Where does the Left stand in India?

by Jules Naudet and Stéphanie Tawa-Lama-Rewal

In India as in Europe, the left wing is struggling. Looking beyond the financialisation of the economy and disparities in social conditions, this essay sheds light on other factors explaining the weakness of the Indian left wing, from electoral dynamics to the criminalisation of the political class.

The Indian landscape of social struggles is both varied and energetic. It ranges from peasant movements organising marches of tens of thousands of farmers over several days to protests by hundreds of thousands of Dalits denouncing the discrimination they face and movements against population displacements due to the construction of large hydroelectric power plants such as the Narmada Bachao Andolan.[1] Activism of this sort, focused on specific causes, has spread across the country and is often organised around a *sangharsh samiti* or committee for local struggle.

However, in a country that includes more than a third of the world's poor,[2] the strong momentum of these social movements does not signify that the left wing is strong. Neither these struggles nor the actions of trade unions or political parties have sufficient weight to obtain better legal protection for workers, universal access to

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[1] This article has benefited from incisive remarks from Joël Cabalion, Vanessa Caru, Mathieu Ferry, Olivier Roueff, and Marc Saint-Upéry, to whom we offer our warmest thanks.

[2] More than 760 million people live with under 3.2$ per day.

quality public services (education, health, etc.), better redistribution of the added value of labour, or more generally the 'reembeddedness' of the economy in society (Polanyi, 1980). Echoing Werner Sombart's questions about the absence of socialism in the United States, this begs the question as to why the left wing is so weak on the Indian subcontinent.

Neoliberalism and disparities in social conditions

Two factors are generally cited as explaining the difficulties of the Indian left wing and its retreat to a primarily defensive position. The first, common to most contemporary societies, is the rising hegemony of neoliberalism in the context of the financialisation of the economy. Neoliberalism here can be defined as a phenomenon combining an economic theory, a political ideology, a philosophy of public policy, and, finally, a collective imaginary that vaunts the merits of the market and of competition (Hall and Lamont, 2013). The urban middle-classes are seduced by the promises of liberalism and these new aspirations lead them to turn their backs on solidarity with more dominated groups. Left-wing intellectuals and parties alike have, as yet, not sufficiently theorised this displacement of power towards finance to the detriment of the state and employers. The Left is therefore in a situation of anomia, lacking an appropriate ideology or repertoire of collective action to address contemporary challenges.

The second explanation often emphasises disparities in social conditions in India, depending on class, caste, gender, religion, language, or region of origin (Ferry, Naudet, and Roueff, 2018). This makes it particularly difficult for dominated groups to achieve a common class-consciousness. This fragmentation is exacerbated by the 'obsession with the small difference' or 'graded inequality' produced by the caste system and which, according to Ambedkar, fosters indifference to inequality (Herrendschmidt, 1996). It is also bolstered by the lack of convergence between the demands of urban workers and workers in the agrarian economy, as well as by the vastly different legal protection afforded to the organised and informal labour markets. It is necessary to stress the importance in India of the division between formal work (i.e. subject to labour law regulations and offering protection to workers) and informal work, which evades all state regulation and concerns 40% to 85% of the active population, depending on assessments (see, in particular, Harriss-White, 2004).

Beyond the evident observation that, sociologically, Indian society is extremely fragmented and that neoliberalism has an increasing hold on political sensitivities, this essay intends to examine some of the other reasons why there is no strong left wing in India today. Given that India is a huge federal state, this overview of the left wing will necessarily pass over numerous aspects of the issue, first and foremost the many local political cultures that coexist, rich with their own specific traditions. We make no claim to exhaustiveness here, but will focus in particular on electoral dynamics; the structural weaknesses of trade unions; the criminalisation of the political class; and the muzzling of social critique by fascist forces. These different explanations, rarely considered together, allow us better to understand why the notion of a common front of left-wing forces able to produce a new class compromise remains a distant prospect.

A strong left wing post-Independence

In 1947, at the time of independence, it was relatively easy to pinpoint the left in the Indian political landscape. It was partly found within the Indian National Congress (INC) itself, an umbrella party from which the socialist current progressively freed itself – although Nehru, who was Prime Minister until 1964, consistently proclaimed his commitment to that political perspective, as did his daughter Indira Gandhi. Outside the Congress, the left wing was represented by the Communist Party of India (CPI), plagued by factionalism from its inception in the 1920s. In 1957, however, the CPI won regional elections in the small coastal state of Kerala and in 1967, now called the CPI(M),[3] it emerged as a major party at the other end of the subcontinent, in West Bengal.

The same year, in this state, agricultural workers from the Naxalbari district seized land of which they had long been demanding equitable redistribution. The political project of those who would soon be known as the Naxalites was Maoist: taking to arms in order to put an end to a 'fraudulent parliamentary system' that was both 'semi-colonial' and 'semi-feudal' and to replace it with a 'people's democratic

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[3] In 1964, the CPI split into, on the one hand, a minority who viewed the USSR as their model, advocated using the parliamentary process (authorised by Khrushchev in 1956), and remained within the Communist Party of India (CPI) and, on the other hand, a majority who refused to abandon a more radical revolutionary plan and formed the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)). For more details about factionalism within the CPI, see Cabalion (2011).

dictatorship'.[4] In Calcutta, political assassinations became rife and, in the 1970s, a spiral of violence set in between the 'urban terrorism' (Kohli, 1991) of the insurgents and its ruthless repression by the police and army. The Naxalite movement went underground and shifted to India's central regions where it survived until it entered a new phase of expansion in the 2000s.

As for the CPI(M), after several years' hesitation, it opted to further its ideological agenda by playing the game of reformism and parliamentary democracy. It won the 1977 elections and went on to govern West Bengal continuously within a Left Front whose greatest political achievements were substantial land reform and strong decentralisation. In Kerala, where power alternated between the Left Front and a Congress-dominated coalition, the CPI(M)'s main victory was high human development in the state, which owed much to the tight-knit associational life of Keralese society due to a strong activist tradition led by political parties and trade unions (Heller and Isaac, 2003, p. 84) but also by religious and caste organisations, as well as NGOs.

The slow ideological fragmentation of the Indian left wing

From the 1980s onwards, it became more complicated to locate the left wing in the Indian political landscape. The political spectrum transformed during that decade: on the one hand, the BJP, the Hindu nationalist right-wing party, progressively established itself as the other pan-Indian party alongside the Congress; on the other, so-called 'regional' parties began to emerge, whose political trajectories (if not their ambitions) were limited to the regional level. Political competition reached unprecedented heights as it became increasingly difficult to govern in the states and in the Centre without these parties. The notion of 'identity politics' – vague but highly prevalent in Indian political commentary – refers to the phenomenon of mobilization focused on regional, caste, and religious identities that these parties more or less explicitly orchestrated.

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[4] Source: CPI (Maoist) programme:
http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/maoist/documents/papers/partyprogram.htm
(accessed July 23, 2018)

Nevertheless, many of them claimed affiliation with political thinkers who were clearly, if differently, left-wing. Periyar, an atheist, rationalist, and feminist reformer was the main inspiration behind the Anti-Brahmin movement and the Dravidian parties (the DMK, formed in 1949, and the AIADMK, its rival offshoot founded in 1972) in Tamil Nadu. Bhim Rao Ambedkar, the main author of the Indian Constitution, an advocate of 'annihilating castes', and the champion of the Dalits but also of women's rights, was the hero of the Bahujan Samaj Party (literally 'People of the majority') created in 1984 in Uttar Pradesh. And Ram Manohar Lohia, the intellectual leader of Indian socialism, was the guiding figure of the parties born from the successive divisions of the Janata Dal (Popular Front) which came to power in the 1990s in Karnataka, Odisha, Bihar, and Uttar Pradesh: Janata Dal (United), Biju Janata Dal, Rashtriya Janata Dal, and the Samajwadi Party.

However, in exercising power, these parties soon distanced themselves from their more or less radical reformist inspirations. In the south, the two major Dravidian parties that have taken turns governing Tamil Nadu since 1967 have not prevented recurrent violence against Dalits or the regression of Periyar's feminism to a simplistic celebration of motherhood.[5] In the north, the Samajwadi Party and the Rashtriya Janata Dal are both profoundly patriarchal. Even though all these parties claim to want to fight poverty, their emphasis is really on caste or cultural identities. Caste has, indeed, proved powerfully efficient in electoral terms: it has replaced major ideologies as the central trope of mobilisation (Jaffrelot, 1998). Today, all political parties endeavour to rally certain castes in order to win elections and the use of 'votebanks' is at the heart of this 'patronage-democracy' (Chandra, 2004).

The shifting perception of inequalities

The electoral game is not solely to blame though: the salience of the concept of 'social justice' in the discourse of the Dravidian parties in the south or the 'lower caste' parties in the north testifies to a very specific approach to inequalities. This concept, as vague as it is ambitious, refers to claims for reparation for the historical injustices suffered by certain social groups, dominated by the Brahmins, the superior castes, the people of the north, etc. depending on the case. However, just like the harm incurred,

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[5] See V. Geetha's analysis: http://www.caravanmagazine.in/perspectives/dravidian-rule-tamil-nadu-fifty-years

the reparation demanded concerns specific groups, even though that group can be very large: the Dalits make up 15% of the Indian population and the 'Other Backward Castes' – a heterogeneous category grouping together castes that are neither 'untouchable' nor 'superior' – are estimated at 52%.

The system of 'reservations' (i.e. quotas), which was established during the colonial period but consolidated at independence, aimed to compensate for the discrimination inflicted on low caste groups and tribal populations by forcing their inclusion in three institutions from which they were de facto excluded: the administration, universities, and elected assemblies. Today, however, many dominant castes,[6] such as the Jats in Haryana, the Patels in Gujurat, the Yadavs in Uttar Pradesh, and the Reddys in Andhra Pradesh have begun demanding their own quotas.

Whether these demands are legitimate, as in the case of the lower castes who are the recognised victims of historical discrimination, or less so, as in the case of dominant castes, these mobilisations all result in stronger caste boundaries, because their success is predicated on castes' functioning as special interest groups. As a result, caste allegiance prevails over class allegiance to the detriment, in particular, of the many members of dominant castes who live in situations of great economic vulnerability. Many formal institutions (caste associations, temples, religious groups, etc.) and informal ones (caste cultures, clientelist networks, matrimonial strategies, etc.) also contribute to accentuating caste boundaries to the detriment of other dividing lines.

By the early 21st century, only the Naxalites still placed class struggle at the heart of their aims and action. The Maoist movement has consolidated its presence in the tribal regions of central India, where it defends the rights of the '*adivasis*' (indigenous) people over forests that are highly coveted by the mining industry for their subsoil, among the richest in the country. A so-called 'red corridor' is said to cover a third of the districts in the country (Harriss, 2010) to the extent that, in 2009, the central government's Home Ministry (run by the Congress at the time) declared the movement 'the main threat to national security' and labelled the CPI(M) a terrorist

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[6] What sociologists refer to as a 'dominant caste' is a caste that is not superior due to its status on the scale of ritual purity but rather one which, despite its intermediate religious status, is powerful at a local level due to the effect of both the number of its members and the hold it has over property, land, and political power. This numerical, agrarian, and political domination does not, however, prevent large sections of these groups from living in very real poverty.

organisation before deploying the army to support local militia in the regions in question. The rare researchers who dare address the issue refer to it as a veritable civil war (Shah, 2014) even though, in the shadows of the jungle and far from the media limelight, it is also a forgotten one. Today, the Maoist movement is completely marginalised: it has been discredited by its use of violence, made invisible by intimidation against intellectuals who write about it, and crushed by the military forces deployed against it.

The history of left-wing political parties since independence therefore reveals a difficulty in denouncing injustice in ways that connect caste and class. Electoral strategies concentrating on the caste issue have fostered an excessive focus on identity in the political game, while the rigidity of the Marxist parties has led them, on the contrary, to neglect this issue despite the fact it lies at the heart of dynamics of exploitation.

The ever-elusive class compromise

One of the reasons why left-wing forces have such difficulty in making their social demands heard is also linked to the structural weakness of trade unionism, which has never contrived to establish a power relation between capital and labour sufficiently to the advantage of the working classes to provide the foundations of a class compromise.

At the time of independence, as the business sector denounced excessive demands by workers and as strikes increased, the Industrial Truce Conference brought together government, labour, and industry with a view to finding a solution to the conflicts by laying the foundations for social dialogue (Chibber, 2005). However, this conference demobilised the unions, who agreed to abandon the strategy of shows of force in favour of participating in co-management organisations. Furthermore, the introduction of a new legislative framework weakened the workers' position, particularly with the *Industrial Disputes Act* (1947). This legislation only authorised strikes and lock-outs with advance notice of least 14 days and made it mandatory to engage in an arbitration process, which handed down verdicts several months or even years later. This resulted in a situation in which reaching a consensus involved mandatory arbitration more than it did collective agreements and which 'managed to sharply turn the political momentum away from the possibility of a class compromise

towards the kind of state paternalism that has been the hallmark of the industrial relations system' (Chibber, 2005, p. 35). Despite claiming to be a socialist state, Nehru's Congress government took the side of capital over labour from a very early stage (Naudet, 2014).

The scale of the informal employment sector and the reduced size of the organised industrial sector make difficult any workers' organisation and coordination. In India, there has therefore been no 'social-democrat moment'.[7] As Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph argue, at the national scale: 'Organized labor has not been able to challenge India's centrist ideology and politics, that is, to mount or support a left class party' (Rudolph and Rudolph 1987, p. 259). The unions have only found political support in the states of Kerala, West Bengal, and Tripura where the communist party long remained in power.

Today, the workers' ability to weigh on the political agenda is weaker than ever before. The last major strikes date back to 1982 when, for almost 18 months, 250 000 textile workers in Bombay demanded better working conditions (Heuzé, 1989). The strike tragically ended in the factories being closed and relocated to other states in the country. Since the waves of liberalisation of the economy in 1991, reforms weakening workers' rights have become increasingly numerous, with, for example, the *Small Factories Bill* aimed at exempting factories employing fewer than 40 employees from many regulations governing working conditions (Kaur, 2015). Although the general strike of September 2, 2016 mobilised more than 150 million workers and made original demands concerning the regulation of the informal sector, it only lasted one day and did not lead to any major renewal of social activism.

The criminalisation of politics

The weak links between political parties and labour movements has been further accentuated by the rising criminalisation of the political class. The major

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[7] India did come close to this social-democrat moment between 2004 and 2009, when the communist parties lent their support to the Congress to form a government based on a 'National Common Minimum Program' which translated into an unprecedented number of public policies in favour of the poorest people (see Z. Hasan, *Breaking New Ground: Congress and Welfarism in India*, IFRI, 2009). However, any genuine recasting of redistribution was impeded by the communist parties leaving the coalition in 2009 and by the difficulties encountered in actually implementing the programmes adopted.

political parties are massively turning to candidates engaged in illegal activities since, in the Indian political world, it seems clear that 'crime pays' (Vaishnav, 2017). Crime has, in fact, become almost indispensable for winning the democratic vote. Between 2004 and 2014, candidates in national elections who had faced criminal proceedings at least once had an 18% chance of winning against 6% for candidates with no criminal record. And the more serious the accusation (assault or murder), the higher their chances of success (Vaishnav, 2017, p. 121-122).

Electoral campaigns are increasingly costly, as the candidates frequently attempt to buy votes (Chandra, 2004). It has become commonplace to distribute sacks of rice, bottles of alcohol, or cash, and while handing out these gifts does not guarantee victory, failing to do so often seals defeat (Vaishnav, 2017, p. 140-142). Given that considerable expense is unavoidable to win the vote, parties are increasingly keen on finding candidates who can self-fund to spare their own budgets. Moreover, as the upper limits defined by the Electoral Commission are generally below the minimal level of expenditure necessary to hope to win, parties also look for candidates able to move around huge sums of undeclared funds – a skill generally found among people engaged in criminal activities. All the parties tend therefore to set aside less wealthy candidates in favour of their unscrupulous counterparts. Milan Vaishnav has shown the vicious cycle in which the political class is caught, as they cannot hope to further the common good without having first consolidated their bases in local or national patronage networks, generally through illegal means. These structural shifts have encouraged what Lucia Michelutti calls 'rule by Mafia' (Mafia Raj) 'a hybrid system of political and economic governance which combines elements of redistributive, market, predatory and democratic logics' (Michelutti, 2017). The largest Indian communist party, the CPI(M), has not been spared by this mafia rise: it was one of the reasons for its defeat in 2011 after 34 years in power in its bastion of West Bengal, although policies expropriating peasants to build factories also strongly contributed to cutting the party off from its electoral base.

In this context, mastering the party's ideological programme is no longer the main criteria presiding over electoral nominations. This has led to a real 'indifference to ideas' (Vaishnav, 2017, p. 135) and a homogenisation of programmes that is fatal to the left wing and to the consideration of working-class interests in political debate. The radical Hindu party, the BJP, is one of the rare parties to have retained its ideological roots while also conforming to this new criminal reality.

The Aam Aadmi Party: a political oddity

Over the last few years, in this context of a crumbling left wing and an ever more criminalised political game, an atypical party seems to be offering a new answer to the ideological and strategic aporia of the communist and social justice parties. The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP – party of the common man) emerged in 2012 from the anti-corruption movement that rocked urban centres in 2011. Its aim, according to its founders, was to 'clean up politics from the inside' because 'India needs a revolution'. This party, which claims its allegiance to Gandhi and intends to regenerate democracy by developing participation, was first viewed with suspicion and irony by the Marxist left, which denounced the naivety of its 'not right nor left' stance, the short-sightedness of its 'anti-corruption' programme, and the elitism of its social base. But when the AAP won enough seats in the 2013 regional elections to form a government in the quasi-state of Delhi, it proved that it was still possible in India to mobilise people around a programme devoid of identity politics and to win elections with very little money. The party began to appeal to part of the Indian left wing and managed to mobilise civil society leaders against the BJP in 2014. Thus some activists from Narmada Bachao Andolan, the anti-nuclear movement, and the right to information campaign ran under the banner of the AAP, while leading communist figures explained their decision to rally to the new party in the media.

In 2015, the AAP won the elections in Delhi for a second time, with record levels of electoral participation earning them 67 out of 70 seats. However, it has proved particularly chaotic in exercising power, firstly for internal reasons: rivalries among the leadership, strategic conflicts, a tendency to act in haste without consultation, and aggressive communication. That being said, an analysis of the policies adopted by the party indicates that it has in fact made clear choices: its main priorities are basic urban services and its main target the poorest people (providing free water and low electricity prices for small consumers, creating a network of local dispensaries, applying the Right to Education by rallying parents in public schools, etc.). However, the central government (dominated by the BJP) has systematically obstructed the implementation and publicising of these policies, creating a practical impediment for this regional government.

The stifling of social critique

The BJP's hounding of the AAP, which goes far beyond the usual rivalry between competing parties, is part and parcel of a broader set of practices aimed at progressively stifling the forces of critique. These forces, both numerous and diverse, are the very foundation of Indian democracy but today they face unprecedented levels of attack.

One of the mainstays of social critique is the associational fabric, which is particular rich in India: 'If caste associations, demand groups, issue and movement politics, and nongovernmental organizations are taken into account, India could be "read" as having a pervasive and extraordinarily active associational life, perhaps one of the most participatory in the world' (Rudolph, 2003, p. 1118). However, the non-government sector is much weakened today: at the end of 2016, the Ministry of the Interior refused to renew 20 000 NGO 'licences' allowing them to receive foreign aid, thereby depriving them of the necessary means to engage in legal or media campaigns.

The media, another lynchpin of critique, has also been subject to multi-faceted censure. While India has a lively tradition of investigative journalism and critique of power, today this journalism is under repeated attack. The Hoot, a private but well-reputed observatory of the Indian media, publishes an annual report on Media Freedom and Freedom of Expression. Its 2017 edition began with the following words:

> The climate for journalism in India grew steadily adverse in 2017. A host of perpetrators made reporters and photographers, even editors, fair game as there were murders, attacks, threats, and cases filed against them for defamation, sedition, and internet-related offences. It was a year in which two journalists were shot at point blank range and killed, and one was hacked to death as police stood by and did not stop the mob.

The law against sedition, a legacy of the colonial period, has been used to intimidate journalists but also to arrest student leaders. This law is particularly draconian and has vast scope, such that it can be applied to almost any form of government critique and is punishable by life sentence. It therefore constitutes a formidable threat to freedom of expression. This policing of thought has been exacerbated by the vigilantism of militias from the constellation of radical Hindu organisations. These self-proclaimed defenders of the nation now no longer content themselves with harassing their enemies on social networks but do not hesitate to physically attack public intellectuals, whether they are writers (such as Kancha Illaiah) or academics (such as Nivedita Menon).

The Indian left wing against the fascist threat

This violence is the work of both the state, through the police and the judiciary, and civil society, through the militias formed in the cluster of Hindu nationalist groups – for example, the 'Cow Protection' movement. These are deployed when accusations of 'anti-national' intentions are made and illustrate the rise of forces that could be described as fascist, using Ugo Palheta's definition of fascism as: 'a mass political movement claiming to work to regenerate the nation (whether it is conceived as a homogeneous whole or, on the contrary, as strongly hierarchised and dominated by a particular ethno-racial group) by wiping out all conflict (hence the denunciation of the left/right divide for example), all contestation – political, union-based, religious, journalistic or artistic – and anything that might jeopardise the principle of its imagined ('racial' and/or 'cultural') unity – particularly racial, religious, and/or sexual minorities' (Palheta, 2018).

The Indian left wing, which is sociologically fragmented, ideologically divided, and suffering a decline in material and symbolic resources, therefore also now faces intimidation from the physical violence of a belligerent Right, whose political and cultural agenda seems well on its way to achieving hegemony. The ultra-nationalist discourse of the Hindutva forces coupled with the muzzling of political, academic, and media dissent is fostering strong patriotic sentiment and the increasing stigmatisation of Muslims. Indian secularism, the common denominator of the country's left wing, has never been weaker.

It is clear today that no political movement, whether partisan or not, offers an ideological repertoire capable of combining the interests of Dalits, Muslims, women, so-called 'tribal populations', agricultural labourers, small farmers, industry workers, and labourers in the informal sector. The demands of these different groups seem forever to condemn them to compete against one another, even while many individuals are in fact at the intersection of several of these groups and share the same condition as victims of an economic exploitation increasingly linked to the financialisation of the economy. In the current political climate, relentless opposition to the rise of fascism is perhaps the only path left for the left wing to try and recover some unity and, above all, to continue having some measure of influence over 21st-century India.

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