
UNIT 31 NATIONALISM AND SOCIAL REVOLUTION — AN OVERVIEW

Structure

- 31.0 Objectives
- 31.1 Introduction
- 31.2 The Nationalists, Socialism and Social Revolution : An Overview
 - 31.2.1 Jawaharlal Nehru
 - 31.2.2 Subhas Chandra Bose
 - 31.2.3 The Socialists
- 31.3 The Marxists, Socialism and Social Revolution: An Overview
 - 31.3.1 The Communists
 - 31.3.2 M.N. Roy
- 31.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 31.5 Key Words
- 31.6 Some Useful Books
- 31.7 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises

31.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we shall deal with the overall significance of the viewpoints of the socialists and the communists relating to social revolution, keeping in mind the important point that the representatives of these two trends were primarily guided by the idea of nationalist struggle aimed at overthrow of British colonial domination. After going through this unit, you will be able to understand:

- the points of difference between the representatives of the two trends
- the significant differences among the representatives belonging broadly to one trend (i.e., socialists or communists) and
- the implications of these contrasting viewpoints for the future of India's independence.

31.1 INTRODUCTION

In the earlier units you were introduced to the ideas of individual thinkers such as Nehru, Subhas Bose, Jayaprakash Narayan et al on the one hand and the perception of nationalist struggle as viewed by the Communist Party and M.N. Roy on the other. What is now required is to develop a broad perspective which would enable one to explain the differences represented by these two trends. This is a very important question, because all of them had two things in common: the opposition to British Colonial rule and the urge to transform the colonial order of India into a modern society based on the ideal of socialism. However, despite these apparent similarities, they differed in their evaluation of the alternatives to British Colonialism, since their understanding of socialism was not identical. Thus, although the urge to transform society was very real, the differences in regard to the perception of socialism led to the development of contrasting perspectives on this question. In this unit you will be introduced to this idea so as to understand its significance for the future of India's independence.

31.2 THE NATIONALISTS, SOCIALISM AND SOCIAL REVOLUTION: AN OVERVIEW

The trend represented by the socialists in the national movement was broadly represented in the ideas of Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhas Chandra Bose, Jayaprakash

Narayan, Narendra Dev and their associates in the Congress Socialist Party. Despite differences among them, they were attracted towards the ethical ideal of socialism emphasising abolition of inequality, exploitation and injustice; they were simultaneously ardent nationalists and were opposed to the methods of conflict and violence by using which the socialist revolution had been accomplished in the USSR. In other words, they aimed at a socialist restructuring of India on the basis of Indian nationalism. At the same time, they also distanced themselves from the trend represented by Hindu revivalism. Broadly, they emphasised the secular basis of Indian nationalism and it was with in this framework that they projected their vision of socialism.

31.2.1 Jawaharlal Nehru

Nehru's understanding of the problem of social transformation of India was primarily guided by his secular and scientific outlook, which aimed at the modernisation of Indian society. In this venture Nehru had before him two major alternatives: One, the model of free market economy in the West, based on unrestricted capitalism; the other was the model of planned economy as pursued in the USSR. Nehru had reservations against both of these approaches. He could not accept the first one, since this would eventually lead to gross inequality and exploitation, in violation of the basic norms of humanism. As regards the marxian model of socialism which was being practised in Soviet Russia, Nehru was deeply impressed by its achievements and he quite openly proclaimed that socialism was the only option for India, if a society free from the clutches of exploitation, injustice and inequality was to be built. His socialist sympathy was most strongly evident in his Presidential address at the Lucknow Session of the AICC in 1936. He could at the same time never reconcile himself to the methods. Thus, he could not accept the idea of the cult of one centralised party, restrictions on rights and freedoms of individuals and above all, Soviet socialism's emphasis on class struggle and the forcible overthrow of an exploitative social order. Nehru's socialism was broadly based on limited public control of private enterprise, planned economy etc. on the one hand, and pluralism, freedom of the individual etc. on the other. In developing this perspective, he was deeply influenced by the Fabian idea of democratic socialism in a nationalist framework. While this nationalism was sharply different from the idea of Hindu revivalism with which Nehru never compromised, he emphasised that India's road to socialism would have its foundations based on traditional Indian ideals like co-operation, peaceful development, humanism and accommodation of all religious beliefs, i.e. secularism.

It becomes quite strongly evident that Nehru was projecting a vision which was bound to unleash tensions and difficulties, since it was an attempt to reconcile things which were contradictory. While Nehru's goal was to seek a society based on justice and free from exploitation, he attempted to do it in a framework of thought where rights and freedoms of individuals placed in unequal circumstances would not be restricted. This was a kind of humanism which was unworkable in practice, since the privileged and the underprivileged were advised to work in a spirit of cooperation. Effectively speaking, Nehru's nationalistic vision blurred his perspective of socialism and dissipated the possibility of any real social revolution, since his radical outlook contradicted his path of compromise.

31.2.2 Subhas Chandra Bose

Subhas Chandra Bose's idea of social transformation of India was guided primarily by a spirit of intense nationalism and the considerations of practical politics. While he quite strongly emphasised that political freedom was meaningless without social and economic emancipation of the masses and that in free India it was not the vested interests (i.e., the landlords, money-lenders and capitalists) but the interests of the peasants and workers which would be protected, the ideological framework which he envisaged for realising these goals contradicted his objectives. In fighting vested interests, since he stood for the abolition of landlordism, an uniform land-tenure system and sound planning, he distanced himself from the capitalist path of free-market economy and came certainly closer to the radical ideology of socialism. But his spiritual background, particularly the influence of Vivekananda, his militant nationalism and

above all, his primary consideration being practical politics, led Bose to reject the Marxist model of socialism with emphasis on class struggle and materialism. Thus, while he was certainly attracted towards socialism's crusade against injustice and exploitation and its advocacy of the cause of equality, he could not endorse the political strategy of Marxism for realisation of these objectives.

His ideological vision became particularly clouded because, guided primarily by militant nationalist sentiments he aimed at realising his goal by adopting a path which would give him quick, immediate and effective results. This inclination towards pragmatism being a major feature of Bose's political outlook, he looked towards fascism with its emphasis on centralised state control and militarism. He felt that the quickest road to social transformation was possible by combining the ideological goal of marxism, socialism with emphasis on equality and the fascist methods of discipline, militant nationalism and rigid state control. In this regard, the views of Bose sharply differed from those of Nehru, who was uncompromisingly opposed to fascism for its inhuman character.

Bose, however, could not convincingly explain as to how this odd mixture was really possible in practice, since fascism was basically a defence of the vested interests of capitalism, while marxian socialism was uncompromisingly opposed to capitalism. The result was that Subhas Chandra Bose's nationalist ideological vision did not enable him to develop any real and effective understanding of the problem of social revolution in India.

31.2.3 The Socialists

Socialism was a trend broadly represented by Narendra Dev, Jayaprakash Narayan and Rammanohar Lohia who distanced themselves from the Congress and claimed to be more radical in their views. However, like Nehru they, too, were not much inclined towards the Soviet model of socialism nor was the Leninist concept of a centralised party acceptable to them. Guided primarily by the spirit of nationalism and the idea of co-operation, they considered themselves radical in the sense that they aimed at the realisation of the ideal of socialism based on equality and social justice by emphasising the importance of democratic decentralisation regarding the village as the main unit of development and encouraging the growth of small scale cottage industries and handicrafts rather than heavy industrialisation. They believed that in India social transformation would be effective only along the traditional path, that is, by encouraging agricultural growth and it is in this respect that they distinguished themselves from the path of Nehru, who aimed at the modernisation of Indian society primarily by adopting the strategy of industrialisation and planned economy.

The socialists, broadly identified with the ideology of the Congress Socialist Party, however, stood for secularism, resistance against obscurantist practices like untouchability and were inclined towards the ethical and humanitarian goals of socialism. In this sense their ideological viewpoint also had common ground with the perspective of the Indian National Congress, predominantly represented by Nehru. But the socialists, too, could not provide any real and effective solution to the problem of social transformation, since their outlook emphasised primarily the values of co-operation and social harmony in a situation where people were placed unequally in the social structure. Neither the idea of co-operation nor the programme of rural development with emphasis on decentralisation could provide any real and lasting solution to the problem of social revolution in India.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) Check your answer with that given at the end of the unit.

- 1) Why was it not possible for Nehru to reconcile himself with either a free market economy or the Soviet model of socialism?

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2) Was there any contradiction in Nehru's understanding of the problem of social revolution?

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3) Why was Subhas Chandra Bose inclined towards a reconciliation of fascism and socialism?

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4) Could Subhas Chandra Bose provide an effective solution to the problem of social transformation of India?

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5) How did the socialists interpret the problem of social revolution in India?

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31.3 THE MARXISTS, SOCIALISM AND SOCIAL REVOLUTION: AN OVERVIEW

The freedom struggle witnessed another trend represented broadly by the marxists who distanced themselves from the socialist minded nationalists on a number of questions. Their idea of social revolution was broadly guided by the basic tenets of marxism and the experience of the Russian Revolution that had taken place in 1917. On the one hand, they were sceptical about the very ideology of nationalism and the solutions provided by people like Nehru, Subhas Chandra Bose, Narendra Dev and others, since in their opinion the nationalist framework of thought would perpetuate the basic problem of inequality, exploitation and injustice in India; on the other hand, they stood for a social order where the interests of the workers and poor peasants would be primarily safeguarded and real power would vest in their hands. This meant an alternative understanding of the problem of social revolution in the framework of a radical variant of socialism, i.e. Marxism. This trend was reflected collectively in the viewpoint of the communists associated broadly with the Communist Party of India, the Workers' and Peasants' Party and other radical groups which broadly swore in the name of marxism. Individually, the marxist position was best represented in the thought of M.N. Roy in his early years when he was associated with the communist movement. Later, however, there took place a major shift in his outlook when he provided a reinterpretation of marxism and distanced himself from the Communists.

31.3.1 The Communists

The alternative strategy of social revolution proposed by the communists was primarily a product of their critique of the nationalist brand of socialism. While they also were genuine patriots and stood for secularism, opposition to Hindu revivalism and obscurantist practices like untouchability, their basic argument was that the objectives of socialism, i.e. equality, justice and freedom from exploitation could not be realised without a radical restructuring of society. In their vision, this was impossible by adopting the nationalist solution which emphasised primarily the idea of

accomplishment of national freedom under the leadership of the middle-class oriented parties and groups as represented by Nehru, Subhas Bose and Congress Socialists. The Communists also could not agree with their perspective of social transformation which mainly justified the values of harmony and co-operation among the contending groups and classes in a society where discrimination between the privileged and underprivileged was extremely acute. In other words, their main objection against nationalism was that it was virtually a defence of the vested interests and real social transformation was impossible by adopting the framework of nationalism.

Motivated by this idea the communists, who professed their adherence to marxism, developed an alternative approach towards the understanding of the question of social revolution. They followed what is generally known as the *class approach* and therein lay their fundamental difference with the nationalist approach. They argued that if the ordinary man was to be the real beneficiary of social transformation, then it would have to be the alliance of the working class and peasantry which would be the guiding force of revolution. This, they argued, could not be done by adopting the methods of co-operation and preaching harmony of contending groups and classes in society; to achieve this objective, the communists thus preached the idea of violent, forcible overthrow of the propertied classes which included the nationalists, i.e. the middle classes also. In proclaiming this goal, they were largely inspired by the experience of the Russian Revolution.

This approach, however, despite its strongly radical thrust, proved unworkable for a number of reasons. One, despite the criticism of the nationalists, it could not be appreciated by the communists that nationalist sentiments and appeals were too strongly embedded in the minds of the masses, which could not be just brushed aside. Rather, this virulent attack on nationalism and the castigation of the nationalist leaders like Gandhi, Nehru and Subhas Bose as agents of capitalists quite often isolated the communists from the mainstream of the freedom struggle. Two, the model of the Russian Revolution was virtually unworkable in India, because the material conditions were fundamentally different. Three, the communists overestimated the potential and organisational strength of the working class was somewhat mechanical and to a large extent unreal, with the consequence that their vision of social revolution eventually remained unreal and unworkable.

31.3.2 M.N. Roy

M.N. Roy quite often regarded as one of the founders of communist movement in India, was one of the those early marxists who attempted a radical understanding of the issue of social transformation of Indian society as distinct from the framework of nationalism. In his early phase (extending up to the late 20s) Roy's understanding suggested that the social emancipation of the Indian masses was possible only by effecting a socialist revolution in the country under the leadership of the working class, since he believed that in India nationalism was a spent force and that the nationalist movement was virtually aimed at ultimate consolidation of the interests of the middle class which spearheaded it. This hostility towards and cynicism about nationalism made Roy an uncompromising critic of the leaders of the Indian National Congress like Gandhi and Nehru. Moreover, Roy's optimism about the prospects of a socialist revolution in India was largely guided by his understanding that industrialisation had proceeded quite rapidly in the country with the result that a strong working class had emerged with the potentiality to unleash a revolution. Subsequent research has proved that this understanding was totally at variance with reality, since the British were not at all interested in any real and effective industrialisation of India.

M.N. Roy, as we know, later returned to India following his dissociation with the Communist movement and this second phase, broadly known as the period of 'radical humanism', witnessed Roy's reinterpretation of marxism in a new perspective. During this period, while he maintained his earlier critique of nationalism and thereby continued to distance himself from the Congress Party, his views underwent a change in regard to the earlier understanding of marxism as just a political instrument for violent overthrow of the exploiter class. Roy now came round to the position that for a real social revolution in India what was primarily necessary was the assertion of a new kind of ethical consciousness with which the people would have to be imbued. The

emphasis now shifted in his thought from political confrontation to a kind of abstract humanism which, however, was of little practical use. As a transition took place in his writings from focusing on the masses to that on the individual and from political action to abstract humanism, his perspective of social revolution became blurred and virtually unworkable.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) Check your answer with that given at that end of the unit.

1) Why were the communists critical of nationalism?

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2) What was the alternative proposed by the Communists for understanding the problem of social revolution?

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3) What were the difficulties of the Communist alternative?

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4) How did M.N. Roy look at the problem of social revolution in his early years?

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5) Could M.N. Roy, as a radical humanist, provide a satisfactory solution to the issue of social revolution?

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31.4 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit we have broadly tried to arrive at an overall evaluation of the contending viewpoints of the nationalists with a socialist outlook and the marxists on the question of social revolution. We have seen that despite their agreement on some major issues like opposition to and overthrow of British imperialism, Hindu revivalism and different types of obscurantism on the one hand and their inclination towards the values of Socialism and rejection of absolute free market economy on the other, they ultimately differed in regard to the issue of the complex interrelation between social revolution and nationalism. For the nationalists it was nationalism which was more important than social revolution and, consequently, the basic issue of social transformation ultimately got compromised. For the marxists however, it was social revolution which was more important and they felt that this was an issue which could not be effectively settled within the framework of nationalism. In this venture, while emphasising class struggle they quite often mechanically contraposed the two and there were occasions when they got themselves isolated from the mainstream of the freedom struggle.

Check Your Progress 3

- Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.
ii) Check your answer with that given at the end of the unit.

1) What were the points of agreement between the socialist minded nationalists and the marxists?

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2) What was the main difference between the socialist minded nationalists and the marxists?

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3) Why is it that the alternative approaches to social revolution as suggested by the nationalists as well as the marxists proved eventually unworkable?

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31.5 KEY WORDS

Class Struggle is a concept used in marxism implying the idea of conflict between the privileged and the underprivileged in society.

Colonialism means direct political control of underdeveloped regions by the developed countries.

Fascism is an ideology rooted in terror and violence for defending free market economy when it is faced with a crisis.

Free market economy is an economic system where absolute freedom is given to the traders to conduct market operations and reap profit; this is the other name of capitalism.

Hindu revivalism was a trend in the national movement in the country which glorified the Hindu tradition of religious values and beliefs in absolute terms.

Secularism means the idea of maintaining a distance between religious beliefs and socio-political questions; it also implies tolerance of all religious beliefs; equality of all religions.

Socialist Revolution means the act of capturing political power by the working class. The first socialist revolution took place in Russia in October, 1917.

31.6 SOME USEFUL BOOKS

Chandra, Bipan et al, 1972, *Freedom Struggle*, New Delhi.

Chandra, Bipan et al 1988, *India's Struggle For Independence: 1857-1947*, Penguins, New Delhi.

Desai, A.R. 1976, (Fifth edition), *Social Background of Indian Nationalism*, Popular Prakashan, Bombay.

Sarkar Sumit, 1983, *Modern India : 1885-1947*, Macmillan India, Madras.

Varma, V.P. 1980, (Second Edition), *Modern Indian Political Thought*, Educational Publishers, Agra.

31.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) See Sub-section 31.2.1
- 2) See Sub-section 31.2.3

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) See Sub-section 31.3.1
- 2) See Sub-section 31.3.1
- 3) See Sub-section 31.3.1
- 4) See Sub-section 31.3.2
- 5) See Sub-section 31.3.2

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) See Section 31.4
- 2) See Section 31.4
- 3) See Section 31.4