

Acharya Narendra Deva Memorial lecture

Delivered by Sri Achyut Patwardhan
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Acharya Narendra Dev has a special place of honour in the saga of National regeneration. I came into close contact with Acharya Narendra Deva during the years 1934-1955. Thus, I had an opportunity of seeing him work with his colleagues at the University. He was a very erudite person and there was hardly any other leader in our public life who was gifted with such deep learning.

He had studied western philosophy as well as Indian philosophy under some brilliant professors like Mahamahopadhyaya Pt. Ganganath Jha in Allahabad and Dr. Venis in Benaras. But Acharyaji was quick to see that the tradition of Brahmanic learning had almost lost its soul and was riddled with conventional methods of study. And the persons themselves who espoused this precious learning were by superstitions. It took Max Mueller and Jones and other western scholars to bring to the western educated Indians the light of eastern wisdom. It is not a surprise that he turned to the deep insights and ethical message of the Buddha. His work on Buddhism is a testimony to his deep and critical research in the teaching of the Buddha as well as the subsequent philosophical developments. His study of the Theravada was based on original Pali texts including the Tripitaka. Further, he took the trouble of learning French to study some of the Mahayana texts which were not readily available in Sanskrit. It is a magnificent exercise of intellectual research that a person so steeped in learning should put his learning aside for a time because he recognized that the regeneration of the Indian citizen had a priority over academic learning and research. It is not that he valued the teaching of the Buddha less but his insights had led him to recognize the supreme urgency of political regeneration of man and society.

Therefore, his political initiation, which began early in his life, took him along paths of organized political action for the emancipation of India from British domination. And he considered no suffering too great in meeting this challenge. He was blessed with an enviable family background. His father was a prosperous lawyer and a deeply religious man but it was not the outer form of religious faith that held Narendra Deva in its system of obligations. With the help of Buddhism he freed himself from Hindu Orthodoxy. Needless to say he realized that the caste system was the greatest enemy of the spiritual heritage of this noble land.

He was deeply involved in efforts of loosening the fetters of caste-ism. Acharya Narendra Deva had discovered that a social system which holds people in its bondage for centuries and saps their vitality and freedom is, at its roots, a mental obsession. He was not a Buddhist for nothing were he not to see this; "Mind is the forerunner of all things, mind is chief and they are mine-made. If with an impure mind one speaks or acts, then misery follows just as the cart-wheels follow the ox's hoof." (Dhammapada,1)

For Narendra Deva, political freedom was not an end unto itself; it was the beginning of a new crusade against the avoidable exploitation of man by man, in the rural areas as well as in modern industrial towns. Acharyaji turned to the study of Marxism in the mid-twenties and became a deeply versed in Marxist Philosophy. But unlike other students of Marx he had a fairly richer philosophical background of Hindu, Buddhist and Jaina philosophy. But what drew him to Marxism was Marx's insistence on relating his philosophical theories to this contemporary economic situation- 19th century industrialization. It is useful to note that Marx had set of views on the economic system as it had emerged during the first half of the 19th century. The communist Manifesto represents a landmark in communist thought and was published in 1848. Narendra Deva was much impressed by the materialist interpretation of history and the postulate of class war.

However, after all his deep study of Marxism , Narendra Deva stoutly denied two postulates of Russian Communism, one, the dictatorship of the proletariat , and two, the suppression of democracy. Writing in 1951 Acharyaji said, "The revolutionary intelligentsia alone can provide the right leadership to the proletariat...The labour peasant class in India is weak and illiterate, it needs the leadership of those who have had the benefits of education and modern knowledge. There is no wisdom in extolling the masses to the skies. The peasant and worker find it hard to comprehend the theoretical aspect of revolution."

Therefore, Narendra Deva always believed that his vanguard of Indian's radical social change would be the lower middle class intelligentsia.

"These revolutionaries come to form a new class unrelated to the property ownership or job security because of their common commitment to the cause of the disadvantaged section of the society." As the head of Kashi Vidyapeeth and in later years, Narendra Deva noticed that there are thousands of young men coming from the lower middle class who braved lathi charges and jail in 1920 and again in 1932 and yet again in 1940-42. These were the most dynamic elements who responded to Gandhiji's call for self- sufficiency. Their only need was to put them through an educative course of social studies and social work, a commitment to serve the poor, a new sense of kinship and loyalty to the cause of the dispossessed. The distinguishing character of this team lay in its unqualified defiance of caste prejudices. They would be a most potent force for radical social change not only for removing economic injustice but even more for liberation this unhappy land from the shackles of untouchability and Casteism. With the training of such cadres in a proper understanding of India's precious cultural heritage and the demands of modern condition of industrial society, India would forge for itself a new path for social change without the use of violence and force. These ideas have been formulated with great clarity by Acharya Narendra Deva in his programme of the Nav Sanskriti Sangha.

The course of events during the last forty years compels us to discover the relevance of Acharya Narendra Deva's political and social perspective through the tragic decline in our public life, particularly in political life all over India. We must restate his primary postulate, that the concept of the sovereignty of common people can only be expressed faithfully through a democratic government committed to the emancipation of our unfortunate lower classes from the nightmare of economic insecurity and unemployment and to pave the way for political stability. The highly degenerate character of the Congress party and its pathetic distortion have created a contradiction between a democratic form and its total betrayal, from the centre to the panchayat level. In this crisis the failure of opposition parties is even more deplorable. They have all proved equally unworthy of the confidence of the Indian People.

A new political disease has gradually come to assume a positively undemocratic character. This is represented by the articulation of caste as a symbol of backwardness. One of the major shortcomings of the Indian socialists' analysis of poverty is that it stressed the factor of class and the conflict between the classes implicit in a feudal industrial order and harped only upon a single factor, viz., the abolition of the private ownership of land by functionless landlords and also a dynamic capitalist class. The factor that was ignored was the sociological truth that Indian society is fragmented by a multiplicity of castes with a rigid sense of the high and the low. Apart from the four Varnas, India has a series of castes and sub-castes with a traditional pecking order. In actual fact, the three upper varnas have absorbed the many subcastes born of intermarriages. In education and lifestyle they have formed an upper intellectual class of society with the advantage of western education and economic stability. The class referred to by Acharya Narendra Deva is the educated middle class which was uprooted from its village moorings and was more or less urbanized, more adaptable for finding its place in the expanding context of an industrial commercial society. This situation left out a large class of persons belonging to the other backward castes. The scheduled castes who were mainly concerned with the skinning of dead animal and such other essential functions remained a class apart. There were other like those who reared pigs which were the rural scavengers and other castes consisting of rural crafts were also part of the submerged section of society. By and large this would give an idea of this would give an idea of the caste fragmentation of the society with its own arbitrary conception of higher and lower.

This is an outline of the fragmentation to which the Indian Marxists including the socialists have turned a blind eye. To talk of class solidarity or to assert that they have nothing to lose but their chains is unrealistic because the central problem (solution) of Indian society is the creation of consciousness of mutual interdependence, of shared task of liberating ourselves from the network of social inequality and inequity. With all due respect to Acharyaji, I feel that this complexity of the caste structure in every part of rural India as affecting the poorer section has not received its due share of attention, by all those who have cherished the ideals and striven through service and welfare activities of his disadvantaged class. Jayaprakash Narain's slogan of Total Revolution is a glaring instance of this blindness.

It may be pointed out that the Indian working class in urban industry carried in his outwardly changed environment the obsessive prejudices of his rural past. Caste cleavages, therefore, regard to the problem of social change. Speaking realistically one must accept that in an epoch of sophisticated militarism, the world has to cope with the aggressors' power who have industrial as well as military clout while the sale of weapons led by the members of the United Nations Security Council there is no room for the hypocrisy which dominates international relations. As in the case of Tibet we have to accept the brute fact that Tibet is under the jackboot of Chinese hegemony. The tragedy is that a country with a bright record like India has spoilt its fair name by acquiescing and supporting the illegal and unrighteous occupation of Tibet from the time of Jawaharlal Nehru. After the break up of the Russian empire, a process of disintegration of states has begun in Europe. Today it affects Yugoslavia, it has also broken the integrity of Czechoslovakia. Unfortunately, India lacks thinkers of the stature of Acharya Narendra Deva or Sardar Patel who could cope with reverberations of these world events on the destiny of this land. Our only hope lies in a new spirit of national dedication, coupled with a global outlook and deep study which has been disappearing from the fraternity of university teachers.

Each university has to be a think tank for insoluble national problems. We can leave them to the politician only at our own peril. For me Acharya Narendra Deva is a beacon light inviting the best brains of the land to dedicate themselves afresh to an effort to discover the lost direction in our advance? I hope Lucknow University will prevent its politicization and provide sane guidance to the government with the insights of our precious cultural heritage.