own image’. Such has been the changing trajectory of globalisation in our time.

Viewed in this perspective, the increasing integration of national economies and the globalisation of trade and investment are not new phenomena, only a new phase in the normal existence of capitalism as a global system. What has taken place, far from being some new departure, is rather a return, a turning back to trends that marked the ‘high’ globalisation of the 19th century, a resumption of the drive that had temporarily slowed down during the intervening period of ‘low’ globalisation. And with this resumed globalisation, given the depth of the current economic crisis, we are also back – with a new vengeance this time – to pre-Keynesian economics and ideological hegemony of *laissez faire*.

II

The talk about ‘globalisation’ as ‘a new era’ or ‘an epochal shift’ represents more an ideological-political phenomenon than a serious analysis of the new situation. What is important, therefore, is not to indulge in such talk but to notice the specificities of the current phase of globalisation, each of which can be seen to be directly relevant to what is happening in Indian politics today, all that is needed, as I said earlier, is a little reason and ability to interconnect.

In the sphere of economy proper, the most important specificity to be noticed about the current phase of globalisation is its radical departure from the way capitalism existed during the previous period of post-war boom, the ‘golden age’ of capitalism. Capitalism of this period was marked by Keynesian strategies of moderate macro-economic regulations and the accompanying limits on capital’s unending thirst for more profits, collectively known as the ‘welfare state’, which, incidentally, saved capitalism from its own self-destructive tendencies – as manifested, for example, in the Great Depression – and also helped it acquire a much-needed ‘human face’ against the internal and external threat of socialism. The onset of a structural crisis of capitalism, which gives every sign of being irreversible, has changed all that. The 1970s saw the world economy going into a downturn that has worsened through every recession since; the gap between business cycles is getting smaller, barely does recovery begin, the growth falters. ‘Globalisation’, with its neo-liberalism, is essentially a response to this structural crisis of capitalism and signifies a return, as it were, from an atypical to typical capitalism, from the aberration that was the post-war ‘golden age’ with its welfare state to a period of

normal. 'free-market' capitalism. For capital to remain 'competitive' in the global market, Keynesian state interventions in the economy have to go. Nor can capitalism now afford to wear a 'human face'; with the threat of socialism having receded, perhaps, it also does not need to wear it any more. The exceptional circumstances that made it possible for the working classes in the West, especially Western Europe, to fight and curb the exploitative logic of capitalism have passed into history. That these working classes are today fighting to defend their hard won gains should not obscure the fact that even in the advanced capitalist West it is no longer capitalism with a human face but back to the laws of the jungle of a normal capitalism. The state must revert to its traditional way of serving capitalism, that is, it must now act as the main agent of globalisation. And this is indeed how the state is now acting.

'Globalisation' abroad has its own specificity in the new phase. If at home 'globalisation' is capitalism all over again, albeit now showing itself in its nakedness, abroad it is imperialism all over again, albeit in a new shape or form, when, the logic of capitalism now becomes more or less universal, imperialism achieves its ends not so much by the old forms of military expansion but primarily by unleashing and manipulating the exploitative and destructive impulses of the capitalist market. This however is not to deny the continuing importance of wars or the use of military means for imperialist purposes. We have the most obvious contemporary example of the United States' use of its military power to grab control of the oil resources of the Middle East and Central Asia and to establish pax-Americana in the world, that is, keep the world 'free' as a freely exploitable area in which giant American corporations can do business on their own terms.

Beyond these two specific features, globalisation in its current phase has an aspect to it which needs to be specifically noted. Post-Soviet collapse, capitalism's impulse to globalise or universalise has so realised itself that capitalism is today a truly global or universal system, such as it has never been before. This has meant universalisation of its polarisations between rich and poor, exploiters and exploited. Its success, so to speak, has carried its failures with it, which however is nothing new or surprising. This is how it has always been with capitalism – exceptional productivity and most inequitable distribution, production of wealth and poverty at the two poles of society. More significant, however, is the fact of universalisation, and therefore sharpening of its contradictions and self-destructive tendencies,

including the inherent tendency to overproduce, to regular crises of overproduction. Historically, capitalism could and was indeed able to resolve or 'displace' these contradictions and escape the consequences of its self-destructive tendencies primarily by deeper penetration within and expansion abroad. To the extent it has become universal, the old escape routes are now that much less available. As Ellen Meiksins Wood has written:

Now, capitalism has no more escape routes, no more safety valves or corrective mechanisms outside its own internal logic. Even when it's not at war, even when it's not involved in the old forms of inter-imperialist rivalry, it's subject to the constant tensions and contradictions of capitalist competition. Now, having more or less reached its geographic limits and ended the spatial expansion that supported its earlier successes, it can only feed on itself; and the more successful it is on its own terms – in other words, the more it maximises profit and so-called growth – the more it devours its own human and natural substance.

The ultimate success of capitalism, its universal ascendancy, has also brought it to the brink of its worst failure. This condition is an important component of the structural crisis – a 'depressed continuum', Meszaros has called it – that today grips global capitalism. That some countries are doing well even in the midst of this crisis, or have cyclical upswings, is something that has happened throughout the history of capitalism and does not negate the reality of this crisis, the intractable problems that capitalism as a global system is now faced with.

Of course, capitalism today is not as Marx saw and studied it in the 19th century. It has undergone changes, important changes, since then, and it is necessary to recognise them for understanding, and struggling against, contemporary capitalism. But as Raymond Williams once warned, in taking note of what has changed in capitalism, we must not make the mistake of underestimating everything that has not changed. And this 'everything', above all, includes the structural logic of capitalism, the law-like tendencies of its capital-accumulative process which, as Marx explicated, have meant uneven and unequal development within and across countries. The universalisation of capital does not mean the universalisation of capitalist prosperity, success, industrialisation or development, as promised by the

globalisers. On the contrary, it can only mean the universalisation of capitalist polarisation, for such is the structural logic of capitalist development. And this is precisely what has been happening. Capitalism's tendency to generate wealth for the relatively few and poverty for the many is as much in evidence today in both the 'developed' North and the 'developing' South as it was in the 19th century England of 'dark satanic mills' that Marx and Engels so perceptively analysed. Now, as then, the poor grow poorer as the rich grow richer. Polarisation abroad has meant the marginalisation and increasing impoverishment of whole regions outside the advanced capitalist countries. The class polarisations of capitalism are as much evident in the North-South divide as in the growing impoverishment of so-called 'underclasses' within advanced capitalist countries.

We may here specifically notice a key feature of contemporary globalisation that it retains from its earlier phases: its driving forces are centred in the imperial states and the dominant classes within these states who own or control and run the multinational corporations and banks duly backed by the international financial institutions. Thus we have, as in the past, 'globalising' nations and classes and the 'globalised', a hierarchical system of power, exchange and benefits: there are wealthy creditors and bankrupt debtors, super-rich speculators and impoverished peasants and unemployed workers, imperial states that direct international financial institutions and subordinate states that submit to their dictates, and so on. There has been much 'globaloney' over 'interdependence of nations' and its 'globally shared benefits'. Surely 'imperialism' is a more useful concept to comprehend this aspect of the reality of our globalised world.

Skewed distribution of benefits is however only one issue. 'Globalisation' is really the globalisation of capitalism's basic dynamics, including the contradictions inherent in its relentless drive to maximise profit and accumulate. As a consequence, we not only have a ravaging of humanity, mass unemployment and underemployment and active impoverishment of large populations at the centre and in the periphery of global capitalism and a destruction of natural environment all over the globe but also a global economy characterised by over accumulation, enormous excess capacity and crisis of profitability, an ever-growing structure of debt, speculative volatility and financial turmoils and, typically, by recurring economic crises and prolonged downturns like the current one. By virtue of its inherent

contradictions, though globally dominant, capitalism yet remains fraught with instabilities, beset as it is by economic breakdowns even in its most dynamic centres of investment and trade and by a succession of national and regional crises – in Mexico, East and South-East Asia, Russia, Brazil, Argentina, etc. – produced by the globalist restructuring of recent decades.



In politics, ‘Globalisation is only another word for US domination’ as Henry Kissinger has arrogantly claimed. From the other end, posing the issue equally bluntly, Fredric Jameson has written: ‘...when we talk about the spreading power and influence of globalisation, aren’t we really referring to the spreading economic and military might of the US? And in speaking of the weakening of the nation-state, are we not actually describing the subordination of the other nation-states to American power, either through consent and collaboration, or by the use of brute force and economic threat?’ He adds: ‘Looming behind the anxieties expressed here is a new version of what used to be called imperialism, which we can now trace through a whole dynasty of forms. An earlier version was that of the pre-First World War colonialist order, practised by a number of European countries, the US and Japan; this was replaced after the Second World War and the subsequent wave of decolonisation by a Cold War form, less obvious but no less insidious in its use of economic pressure and blackmail (‘advisers’; covert putsches such as those in Guatemala and Iran), now led predominantly by the US but still involving a few Western European powers. Now perhaps we have a third stage, in which the United States pursues what Samuel Huntington has defined as a three-pronged strategy: nuclear weapons for the US alone; human rights and American-style electoral democracy; and (less obviously) limits to immigration and the free flow of labour. One might add a fourth crucial policy here: the propagation of the free market across the globe. ‘Jameson sees’ the US (and such utterly subordinated satellites as the UK)’ as playing ‘the role of the world’s policemen’ and enforcing ‘their rule through selected interventions (mostly bombings, from a great height) in various alleged danger zones.’

In its pursuit of global domination America has, more evidently than ever before, emerged and self-identified itself, as the country with the power and responsibility to police the world in defence of capitalism. A leading diplomatic historian, Gerald Haines (who is also the senior historian of

the CIA) has observed that after the Second World War, the United States 'assumed, out of self-interest, responsibility for the welfare of the world capitalist system.' President Clinton and his Secretary of State Madeleine Albright saw the US as the world's only indispensable nation', and Anthony Lake, his National Security Advisor, in line with a former such Advisor Brezhnev's public defence of the 'necessity' of American leadership in the world, even announced a so-called 'Clinton Doctrine': 'Throughout the Cold War, we contained a global threat to market democracies', now we can 'consolidate the victory of democracy and open markets' – the formula however is redundant since the latter adequately captures what is really meant by 'democracy'. More recently (1999), in his much noticed 'Manifesto for the Fast World' in the *New York Times Magazine*, the well-known columnist Thomas Friedman has argued that since the United States is the country that benefits most from globalisation, it is also the one that has to take the main responsibility for sustaining it. 'Sustaining globalisation is our overarching national interest ... Globalisation-is-US' This, he clarifies, is different from 'old-fashioned imperialism, when one country physically occupies another.' Now, it's a matter of maintaining 'an abstract globalisation system.' And this 'requires a stable geopolitical power structure, which simply cannot be maintained without the active involvement of the United States.' Bush Junior has since, in his own way, made abundantly clear what this means.

The US domination today has an interesting ideological dimension in that America has sought a 'noble' or 'saintly' guise for its policies abroad. It pursues them in the name of 'human rights' and 'democracy' which only reveals how cynical or hypocritical the sole superpower's global politics can be. Take the UN Declaration of Human Rights. Half of it concerns social and economic rights. The West largely rejects them, the US totally. They limit themselves primarily to what they call civil and political rights. This apart, if the record of the UN on human rights is painfully bad, it is understandably so because it has been, and still is, dominated by the United States: the country with innumerable violations of human rights all over the world, from the Philippines at the turn of the last century to installing Marcos there after the war; from the invasion of Guatemala, the Dominican Republic and Grenada to the Vietnam war; from installing Suharto in Indonesia (and more than one million murdered in the course of Suharto's US-backed counter-revolution) to imposing and sustaining dictatorial

regimes in Latin America (including Pinochet in Chile) and Africa; not to mention the authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, the Colonel's Dictatorship in Greece and the death of one million children in Iraq as a result of sanctions continued to be imposed by the United States and rubber stamped by the UN, with the total subservience of its allies, before it again attacked Iraq in a blatant violation of international law. America's interpretation of human rights, replacing the common interests of humanity with the particular interests and arbitrary actions of the United States, violates any meaningful conception of human rights. Even otherwise America's extremely selective concern with human rights in pursuit of its interests abroad has been justifiably regarded as a new form of imperialism, 'Human Rights Imperialism'.

It is no different with America's concern for democracy. The essential criterion once again is what best serves American interests. American policy makers have had no hesitation in lining up on their side some of the most corrupt dictatorial regimes that there were, often hailing them as members of their 'free world'. These have included the apartheid regime of South Africa, Syngman Rhee and the military rulers of South Korea, Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines, Lon Nol and other dictators of South Vietnam, Ayub Khan and Yahya Khan of Pakistan, the Shah of Iran, the Duvaliers of Haiti, Pinochet of Chile, Suharto of Indonesia and any number of other tyrants or authoritarian rulers in Africa, Central and South America and the Middle East, including, once upon a time, Saddam Hussein in Iraq. It is to them that American aid and armaments have overwhelmingly gone. 'He may be a son of a bitch, but he is *our-son-of-a-bitch*'. This has been Washington's refreshingly honest view of the Somozas, Batistas and Duvaliers of the world. Obviously, the absence of democracy is all right so long as a country is supportive of the United States. 'Democracy' like 'human rights' is only an ideological cover for the pursuit of America's more mundane material, that is, imperialist interests abroad.

Ideological deception has its uses, no doubt, but there is nothing like exercise of naked military power to secure and sustain particular imperialist interests and overall global hegemony. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States has acquired a global dominance as the one remaining military super power, indeed the dominant imperialist power in the world. Contrary to the notion that globalisation and the establishment of the world market have made military power redundant, the US maintains, by a very

wide margin, the world's largest military. Empires throughout human history have relied on foreign military bases to enforce their rule and protect their interests, and in this respect Pax Americana is no different from Pax Romana or Pax Britannica. The United States has military bases in sixty-nine countries, with this number on the increase with the wars against Afghanistan and Iraq. The United States totally dominates NATO – recently redefined as a self-legitimizing aggressive force – as well as the Far Eastern military alliances, especially the 'US-Japan Security Treaty'. Despite the publicly proclaimed end of the Cold War, the US military budget remains very large, accounting for fully a third of world spending on arms. For the US ruling class, in view of what it sees as its responsibilities in the global capitalist order – which one scholar has summarised as: 'to keep the system functioning; to control the underlying populations; to safeguard the United States as the centre of the international financial system; to maintain the United States (and, specially, US capitalists/corporations) in the top perch in the imperialist pecking order; and to prevent countries from breaking away from the system of global controls' – it is not enough to have a military bigger than that of any other power; it must be bigger than that of any plausible combination of other powers, and this applies of course not only to the immediate situation but to what might be the situation five or ten years from now, when the potential challenges of today might become real. It is pushing ahead with plans for a capability to fight two major regional conflicts at the same time.

The United States has the world's largest stockpile of weapons of mass destruction, chemical, biological and nuclear, and is the only state ever to have used the nuclear weapons. It is an arch votary of the unequal Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and, even as it regularly arm-twists the minor nuclear nations, has refused to ratify the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). It has unilaterally withdrawn from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty and is busy developing weapons like the nuclear bunker-busting bombs. According to a classified Pentagon report the Bush administration has directed the military to prepare contingency plans to use nuclear weapons against countries it sees as America's immediate or potential enemies, and to build new smaller nuclear weapons for use in certain battlefield situations. Despite objections from its European allies that it is unnecessary and will most likely trigger a new arms race, despite the opposition of Russia and China, despite a protest by as many as 50 Nobel Laureates headed by Hans A. Bethe, one of the architects of the

atom bomb, who have called it a 'wasteful' and 'dangerous' system, the National Missile Defence System remains a priority on the agenda of the United States. Its National Security Strategy, with its policy of military supremacy over the entire earth and the doctrine of pre-emption, is nothing less than the declaration of a new imperial order to be backed up not only by the threat but also the aggressive, pre-emptive employment of overwhelming power against any country not to its liking. Most recently, following upon its yesterday's 'Star Wars Project' or the current 'Missile Defence System' – argued for as 'defensive shields', though nothing of the kind – the United States has gone in for their heavily updated, blatantly offensive successor, codenamed 'Falcon' (Force Application and Launch from the Continental US) – its unmanned delivery vehicles, carrying a payload of 12,000 pounds and flying at speeds of up to 10 times the speed of sound, will be able to strike targets 9,000 nautical miles distant in less than two hours. As John Pike, head of the Washington think tank, Global Security. Org. has commented: 'It is about blowing people up on the other side of the planet even if no country on earth will allow us to use their territory'. The purpose, obviously, is to enable the US to go it alone against whichever country they please to subdue or destroy in their design to achieve world domination.

The global expansion of military power on the part of the hegemonic state of world capitalism is an integral part of economic globalisation. (The other advanced capitalist countries, tied into the system, are also reliant on the US as the main enforcer of the rules of the game). The American ruling class knows that economics are ultimately a matter of politics, that it is relations of power, above all military power, that command the market, that there will be no "global market" without an American military empire. 'The hidden hand of the market will never work without the hidden fist – McDonald's cannot flourish without McDonnell Douglas, the designer of the F-15. And the hidden fist that keeps the world safe for Silicon Valley's technologies is called the United States Army, Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps.' This is how Thomas Friedman, who incidentally was also an adviser to Madeleine Albright, has put it in his article we have noticed earlier. Friedman goes on to quote approvingly from foreign policy historian Robert Kagan: 'Good ideas and technologies need a strong power that promotes those ideas by example and protects those ideas by winning on the battlefield. If a lesser power were promoting our ideas and technologies, they would not have the global currency that they have.'

Naturally, the hidden fist has to come out of hiding from time to time if it is going to make its point. And here the United States has a long history. The Monroe doctrine onwards it is a history of armed interventions or wars along with coercive diplomacy, bloody coups and covert actions against other sovereign states to make the world 'safe' for American business. In the half century since the Second World War alone, on one pretext or another – 'containing communism' 'protecting American lives', 'punishing "rogue" states', 'war on terrorism' or even 'promoting democracy', etc. – America has thus aggressed against countries as far afield as Greece and Cuba, Chile and Vietnam, Brazil, Guatemala and the Dominican Republic, Grenada, Nicaragua, El Salvador and Panama, Angola and Mozambique, Iran, Iraq, Libya and Afghanistan. And the list is far from complete. Here we may also notice that apart from specific economic objectives or military gains, a most significant aspect of America's use of military force since the end of the Second World War – its important wars from Korea to the Balkans, the Gulf and Afghanistan – has been its political objectives: the 'containment' of external enemies or of internal opposition, diverting attention from tricky domestic problems or even the narrower political objectives of electoral advantage through displays of 'toughness' or tough 'nationalism'. That is how it needs to be noted that as a globalising power, America's militarism does not generally have territorial ambitions, it does not seek direct physical control or hegemony over specific colonies. It is, typically, the use of massive displays of force to assert the dominance of global capital so that this capital, particularly the American segment of it, can freely navigate the global economy without hindrance. If at times it has the appearance of a naked display of imperial power for its own sake, without any specific or immediate objectives – and an outright military victory is neither an issue nor even a possible outcome – it is just to show who is boss, that is, to make a general point about US domination of the world, its hegemony over global economy. As one comment has it, 'such display of imperial power only shows that US imperial hegemony can't now rely, if it ever could, on economic superiority alone, and that it depends on periodic display of sheer force. It hardly matters where or for what ostensible purpose, though it helps if the target is non-European or non-white.'



Beyond these economic, political and military aspects, a specific feature of the current situation is the ideological and cultural sweep of capitalist ideas and values that, in its own way, defines the current phase of

globalisation. Capitalism's technological ingenuity has made it possible for its principles to find their way into social, institutional and cultural spaces that even a few decades ago were beyond their reach. Commodity relations and moralities of the market are penetrating into every aspect of our lives, producing profit of course, but also ravaging morals and culture everywhere. A process of culture penetration is on – including what is described as 'McDonaldisation', the American way of life', 'homogenisation or levelling down of cultures', or simply as 'consumerist culture' – whereby the bourgeoisie today 'makes the world in its own image' with an impunity almost unparalleled since Marx wrote these words 150 odd years ago. This culture penetration is not just an extension but integral part of globalisation as imperialist domination. Imperialism has never been merely an economic-military system of control and exploitation. Cultural domination, an effort to penetrate and dominate the cultural life of the popular classes in order to reorder the values, behaviour, institutions and identity of the oppressed peoples to conform with the interests of the imperial classes, was always an integral part of it. So it is now with globalisation as a new, latest form of imperialism. Besides, there are now direct material benefits to be had, as never before. Recognising American economic and cultural domination in the ongoing globalisation, James Petras has written:

US cultural imperialism has two goals – one economic and the other political – to capture markets for its cultural commodities and to establish hegemony by shaping popular consciousness. The export of entertainment commodities is one of the most important sources of capital accumulation and global profits displacing manufacturing exports. In the political sphere, cultural imperialism plays a major role in dissociating people from their cultural roots and traditions of solidarity, replacing them with media created 'needs', which change with every publicity campaign. The political effect is to alienate people from traditional class and community bonds, atomising and separating individuals from each other.

It may be mentioned that religious fundamentalism (especially the Islamic) so rampant today, is significant, partly at least, for its opposition to 'consumerism of the West' or 'the American way of life', the imperialist cultural domination it is resourceless to understand or overcome. But it has acquired this significance

primarily because the traditional left alternatives, in particular the great revolutionary traditions of Marxism and communism seem to have become, for the time being at least, unavailable.

To be particularly noticed is the ideological domination or hegemony that capitalism has come to acquire in the current phase of capitalist globalisation. With capitalism becoming all but universal, it has also become ideologically hegemonic as never before. It is today so powerful and pervasive as to have become invisible, and is all the more powerful for being invisible. You no longer mention or recognise it or even refer to it by its proper name. It is 'globalisation', 'liberalisation', 'structural adjustment', 'economic reform', 'new economic policy' (and with the new votaries from the left in India joining in) 'industrialisation', 'development and progress', even 'civilisation', etc. – that is anything but capitalism. A consensus on behalf of capitalism has emerged that makes it virtually immune against criticism or any discussion of alternatives (which, incidentally also makes nonsense of the much-vaunted pluralism of bourgeois democracy, gaining for it a spurious credibility only by a bizarre blowing up of minor differences among competitors in the politics of 'actually existing capitalism'). Given the collapsed Soviet regime's spurious identification with socialism, bourgeois ideologues have gone to town proclaiming the inevitability and virtues of capitalism. It is not only that the world is noisy with the refrain that 'there is no alternative', that the 'economic reforms' are 'irreversible' and that the world must adjust to the so-called rationality and efficiency requirements of 'the economy', today every human practice, every social relationship, virtually everything under the sun including the natural environment is subject to the requirements of profit-maximisation. As Michael Lowy has noted:

Indeed, never till this end of the 20th century has capital succeeded in exerting such a complete, absolute, undivided, universal, and unlimited sway over the whole world. Never in the past has it had its current ability to impose its rules, its policies, its dogmas, and its interests upon all the nations of the globe. Never have international finance capital and multinational corporations been so out of control by states and peoples. Never before now has there existed such a dense network of international institutions – International Monetary Fund, World Bank, World Trade Organisation – devoted to controlling, governing, and administering human life according to the strict

rules of the capitalist free market and unrestricted pursuit of capitalist profitability. Finally, never in any preceding epoch have all spheres of human life – social relationships, culture, art, politics, sexuality, health, education, sports, recreation – been so completely dominated by capital, so deeply submerged in ‘the icy water of egotistical calculation.’

Underpinning this ideological domination are new information and communication technologies which have added immensely to the power of those in command of the mass media, advertisements and entertainment to control popular consciousness, to turn whole people, like individuals glued to their TV sets, into what the German poet Hans Magnus Enzensberger has called ‘secondary illiterates’, those who need neither memory nor any thinking or learning to sustain themselves. These are of little worth to them, the passive subjects in a world where the reigning ideology is consumerism with its exclusive concern for ‘instant gratification’ and ‘contentment’. A market-driven ‘mass culture’ has come up which on the one hand aims at developing consumer instincts in the people to the utmost and thereby expanding markets for the greater glory of late-capitalist profit-making and, on the other hand, at ideological brainwashing of the people, diverting them from any advanced social ideals and implanting in their minds bland, illusory and often downright false and reactionary views of social and political realities.

A ‘true idiot culture’, Carl Bernstein has called it, where for the ‘first time in history the weird and the stupid and the vulgar are becoming our cultural norm, even our cultural ideal’. Even as a ‘stupid ‘and vulgar’ culture is mass purveyed via television screens, tabloid newspapers, glossy magazines and similar other means, the tendency is to pitch all messages to the lowest level of mental capacity. Knowledge is reduced to slick, pre-digested, easy to understand capsules, inducing people to want simple answers to difficult problems. People’s consciousness is transferred on to philistine, narrow-minded lines, and interest in truth which demands hard, complex and subtle exercise of mind, simply recedes into the background. The overall consequence is a dilution and dispersal of people’s questioning spirit, their angry or combustible sentiments, an emasculation of their critical consciousness. There is general enervation of civil society, its members rendered incapable of ‘Answering back’ as C. Wright Mills once phrased it. According to Jean Baudrillard, the very possibilities of critical examination and reflection are destroyed. In other words, the inundations of consumerism and ‘mass culture’ leave the alienated individuals of contemporary

late-capitalist society eminently vulnerable to capitalism's hegemonic control. Though oppressed and exploited, they are now more open to 'colonisation of the mind' – victims' internalisation of the cliché 'there is no alternative', their willing suspension of ideals and acceptance of a sub-autonomous existence in the interest of maintaining a secondary or even a tertiary position in the obtaining 'reality' – be it the capitalist society or for that matter the global capitalist system. For that is also what the 'Third World mentality' is all about.

So much for globalisation as the context of contemporary Indian politics.

III

To understand 'Indian politics in the age of globalisation', the hard and fateful choices it confronts our people with, it helps to know how we have arrived where we are, with our rulers going in for globalisation as their strategic option. It is not much remembered these days that we were very much a globalised country not so long ago. Before 1947, we were part of a global system, well-integrated into the world market economy. We were globalised, but we did not like it. Our globalisation then also had a name, imperialism, and we struggled against it because it meant – by virtue of its structural logic – accumulation of wealth in England and poverty in India. Like other Third World countries, we wanted to get out of this globalisation. This was a necessary, though not sufficient condition to be able to build a better life for our people. Herein lay the essential meaning of our struggle for freedom. It is significant of our present-day rulers, including those claiming to be successors of Gandhi and Nehru, that they have long forgotten what this struggle was about and would like us all to do the same. But our people need to remember.

Aware of the exploitative logic of the global capitalist market, of centuries of experience of imperialism which provides little evidence of the beneficial effect of foreign investment in countries of the Third World so far as the common people are concerned, and in its own way influenced by the interim successes of the Soviet Union, the post-independence (Nehruvian) national project opted for the strategic goal of a state-led self-reliant development promising economic growth with 'equity and distributive justice' to the people. That it did not work out the way it was intended, that there was a significant degree of economic growth but not much equity or distributive justice for the people, that the project ended up building an India-specific

government-supported capitalism, that the rhetoric of ‘a socialistic pattern of society’ only deceived the people, legitimised the statist-capitalism that was coming up, and created confusion about it as ‘socialism’ that persists to this day and that the failure of this capitalism to deliver was and continues to be misinterpreted as the failure of socialism in India – all this, its why and how, is not my concern at the moment. The point to be noted is that passing through a series of economic and political crises, the national project, such as it was, finally and definitively collapsed in 1991, foregrounding, once again – now in the context of the changed balances of forces in the world following the collapse of the Soviet Union – the question of strategic options for India’s future economic and social development.

Apropos the collapse of the Nehruvian national project, I would like to reproduce here a passage from what I wrote in 1997 on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of India’s Independence:

The evidence of this collapse is there in the disintegration of values and degradation of life all around us, in the continuing poverty of our people and growing consumerism of the elites and a society at once cynical and fearful about the future. It is there in official statistics and pages of the private media and so-called ‘national mainstream’ which, bearing the impress of India’s corrupt and corrupting, somewhat lumpen capitalist development, is an increasingly dirty affair – corrupt, communal and criminalised, a repressively homogenising mainstream. The evidence is there in the visionless and so obviously laboured efforts of the powers that be to flog a tired and flabby patriotism into some semblance of life in this fiftieth year of India’s independence, including Colgate-sponsored selling of *Vande Matarams* on the television by hordes of India’s VIPs and VVIPs. And this evidence is pathetically present in the impotence (or is it hypocrisy?) of the supposedly ‘stirring’ calls being made on the occasion – in Parliament for a ‘second freedom struggle’ and by the Prime Minister to ‘begin the struggle for economic freedom’ ! One wonders what these past fifty years have been about. A Finance Minister took India back into globalisation, asking us not to be afraid of the East India Company, opened up India to the multinationals, on the dishonest plea that ‘the

nation has been living beyond its means' – 'nation' indeed, when a good majority of our people have simply no means to live and most others none to indulge any 'living beyond'! His successor, more honest and ideologically committed, has been publicly pleading with the former globalisers in London to come back to India for another equally long stay (and then gone to town with this pleading in Washington and elsewhere): 'You came to India and stayed for 200 years. Now come prepared to invest and stay for another 200 years, and there will be huge rewards'. The post-colonial national project is indeed over and done with.

The post-independence national project having collapsed, 1991 onwards, India's ruling classes, through their different political formations, notably, the Congress and the BJP, have gone in for 'globalisation' as their new strategic option – a shift from the state-supported capitalism to a privatised 'free market' capitalism and from self-reliance in economic development to reliance on Foreign Direct Investment and the multinationals, a shift euphemistically described as 'economic reforms' which has little to offer to the common Indian people. The much-touted 'growth rates' are no indication of general well-being in a capitalist society; instead, as Amit Bhaduri has pointed out, 'the unprecedented high economic growth on which privileged India prides itself is a measure of the high speed at which India of privilege is distancing itself from the India of crushing poverty. ...the higher the rate of economic growth along this pattern becomes, the greater would be underdevelopment of India'. The so-called 'trickle down', if and when it occurs, is no better than feeding horses with oats so that something passes down to the road for the sparrows, as Galbraith once described it. Over the past decade-and-a-half or so, whatever be the benefits 'economic reforms' has brought to a small section at the top, it has further polarised our society, played havoc with the lives of our common people and pushed them still further into a peripheralised existence within the global capitalist system.

This is nothing surprising. 'Economic reforms' is only a euphemism for capitalist development whose structural logic, as a former the President of Brazil once reported it to the masters in Washington, is: 'the economy is doing fine, the people are not. Chary of using the dread word 'capitalism', even the advocates of globalisation, Joseph Stiglitz, Amartya Sen and others, regularly admit and

lament that ‘the fruits of globalisation’ are not reaching the people and Klaus Schwab (of the World Economic Forum) writes: ‘We are living in an increasingly schizophrenic world, where economies are booming and global signs are promising, but underneath are economic, political and social risks, as well as imbalances and inconsistencies.’

A market-governed economic growth simply cannot deliver ‘inclusive growth’, to use another of the proliferating buzzwords of our time. Instead, it is by its very nature exclusionary, and the logic of the market, with its inevitable winners and losers, only makes for ‘the secession of the successful’, as the economist Robert Reich once phrased it. One look at the economic policies or concerns, their lifestyles and values will reveal how far ‘the successful’ of India’s marketplace have already ‘seceded’ from the vast majority of their supposedly ‘unsuccessful’ fellow countrymen.

Apropos India’s state-supported capitalist development during the Nehru era and later, I had written:

To borrow from Tom Paine’s metaphoric rejoinder to Burke’s attack on the French Revolution, admiration for the ‘plumage’ of India’s ‘national development’ should not prevent us from seeing its failure in ‘the dying bird’. The world indeed looks very different from below, when the poor and oppressed of ‘our nation’ look at it.

This is even more true of the market-led capitalist development during the current era of neo-liberal ‘economic reforms’.



Before proceeding with my argument about what I have elsewhere described as ‘contemporary India’s most important *unraised* political question’, the question of a people’s strategic option, an alternative path of development distinct from and in opposition to that of India’s ruling classes, I would like to touch upon a few aspects or implications of the current shift to globalisation or ‘economic reforms’ which are immediately relevant to several important issues of the present-day Indian politics.

To begin with, it is to be noted that state intervention in the economy was deemed necessary by the then economically and legitimacy-wise politically weak Indian bourgeoisie itself (cf. Bombay Plan, 1944). A major beneficiary of ‘economic growth’ during the Nehru era and afterwards, it soon

developed substantial strength of its own and grew hopeful of new avenues of profit-making at home and abroad in partnership with global capitalism. The shift to globalisation, therefore, can be viewed as a natural progress for the Indian bourgeoisie, signalling a further consolidation of its position and power in the state.

Again, globalisation's shift to 'market economy' is usually justified by the bourgeois ideologues as a response to the failure of state intervention in the economy, more commonly the failure of the public sector. Now, apart from the fact that the public sector – which by itself has no socialist implications – has a successful presence in many capitalist economies and was a roaring success in the erstwhile 'socialist' countries, the public sector in India has not been the kind of failure bourgeois ideologues make it out to be. There are 'the stunning achievements of the National Thermal Power Corporation, Bharat Heavy Electricals, Nalco, the Oil and Natural Gas Commission, the Gas Authority of India or the Indian Oil Corporation' as a knowledgeable scholar has recently pointed out. And even the failure of the public sector in India, such as it has been, is better understood as the failure of Indian democracy whence alone correctives to its malfunctioning or failure could have come, unlike the private sector where correctives come from the market, though often needing to be backed by the state. Therefore, the answer to this failure is a differently working democracy, an effective exercise of people's power in the state, and not a market-based private sector with its record of now well established worse failures.

It may be added that even otherwise Indian democracy is a rather sickly affair and a major, if not the sole achievement of India's 'democratic politics' is that it has managed to give politics itself a bad name: it is a dirty business best left to dirty politicians! That Indian democracy's failure to deliver has come to be raised to the status of a theory, indeed a 'law' of politics ('anti-incumbency', etc.) is as good an indication of the poor state of health of India's democracy and its 'democratic politics' as any other.

Yet again: that the shift to globalisation was unaccompanied by any debate or discussion, serious opposition or questioning, points, among other things, to the essential class character of the politics currently dominant in the country.

Marcuse has said somewhere that the success of a system is when it makes alternatives unthinkable. This is the success that capitalism achieved, or seemed to have achieved, in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse. The reality of capitalism

catching up, the euphoria over this success is long over in most places. But, a Sainath may decry 'corporate hijack' of media agendas and a Bhikhu Parekh may bemoan the country's lack of 'an inspiring moral vision', capitalism's success is resonant in the 'silences' of the public discourse in India and in the Indian ruling elites commitment to 'economic reform'. Capitalism or 'market society' is taken for granted, for them it is the only possible mode of existence. Even as the reality of a Third-Worldist capitalism is painfully there all around us, not only is socialism forgotten (except for occasional denigration), even a discussion of capitalism is conspicuously absent. In the consensus built around the establishment ideology, to think capitalism remains decreed out of fashion. The Congress and the BJP share in this consensus and its ideology – a class ideology, it may be noted, is seldom, if ever, all of one piece; generally it is constituted by many ideas, doctrines, systems of dogma and philosophies which seemingly compete and even contradict each other but are socially supplementary. For the same reason, like the Congress, the BJP represents the interests of India's capitalist class and its allies, which representation is not a matter of class origin, background or membership in the class, or of personal inclinations or convictions but, as Marx put it, 'what makes them representatives (of the class) is the fact that in their minds they do not get beyond the limits which the latter do not get beyond in life, that they are consequently driven, theoretically, to the same problems and solutions to which material interest and social position drive the latter practically.' It is thus that the two parties, or their leaderships are unable to see beyond the limits postulated by the 'economic reforms'. The only economy they know is 'market economy'. The only possible form of development for them is capitalist development. The two are not that different as their leaders think or would have us believe. The differences between the two are important only at the tactical level. Strategically the BJP is as committed to 'economic reforms' as the Congress. That is why it is mistaken to see the BJP only as a communal party and that is how, while its opponents, including the Left, impotently locked themselves in a 'communalism-secularism' trap, the BJP merrily went on implementing the Congress initiated 'economic reforms' without much notice or objection. As Radhika Desai, a Canadian scholar, has noted:

The Indian capitalist class may be senior, practically venerable, among the bourgeoisies of the Third World, and it may have benefited from liberalising economic policies under practically every administration since the late 1970s. But the NDA governments presided over such a massive dose

of the most brazen and unapologetic liberalisation as to constitute a virtual rebirth of the capitalist class, sired by the BJP. Indian capitalists' new filial loyalty cannot be underestimated. The NDA oversaw a vast and ungrudging expansion of practically every sector of the urban industrial economy: finance and financial markets, the media, housing and construction, consumer durables and non-durables of every kind. Privatisation was accelerated, giving a great fillip to the stock markets; the foreign exchange regime was further liberalised; FDI and portfolio investments, including by foreign institutional investors, FIIs, flowed in. Consumer credit to finance lifestyles of international standards (indeed, better, thanks to the cheapness of domestic labour) for a small but very visible stratum of those in business and professions was expanded and liberalised, as was the import regime. The tax burden on the rich was reduced; innumerable small quotas and restrictions on economic activity were lifted; the IT sector boomed, employing thousands of young professionals and arousing unprecedented hopes of upward mobility among thousands of others; and, not least, the objective of closer ties between India and its wealthy 'diaspora' in the metropolises was pursued by taking the first steps towards granting dual citizenship. All talk of the poor and of larger social goals was dismissed routinely as the leftover cant of yesterday's 'licence-permit raj'. It was truly a dream government for the possessing classes.

Needless to say, the effect of these measures on the whole economy was less than spectacular and, on the poor majority, positively disastrous. More than ever, the NDA governments created two nations in India, already home to some of the starkest divides between poverty and wealth. Every criticism from the left had its counterpart in appreciation on the part of the rich, and there is no doubt about a feel-good factor among the propertied elite and foreign interests in India: in fact, an overwhelming pro-BJP sentiment.

This, of course, cost the BJP the 2004 Lok Sabha election. But it was no 'rout' as the opponents' wishful thinking tended to view it (the BJP's tally was 136 seats to 145 to the Congress). The corporate world, happy over the BJP's performance in power, are desperately hopeful about its future as a 'modern'

political party, alternating with the Congress in the much longed-for two-party system in India's parliamentary democracy. The corporates can well do with its *Hindutva* and the accompanying obscurantism. Capitalism needs science and technology, but, as we know from history, capitalist classes have always needed religion and obscurantism too. The BJP's aggressive nationalist posture could well be an advantage in the harsh competitive world of global economy and politics.

Finally, globalisation's shift to market economy has its obvious implications for the future of democracy in India. It is not surprising that its pursuit of the new strategic option, the so-called 'economic reform' had the consequence of the Congress losing its credibility with the people and power to the BJP-led NDA. The NDA Government, now pursued the same 'economic reform' agenda, necessarily producing, in the words of Radhika Desai, 'a feel good factor among the propertied elite and foreign interests in India' and creating 'more than ever...two nations in India, already home of some of the starkest divides between poverty and wealth'. It was 'India shining', but only for a few at the top, with the many below experiencing its structurally *other* reality. Again, it was not surprising that the BJP lost the 2004 Lok Sabha election and its power at Delhi. Back in power on the *aam aadmi* plank, compulsions of electoral politics forcing it to take note of the victim of 'economic reform', the so-called *aam aadmi* ('the common man'), the Congress now again speaks the Nehruvian language of economic growth with equity and social justice, etc. – a Manmohan-Sonia farce, as it were, to Nehru's tragedy, to paraphrase Marx's famous observation on the caricatured re-appearance of historical phenomenon.³ The Congress now seeks 'economic reforms with a human face', something which, symbolic gestures apart – already forced on it by the supporting left – 'economic reform', because of its structural logic, simply cannot deliver – and this puts it at odds with democracy in India. In other words, while some muddling along for sometime is always possible, the structural nature of things being what it is, 'economic reform' and democracy simply don't go together. I do not have to spell out the negative implications.

(It will not be out of place to mention here that the current long-term crisis of global capitalism has compelled it to shed its 'human face' even in the advanced

³ This is how it goes in the opening para of Marx's, *The Eighteenth Brumair of Louis Bonaparte*: 'Hegel remarks somewhere that all facts and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce.'

capitalist West – dismantling, or struggle over dismantling the welfare state has been a distinct feature of economy and politics in the advanced capitalist countries in recent decades. A return to normal or typical capitalism, as we have already noted, is in fact a major aspect of capital's current phase of globalisation as against the welfarist capitalism of the earlier period which was really a conjunctural aberration in capitalism's long history as an exploitative system.)

This also applies to another of our cherished values, secularism, which is integral to India's survival as a democratic polity. If economic reform and democracy do not go together, economic reform and secularism too do not in the sense that in its failure to deliver the economic reform regularly generates a basis for anti-secular developments. The shift to market economy has been accompanied or followed by the rise to prominence of the utterly reactionary, semi-fascist *Hindutva* ideology and politics spelling its own disasters for the present and future of the Indian people. Here it needs to be understood that '*Hindutva*' has come up because our society today provides a continuing social-material basis for the production and reproduction, the rise, sustenance and spread of such ideas or ideologies. One does not have to be a Marxist to understand or recognise this. A long time ago, suggesting that ideas do not rise and prosper through some inherent power of their own, Herbert Spencer had said: 'Ideas wholly foreign to the social state cannot be evolved, and if introduced from without, cannot get accepted, or if accepted die out.' It is the economic, political and moral wreckage left behind by the failure of the Nehruvian project which has provided the 'social state', that is, the necessary social-material basis for the rise and growing acceptance of '*Hindutva*' as religious fundamentalism and a fascistic political ideology. 'Globalisation' or so-called 'economic reform', in its economic, political and moral-cultural consequences is daily piling up more such wreckage, creating more social-material basis for all sorts of fundamentalisms, regressive ideologies and disintegrative politics. That is how the decade of the most vigorous debate over the issue of communalism and equally vigorous advocacy of secularism, the 1990s, was also the decade of the most heinous anti-secular developments and the BJP's rise to power at Delhi. One may well hazard the view that with the globalisation that is on, communalism and its consequences may well be a specific feature of the barbaric situation in India as part of the universal barbarism that capitalism now threatens the world with. That is, if the people do not effectively intervene, and do so in time, with ideology and politics, a strategic alternative, of their own.

IV

The ruling classes of India have through their different political formations, decided to 'secede' from the people and opted for 'globalisation' as their strategic option for the future. The Indian people yet again face the question, whose full implications were somewhat obscured in 1947 due largely to the interim successes of the Soviet Union: what do they do in the current situation of global domination of capitalism? The historical experience in India and elsewhere in the Third World makes it abundantly clear that development which can meet the needs of our people is impossible within the framework of capitalism, national or globalised. Socialism has to be the strategic goal, whatever be the long or short transitional route to it.⁴ Historical experience indeed allows no other choice.

This, however, is not posit socialism as achievable today or tomorrow, or even the day after, but to posit it as people's alternative strategic goal, as the principle governing people's politics which links together their immediate, ongoing and emerging struggles in an ultimate project of revolutionary transformation of society, as the goal of a long transitional process whose specifics and speed will depend on the objective material conditions and the nature and balance of class forces involved at each stage of the struggle for the socialist goal. Immediately it means saying 'no' to globalisation, a 'delinking' from the global capitalist market and opting for a pro-people socialism-oriented autonomous development.

To say 'no' to globalisation is not to argue for any kind of 'autarky' in economic development. Essentially, it is a question of control over what a country produces and what it buys and sells abroad, the terms on which it does business with foreigners and engages in international exchange. More precisely, it is to pose the issue of this development being governed by external imperatives, those issuing from the requirements of the world capitalist market (export-led growth, etc.) and the associated consumerism of the rich, or primarily by internal imperatives, those flowing from an assessment of own resources and the needs of the people. Of course any attempt at saying 'no' to globalisation or 'delinking' is likely to exact a heavy price in many ways, including an unavoidable trade-off between the

⁴ As mentioned earlier, it is socialism not as they built it in the erstwhile Soviet Union but as visualised by its classical tradition: A humane, democratically functioning society providing a superior and advanced form of freedom and self-determination to the people.

requirements of productivity and those of minimising the polarising impact of global capitalism's enormous economic power. But once 'productivism' is abandoned and human welfare has the priority, this need not be a deterrent to adopting the strategy that 'delinking' involves. This strategy, it may be added, is born of historical experience that the more an economy is part of the international network of capitalist trade and finance, the more it becomes dependent on it, the more its domestic economy must adapt to the world price system, the requirement of international finance (including the discipline imposed by the International Monetary Fund), and the capitalist business cycle, with the result that the constraints of the world market become a dominant influence and the country so involved increasingly loses control over its own destiny.

This strategy postulates an effective exercise of people's power in the state, with the state, truly committed to peoples's welfare, undertaking at the very outset a comprehensive programme of eradication of mass poverty, universal primary education, health care, housing, and provision of basic necessities for all. Initiating steps towards redistribution of incomes and development of backward areas will be a priority for the state's active intervention in the economy which even as it covers such areas as foreign relations, production and social distribution, research and training, and the like, will need to secure an effective transitional combination of planning and market forces without letting the market or its values take over. The agrarian revolution benefiting the rural proletariat and small farmers, thereby improving the productive capacity in the rural areas, and laying the basis of cooperative effort and voluntary collectivisation of agriculture should be high on its agenda of economic reconstruction, as should be the transformation of the informal sector into a popularly managed transitional economy. A building up or restructuring of industry is obviously necessary. But it can neither be one based on 'international competitiveness' (that is promoting exports through low costs of local labour) nor on 'import substitution' (promoting production for the consumption of the privileged local classes). Not that all effort in these directions is ruled out; some of it may even be necessary. Only priorities, for years to come, lie elsewhere. The important thing is to develop and organise productive forces in a manner that helps the rural sector leap forward, carries industrialisation to the countryside and in general ensures a pattern of growth which, refusing the wasteful production to satisfy elite consumerism, immediately benefits the popular masses, satisfying their basic needs, needs created and

satisfiable by the redistribution of income. It should be obvious that the overall development of our Third World country today cannot support the First World consumption levels of our elites. What is needed is a diversification and development of internal markets for domestic goods and services governed by the overall principle that, beyond a certain necessary priority charges of an unequal nature, private needs and wants should be satisfied (and this goes for their increasing satisfaction) only at a level at which they can be satisfied for all. Beyond this all increases in the production of consumer goods should be for collective consumption.

Such a socialism oriented pro-people endogenous development process will draw on its own strengths and domestic resources and capacities, including those of the hardworking poor who yet remain the most creative and productive force in society. It will give the common people, an overwhelming mass of workers and peasants, a positive stake in the economy and mobilise them for building a better society as well as for the inevitable struggle against global imperialism and its local allies or partners – an awakened and aroused people are indeed the best defence even against armed aggression. Needless to add, such popular mobilisation and struggle will be all the time necessary to carry through the strategic option that socialism-oriented delinking involves.

What the above strategy in effect demands is that not economics or ‘the market’ but politics, that is people’s politics, is put in command of the economy. ‘Politics in command’ means posing such questions as: growth? But which growth? For what purpose? For whose sake, whose benefit or profit? For what kind of society and within which environment? Are social needs the guide or the market and its profit-making? Is it to get the maximum welfare of all the people, with priority for the needs of the poorest sections and the most backward regions and for the protection of environment? Or is to satisfy the market-induced, ecologically unsustainable consumerist hunger of the privileged part of the population seeking to maintain or attain the ‘high’ living standards of the West? These are questions which are central to any search for a real alternative to capitalism. We must ask: is our goal meeting ‘the needs of the economy’, its ‘anonymous masters’ as they have been called – ‘abstractions such as financial markets, interest rates, exchange rates, commodity prices, indexes and statistical artefacts of all kinds’ – or satisfaction of the needs of the people, allowing citizens the possibility of living as human beings? Is the starting point of our

economic exercises to be calculation of deficits in order to cut them at the cost of the people or a determination of resources needed to satisfy people's needs in order to find or raise them? And our language? Do we practise the obscurantism of GDP, fiscal and revenue deficits, balance of payments, growth rates etc., or speak more humanely in terms of such things as food and clean drinking water, health care and sanitation, housing and education, etc. so that the economy becomes a transparent and accountable means of integrating these basic human needs of the people with a planned use of domestic resources, an use which also takes care of questions of equality, social justice including gender justice, employment, ecologically sustainable development, etc.?

Economic and technological backwardness is often pressed as an argument to counter the plea for such autonomous economic development. {Getting access to the most modern technology is another usual argument for the need to actively participate in world trade). Here, apart from the fact that in India we are not that lacking in technology or the talent for it, two brief observations are in order. In the first place it is useful to recognise that if, despite economic backwardness, the priority is given to the needs of the poorest and most deprived sections of the people, there is much that can be done at the outset even in absence of growth of productive forces. The redistribution of wealth and the use of idle or under utilised human and material resources, their more productive deployment, can bring quick improvement in health, education and general living conditions of large masses of people. Early years of post-revolutionary societies in the Soviet Union and elsewhere provide ample evidence of this achievement which could be the basis for further development along socialist lines.

In the second place, once we overcome the fetishism of science and technology – which (as, for example, with Nehru's 'temples of modern India', etc.) attributes to them properties or power they do not possess, and at times even expects them to do the job of a social revolution which they simply cannot – and, as with economic development so with technology, ask the basic question: 'technology for what purpose?', the argument for getting access to the most modern Western technology via globalisation – even if that was certain which it most certainly is not – loses much of its force. If the purpose is to satisfy the consumerist hunger of the privileged part of the population and therefore supply it with the most modern gadgets, designs, and goodies of the West, then rushing into globalisation is indeed

understandable. But if the purpose or priority is to meet the needs of all the people for decent food, clothing and shelter, clean water, proper sanitation and health protection, education and cultural opportunities and the like, then devoting scarce resources to the most modern technology will only be wasteful because there is little in the latest technology of the West that would make a significant contribution. In fact what is most useful and relevant in technology, Western or otherwise, for improving the way of life of the masses is widely known. Most of this technology is already available at home and what else is needed is obtainable in the normal course of managed trade.

‘Politics in command’, that is a socialism-oriented development really involves making a fundamental and principled choice, namely, divorcing the criteria of rationality in economic-social life from those that govern the market-based system of capitalism. ‘Delinking’, is making a similar choice in relation to global capitalism. No autarky, it is yet reversing the process of peripheral ‘adjustment’ to global capitalism, that is subordinating external relations to the logic of socialism-directed internal development. Instead of our country adjusting its internal agendas to the world expansion of capitalism, to the imperatives of global capitalism, it is the imperatives of internal socialism-oriented development which must have the primacy.

Finally, a few words about this thing called ‘development’ which must not be assumed to be synonymous with capitalist development. That the initial modern economic and industrial development, that in the West, occurred in the capitalist form is no reason to believe that this is the only way it can take place. The man who best studied and theorised this development certainly did not think so. Marx was categorical in rejecting the idea that this was the path ‘every people is fated to tread’. He in fact deemed the capitalist path not ‘worthy of our human nature’. This apart, the concept of ‘development’ is by nature ideological in the sense that it is suggestive of something desirable, involving the overarching question as to what kind of society we, as human beings, want to have. Surely it is people and not ‘economic growth’ or productivity that must come first in such a society. It has to be a humane society that fosters cooperation, solidarity and respect for universal ethical values, and makes for a non-alienated, ‘truly rich human life’ that Marx spoke of. Of course such a society is impossible without basic material security and need satisfaction. But to believe that you can assure need satisfaction through greed, private acquisitive drives, universal competition and strife – the values of capitalism – and through the capitalist

production process which, as Marx said, turns the worker into ‘an automatic motor of a fractional operation’ and ‘cripples his body and mind’, and yet hope for a humane society of cooperation and solidarity and social well-being, is utopianism of the worst kind. Subordinating humanity to economics, to imperatives of the market, capitalism commodifies life and undermines and rots away the relations between human beings which constitute societies. Its ethos of the market place – competition, egoism, aggression, alienation, universal venality, in short ‘the rat race, its pseudo-moral principles’, as Keynes once put it, ‘which have hag-ridden us for 200 years (and) by which we have exalted some of the most distasteful of human qualities into the position of the highest virtues’ , create a moral vacuum in which nothing counts except what the individual wants and can grab, here and now. At the end of it all, even when wants are satisfied, the people are ever more subordinated, ever less free, ever more flattened and made passive by the dictatorship of consumerism that arbitrarily shapes values, imposing on them the heavy burden of uniformity. The values of difference, individualisation (not individualism), all-sided development of man, of human freedom itself, disappear in the market place which is proclaimed to be free. As *human beings*, people simply don’t fit into capitalism. A capitalist society is not the society we want to have. However poor or backward today, we need to *move away* from capitalism-oriented development and, however slowly or falteringly, *move towards* building a humane, democratically functioning socialist society that fosters equality, cooperation, solidarity and respect for universal ethical values.



I had at the outset of my lecture spoken of the hard and fateful choices our people face today. One that encompasses them all (and which I have been discussing) concerns India’s path of development. Do we accept the globalisation dictated capitalist path of development our rulers have opted for, which polarises our people and peripheralise them within a global capitalist system? Or do we struggle for a socialism-oriented development with its promise of a humane, democratic and ecologically respectful even if economically less prosperous society, providing a life of security and fulfilment for all?

It is my argument that we choose the latter. This implies, among other things, that we learn from the past experience with economic development, avoid

its negative consequences, for example, the damage that capitalist development regularly inflicts upon human beings and natural environment, that we reject the supposedly Marxist fascination for ‘the development of production forces’ that bedevilled the erstwhile ‘socialist’ economies and the obsession with ‘economic growth’ that plagues a capitalist economy, that we better negotiate the necessary trade-offs between economic development and social justice, between requirement of productivity or efficiency and environmental sustainability or quality life which is not entirely a matter of material progress or economic growth. In other words, we have the opportunity ‘to do something new’, the all important option of a path of development which subordinating economy to humanity, plans and develops it in a way that is, in Marx’s words, ‘worthy of our human nature.’

Given the current balance of forces at the national level, it is likely that the struggle for this option will *initially* come up at the level of India’s state politics. Apropos this perspective, I would like to reproduce here a passage from what I wrote recently as a critical comment on the CPM politics in West Bengal:

It is simply inconceivable that there can ever be a situation where socialist principles do not indicate what can be done and what should not be done in the light of these principles. With politics, that is people’s politics, in command, socialism-oriented initiatives are indeed possible at the state and local levels in the left-ruled states. The need is for the CPM to mobilise all the resources within and without the left parties to work out an alternative path of development geared to *the strategic goal* of socialism, implement whatever part of it is implementable at the state and local levels in the states where the left is in power, and mobilise the people elsewhere for it, with primacy given to extra-parliamentary struggles. This will make the left-ruled states an example for the rest of the country and help the Party and the left to rally all the radical forces in the country – NAPM, ultra-left formations, militant NGOs, etc. – to emerge as a genuine and effective alternative to the ruling class politics at the centre, with its own agenda of pro-people, self-reliant socialism-oriented development for the country. Of course, it is going to be a long haul and we don’t have to mix up our own mortality with a time-table for the achievement of socialist goals.

I know that this option, the struggle for a socialism-oriented development, means travelling along an uncharted road, and in a situation marked by an

extraordinary dominance of capitalist ideology and an equally extraordinary inhibition of social imagination where our people, including those on the left, seem to have lost the dreams they once had – the most terrible thing that can ever happen to a people – this option will be deemed impossible. But the situation demands nothing less, it indeed demands doing ‘impossible’ things. One remembers the admonition of the rebel students of Paris in their May-June uprising of 1968. They had said: ‘Be practical! Do the impossible!’ Four decades later, it may be added: ‘If we cannot do the impossible, we better prepare to face the unthinkable’. Some of the ‘unthinkable’ is already happening around us. □