

The Politics of Culture in the Time of Neo-liberalism

Many progressive persons have been noting with a sense of shame the trajectory taken by the recent debate in the Parliament, the highest forum of our democratic culture, on the Criminal Law Amendment Bill meant to deal with the increasing phenomenon of sexual violence. What is shameful is that the debate on justice against sexual violence almost turned into a discourse on how to protect men from the putative abuse of the proposed law; while mouthing highly moral views on the need to prevent young men and women from indulging in sexual promiscuity by raising the 'age of consent', senior members of Lok Sabha did not hesitate to snigger and joke to water down the criminal offence of stalking women by describing it as a 'natural' tendency in males. How do we look at these offensive lapses in social perspective in an era when neo-liberalism assures us of fast advance into a y-generation 'modern' economy? Do we regard them as lingering ideological remnants of our unregenerate past? It may be recalled, however, that even in the public outrage which followed the gang-rape and later death of a student in Delhi, different voices were heard and a good many of them in a way anticipated the previously-mentioned trend of parliamentary debate. From hysteric calls for extending the death-penalty to rapists, to gratuitous statements like rapes happening in 'India' and not in traditional 'Bharat', to blaming the victim for provoking the crime—the elements of barbarous unreason are all here spread amply across the board. We can hardly wish them away as leftovers of the past. In fact, I would like to propose that what we find in these elements of the present debate are but examples of the dominant cultural trends of the time of neo-liberalism.

Capitalist transformation of agriculture preceded the industrial revolution in Western Europe and provided the initial impetus to the radical release of productive forces and transformation of social relations that Marx and Engels speak of in the 'Communist Manifesto'. In our country, this process remained incomplete and so it makes sense to talk of a semi-feudal economy unable to make a radical break with the past so that the newly-emergent hegemony of 'cash-nexus' is modified by social survivals such as caste and gender oppression. But a partial reading of the 'Communist Manifesto' leads even some Marxist analysts mistakenly to assume a sequential view of social progress which regards capitalism as necessarily a more 'advanced' form of human civilization than feudal or semi-feudal formations. This view overlooks the fact, duly emphasized by Marx and Engels in many of their writings even apart from the 'Manifesto', that even at its most triumphant moment capitalism is compelled by its own inner contradictions to co-opt and to re-invent 'survivals' of a more 'barbaric' past to balance its own economic momentum. The slave-like use of female and child labour in the early days of industrial capitalism in Britain, use of black slaves in colonial plantations, repeated occurrence of man-made famines under British rule in India are examples of exploitation that belie even at that point of time the enlightened values of equality and freedom associated with capitalist economic progress. When Lenin speaks of the woman as a 'domestic slave' within the capitalist system, engaged in 'barbarously unproductive, petty, nerve-wracking, stultifying and crushing drudgery' it is this re-invention of earlier forms of exploitation to which he draws our attention. The term neo-liberalism may similarly suggest the promise of an enlightened world-system where capital is to flow untrammelled all over the globe to revolutionize remnants of the old order which have persisted for a long time particularly on the margins of the so-called third world, but at the same time neo-liberal culture retrieves and includes some of the most retrograde elements in it for its own purpose.

Its power to do so is immensely enhanced by rapid technological advances in electronic as well as print media. Such advanced technology has been used by finance capital to facilitate its instantaneous travel to all remote corners of the globe making it essential that the former

should have modern media under its control. But this control over some of the most extensive and powerful modes of communication means that corporate bodies owning media houses and channels also dominate the production and dissemination of cultural messages through them. The history of the growth of print and electronic media in India in the last two decades amply demonstrates how the bogie of government control of media has been utilized to promote what seems to be a free-for-all in the arena of communication, but what is in effect a gradual diminution of all public intervention and a regime of culturally restrictive cross-media monopolies. Economic domination comes to mean political and cultural domination as well. 'Freedom' is the freedom for advertisers to maximize profit, while a stark financial policy for capturing the market replaces the perspective of public good.

All this is well-known, but this is not the major point I am trying to make in this paper. In a general sense, one may agree with the formulation that within a particular historical formation, the dominant ideas are the ideas of the dominant classes. If culture has to do with the production and dissemination of ideas, beliefs and social practices and not just of literary, performative and artistic forms, then in this broader sense, neo-liberal culture may be expected to have profound ties of interest with trans-national finance capital. This may even be described as the ultimate 'determining' factor of such culture. However, it is not born *ex nihilo*, but out of many continuities. In India, there are many developed regional languages, many pre-existent artistic forms, many social rituals and ideological traditions with which trans-national corporate media must negotiate if it has to bring this vast space within its hegemonic ambience and turn it into a market, since this space bears the marks of much older hegemonies surviving on the margins of the living present. This heritage includes humble folk-traditions as well as more sophisticated literary, performative, musical, visual inventions from feudal and colonial times. These cannot be erased all of a sudden and replaced by ideas, habits, practices and aesthetic forms that 'reflect' more directly the interests of a trans-national market. In fact, trans-national corporate media, in the specific context of India, evolves its own characteristics and invents selective traditions which enable it to retain its hegemony. We find informational or cultural programmes, serials, promotional materials presented in such media continually incorporating different kinds of 'indigeneity' and bringing these earlier traditions under its direct domination. The growing exclusivism of the educational system in the neo-liberal dispensation which prises away what might have been the common heritage of the people in these traditions, collaborates with this tendency in media and reinforces an undemocratic, elitist ambience in culture.

But if corporate media represents the most immediate form of neo-liberal culture, the other forms of public communication that remain outside its ambit persist none-the-less on the margins. These sometimes operate within particular communities or localities and maintain a degree of autonomy from the influence of dominant culture. Or the same persons who are subject to the spell of corporate media at one level, may simultaneously remain committed to regional and local forms of communication at another. As I have said earlier, neo-liberal culture must bring within its control also such spaces into which capitalism had earlier intervened but minimally, or spaces which had so far resisted such intervention. But this process cannot be fully understood by referring only to its homogenizing thrust; as a result of the pressures operating on it, it also has to develop flexibility and complexity. In other words, dominance itself is dominance within given circumstances and cannot be seen as something arbitrarily imposed from outside. It has to continually respond to the challenges of the shifting tensions of social relationship at a particular historical moment. If the term 'neo-liberal culture' in the sense of dominant culture in the era of finance capital has to make any sense at all, these complicating factors have to be borne in mind.

For instance, in India the advance of neo-liberalism from the outset has been in contradiction with some of the basic ideological assumptions of the Indian Constitution. The Constituent Assembly which prepared it was formed in the background of the anti-colonial struggle of the Indian people. Many different sections of the people were engaged in this struggle as also in the anti-feudal and working class movements that emerged side by side with this in the 1930s and 1940s. The integrity of the Indian Constitution consisted in the extent to which it was able to accommodate the varying aspirations of these people's movements. Legal and constitutional equality of all Indians was therefore its basic principle. The stated principles of 'secularism' and later 'socialism' were perceived as following from this. It is a different matter that the anti-colonial struggle itself was fractured by many mutually opposing pulls; also after Independence, the principles of the Constitution continued to be violated in action by the dominant political and social forces. But the power of the constitutional mandate still ensured that even these forces could not wish away commitment to a welfare-oriented republic. Neo-liberalism seeks to do away with this need altogether. But it has to operate at the outset within existing institutions and traditions that represent a different welfarist democratic hegemony. Even when these are dismantled by politically dominant forces, at the social and cultural level, the oppositional hegemony lingers. It is still difficult to think of dismantling the existing Constitution although state policy and administration have moved quite far in the neo-liberal direction.

What then is being questioned here is the myth of the 'inevitability' of neo-liberalism, the 'there is no alternative' approach to it. The example of the ideology of the Constitution shows that the phenomenon of hegemony is never monolithic. There always exist combating or resisting hegemonies by which the edges of dominance are fractured. What are the ideological and cultural traditions that dominant culture selects and co-opts? What are left out and suppressed? How do oppressed people get drawn into this process so that consent and collusion are taken for granted? These are the issues we have to address. It needs to be emphasized that never before in the history of capitalism has the arena of the mind, of culture, been regarded by the economically dominant forces as such an important target of aggression. Early colonialism in deed has sometimes destroyed civilizations. At other times, however, direct intervention has been avoided and there has been gradual acculturation. The 'modernity' of neo-liberalism is tied up with technologically advanced modes of communication, particularly electronic media; but corporate capital's major world-wide target in the present time is land, land-based resources and the people who live on land, particularly in the third world countries. These people have been on the margins of capitalist domination so far, retaining some of their neglected cultural resources; as corporate capital takes possession of the economic resources which constitute the livelihood of these people, their cultural life also is sought to be subsumed, reduced to a liminal nostalgic presence, under the technologically powerful 'modernity' of neo-liberalism. This process involves an erasure of these cultural resources as a part of the lived present of the marginalized people. This is why it is important to differentiate between their actual presence in people's lives and their reconstruction through the 'modernity' of dominant culture, to understand what this 'modernity' selects and what it suppresses.

When we talk of people living 'on land', we are in fact thinking of many different groups of the rural poor, peasants, agricultural and non-agricultural labourers, fishing communities, small producers, small traders, tribal people, migrating groups etc. and of course of the women belonging to these groups. Those who have been uprooted from land and have been earning their livelihood in urban areas as regular or casual workers or service-providers may have come under the spell of corporate media, but as far as they can, also often retain their linguistic and cultural ties with land. All the groups living on land use idioms that have existed

for a long time and have their rituals, performances and cultural practices which have not been completely subsumed under the capitalist system. These 'traditions' may not show conscious elements of protest or opposition against dominant culture, but they make a difference as a part of the lived present of the labouring people in so far as they provide occasions for immediate communication not only within a particular community, but among communities. In rural areas of West Bengal, we still find Hindus from different 'lower' caste-groups as well as Muslims participating without restriction in these porous spaces of culture while also creating such spaces. Through largely oral exchange of information, gossip, attitudes and views, performance traditions are also worked out anew in accordance with their own conventions.

It is this concept of the 'popular' which neo-liberal 'modernity' seeks to push into the background. Neo-liberal 'modernity' perceives the 'popular' at one level as representing an undifferentiated, crude and inchoate demand for audio-visual sensationalism produced as cheaply as possible. This is seen as the dark opposite side of what corporatism has re-invented and preserved exclusively as elite culture. Without understanding how the labouring poor think, speak and engage in social and cultural practices, this 'modernity' seeks to integrate them too into its sphere of influence as a necessary contrast through the unthinking, passive image of the 'popular'. At another level, as if as a concession to the indigenous, popular 'traditions' which may be transformed into something marketable are subjected to a makeover and co-opted into dominant forms of corporate culture. Once transformed, they have very little connection with the lived present of the labouring poor. The use of the racy folk-tune for opulent media events and 'reality shows' is of course the most familiar example of this. In West Bengal rural scroll-paintings have found a niche market in the trans-national cultural scenario; but this means that what had been an essential part of live verbal-musical performances in the countryside by the scroll-painters for popular instruction and entertainment, has been reduced to decorative wall-hangings in penthouse apartments of the rich. But further, neo-liberalism even while foregrounding 'modernity', propagates a backlash of reaction when thus reconstructing the 'popular'. This is why I have said at the very outset that elements of unreason, of the mystification of coercive power, of undemocratic, divisive, communal, casteist, misogynist thinking are present in neo-liberal culture not as mere survivals, but as expositions of its very nature. Such elements are developed specifically to subvert and suppress what I have described a little while ago as the truly popular, even when the existing culture of the people may not show any conscious oppositional positions. Neo-liberalism targets any active agency of the subjugated wherever it is to be found. How the 'popular' or the indigenous is reconstructed for this purpose is something that warrants close study.

I am not trying to romanticize the truly popular by suggesting that it does not carry the ideological baggage of earlier hegemonies with it. The practices of the people may well be at variance with the letter of the Constitution and with anti-colonial traditions of secular democratic modern thought. Of course caste-feelings are very strong at the ground-level as markers of identity; the communal divide is very much a reality; the subjugation of women within the family and the community is accepted in action and in attitudes and represented through forms and practices of popular culture. The point, however, is that as long as these remain as elements in the lived life of the labouring poor, these are generally balanced by what we may describe—a little vaguely perhaps—as popular reason or even as a ground-level sense of survival. Just as this culture, in spite of being bred in a situation of exploitation and oppression, shows few overt signs of oppositional politics except at certain historical moments when direct confrontation develops with dominant classes, similarly, the contradictions among different sections of the labouring poor on caste, communal, gender lines are ordinarily kept

within limits through their own agency. But when these elements are picked up by the dominant forces in the neo-liberal era, these are re-invented in a way that destroys the checks and balances generally found within popular culture.

When unreason is institutionalized and marked with the sanction of powers that be, it becomes a unique instrument of oppression of the labouring poor. The porous spaces of communication which allow them to exchange ideological and cultural resources not only among themselves but to a certain extent with the rest of the world are sealed through these interventions. They are forced to reconstitute themselves in accordance with the perception of the dominant. The religious rituals and practices of the poor are contingent and open-ended; when it is taken over by the dominant classes and given a marketable shape by corporate media it becomes the exclusive marker of a community. The recent development of pilgrim-tourism in many temple-towns with the flowing in of corporate money has gone hand in hand with the takeover of existing secular spaces and intensification of communal identities among the people. Similarly the institution of Hindu marriage has been corporatized and packaged in such a way that it has become hard for the poor to get their daughters married in accordance with that standard. Marriage is underscored through this process as restricted by the 'conventions' of the religious community of which it is a part and rich and poor within the community are bound to abide by the highlighted conventions; the idea that marriage outside caste and community is a deviance is being propagated more and more forcefully. These are some examples of how people get trapped by reaction as existing alternatives get erased.

As secular and democratic public spaces are being taken over by corporate power, communal, casteist, patriarchal politics is no longer confined to right reactionary parties; it is spreading across the board. This is manifest in the trends demonstrated in the recent parliamentary debate to which I had referred at the outset. So far as the Left parties are concerned, unless they launch a struggle for every inch of that receding public space all the time, they are likely to be judged by history as having remained passive victims of this reactionary politics and the reactionary idiom. Sometimes we ourselves believe that it is just a matter of voicing politically correct views, which will make the people trapped by reaction follow us. But this assumes that the people are themselves passive recipients of ideological and cultural messages in so far as their communication with the rest of the world is concerned, that all new thought is literally imposed on them from outside. But their relationship with the living world around them can be dialogic, if access remains open and a many-sided democratic flow of communication is allowed; it is therefore necessary that Left activists should widen two-way accesses and learn the living idiom used by the people; the messages contained in them at any particular historical moment must be deciphered because this idiom is by no means identical with the language we bring to them from outside. Only then it is clear to us how this idiom may generate new thought and articulate a resistant culture at that moment so that people may become agents of their own change.

One particular moment in the history of India when popular culture developed this direct resistant quality was during the 1940s and early 1950s when the Communist Party of India was able to make some interventions into popular consciousness through the People's Theatre Movement. This intervention obviously came from an external agency, and the anxiety about communicating the 'official' political line is always there. But this projected linear relationship is not how the People's Theatre Movement actually impinged upon the people, large sections of whom were at that time engaged in mass struggles. Activists came to be in close connection with them through these struggles and at that point of time, we do often find a two-way process there. Left cultural activists were most effective when instead of imposing the political line on the people, they were able to provide access to discourses evolving in the

changing world around them, when acquaintance was made on both sides with new content and forms of communication. This inspired the creativity of the people and awakened a sense of agency. Comrade Sundarayya in his account of the Telengana people's struggle refers to an imprisoned peasant activist who when interrogated by a Government-appointed official, describes a Communist in the form of an extempore poem: ' He can also be seen among the very poor/ A Communist is found among the famine-sufferers/ He can be found among the rich too/ As also among the patriots/ He is there among Congressmen and Leaguers/ He is there in your shade, my shade'. The idiom of this appears unique even in a rough and ready translation, because it is no mechanical reflection of an official line, but an example of the people's lively creativity and of the perspective developed by a representative of the labouring poor into an immediate political issue. This perspective owes something to inputs from Left cultural activists, but flourishes on the experiential logic of the idiom of the people. We pay our homage to the great leader because he was able to see the importance of this.

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