

Out of touch with reality

By Kuldip Nayar

Democracy

IT used to be said until the 1960s that a boy or a girl who was not a leftist by the age of 20 should consult a doctor. Such sentiments were not a fashion but a part of idealism. Students felt that the gap between the haves and the have-nots was unjust and they would agitate against it.

Today they are interested in cushy jobs or comfortable living. The word 'left' is taboo lest the corporate sector should come to suspect them of having 'disruptive tendencies'. There are few study circles where the problems of the poor are discussed. But there are numerous seminars on how to build capital quickly.

A few NGOs are keeping the flame of service burning. But they have little time to work on alternatives to overhaul society. Their main hindrance is feudal thinking or the arrogance of the rich. The latter control even the democratic system. NGOs have not been able to reignite liberal thinking, much less of what is considered 'left'.

I was studying at Lahore from 1941 to 1946. By then the idea of Pakistan had caught the imagination of most Muslims. Yet we were all members of the Students' Federation which was secular and pro-left. Our different religious identities or diametrically opposed thinking on partition did not come in the way of reacting to the demand for the release of soldiers and officials of the Indian National Army (INA).

The trial of three officers, one Hindu, one Muslim and one Sikh, was a challenge for each community. Yet the students under the banner of the federation came out on the streets. It may sound odd, but it is true that the noise to release the INA men was as loud as the demand for Pakistan to 'protect' Muslims from the preponderant Hindu majority. The British had to give in and release all the INA men.

The left thinking continued to prevail in the entire subcon-

methods of exploitation of the undeveloped or under-developed. Financial meltdown is the result of rich individuals and nations living beyond even their means and expecting the poor to pay for their profligacy. The result is the world has more poor than before.

Still outbursts in schools like Osborne in France, America's belated fight against McCarthyism and the mowing down of youth by Chinese forces at Tiananmen Square indicate the desire of people to stay free. In India itself, the Naxalite movement to overhaul society has reignited aspirations. But the cult of violence scotches the dream of democratic change. Guns have become the ideology and fanaticism the vehicle.

India is aping the West when it should be preparing to usher in the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi who said that the progress of a country should be measured by the effort it had made to uplift the poorest to positions where they could hold their head high against the rich and powerful. Gandhi warned that the "wrong means" would not lead to the "right results".

The crisis of Indian politics today is a crisis of change. It reflects the widening gap between the base of the polity and its structure. During the last couple of decades both the political and economic process has brought sections of the peripheral and deprived social strata into the active political community. Particularly in the north, intermediate peasant castes have bettered economic conditions with the help of new agricultural technologies. They are no longer willing to accept a political dispensation weighed in favour of the traditionally privileged. This is a process which started first in the south.

The Dalits too are aware of their rights now, thanks to the slowly changing opportunity structure and efforts by political parties to mobilise their support. They are demanding a change for betterment. At the same time, there is a growing demand for purposive and principled politics, a deep feeling of revulsion

prevail in the entire subcontinent even after partition, although less vigorously in West Pakistan than East Pakistan and India. When the communists won in Kerala in 1950, it was felt as if Yunan, a territory in China, had been established in India and that the colour red would spread all over the country. But nearly 50 years later, the left has a strength of only nine in the Lok Sabha.

Unfortunately, the rout of communists in West Bengal and Kerala has focused attention on their governments' failings, the infighting or incidents like those at Nandigram where its cadre joined hands with the police to commit brutalities on the rural Bengali population. The real discussion why communism as an ideology has been declining in India and elsewhere is not taking place.

No doubt, the victory of the rich West in the Cold War has been so stunning that there has been no organised left formation since the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Communist China is too nationalistic to revive the ideological dialogue. Its energy is confined to building areas of influence. Who is there to talk about the left? Intellectuals and thinkers increasingly concentrate on democracy as if it is a substitute for the left. The opposite of communism is capitalism.

The new idiom is 'reform' which is the anti-thesis of any revolutionary thinking. This is why new global economic policies have come to be seen as

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against the policies of self-aggrandisement and mounting anger over the neglect of the public interest.

Public interest is also what the left throughout the world has lost sight of. The ideological dark glasses of those in the left do not allow them to see that communism or any other 'ism' or, for that matter, democracy is not an end in itself. The end is the individual, the common man who cannot be used for ideological purposes. He is not devoid of sentiments, nor is he part of a machine. The left has denied people what may be called the moral and spiritual side of life, something basic in man.

When consumerism and commercialism take over society, they kill feelings of care that were part of idealism. There was an instinctive desire to help. The embers of sensitivity are still burning. The need is to stoke these. The mere structure of democracy is not enough. Its spirit has to be understood. Until idealism returns, stirrings against exploitation cannot take shape. Those who want to foster liberal thinking cannot afford to be out of touch with reality. ■

The writer is a leading journalist based in Delhi.