

I. P. Desai Memorial Lecture : 5



**SOCIAL POLICY,
'DEVELOPMENT' AND DEMOCRACY**

Rajni Kothari

CENTRE FOR SOCIAL STUDIES

PREFACE

To honour its founder, Prof. I.P. Desai, who died on 26 January 1985, the Centre for Social Studies created an endowment fund to which his friends and admirers contributed generously. Intended to promote such activities as were dear to Prof. Desai, the fund has been utilised to institute an annual I.P. Desai Memorial Lecture series. The first four lectures were delivered by Profs. Ramkrishna Mukherjee, A.R. Desai, Yogendra Singh and M.S. Gore.

It gives us great pleasure to make available to a wider academic readership the fifth lecture which was delivered by Prof. Rajni Kothari on 26 March 1990. Like his predecessors in the series, and in accordance with the kind of praxiologically oriented sociology of which I.P. Desai was a powerful proponent, Prof. Kothari deals with certain critical issues dogging the Indian polity, issues with which he has been grappling for the past few years. We are grateful to Prof. Kothari for having readily responded to our invitation to deliver the lecture.

I must thank Prof. Ghanshyam Shah and Dr. Biswaroop Das for kindly preparing the copy for the press, and Shri Bhupen Khakhar for designing the cover for publications under this lecture series.

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So far the focus of development has been on a model that was based on a specific economic sequence - laying the infrastructure of industrialization which is supposed to lead to capital accumulation that will in turn distribute the benefits of development, for a long time unevenly, creating a great deal of inequalities (for that is inherent in the very process of accumulation), but ultimately that very accumulation can lead to making available to the masses goods and services that will raise their standards of living, and thus in the end narrow inequalities, eradicate poverty and lead to an era of prosperity and the rise of a truly socialist

welfare state that looked after the well being of its people. The concern that is now being expressed is that something has gone wrong with this assumption of an automatic transition from accumulation to distribution; the liberal assumption that there would be an elite that would facilitate a trickle down, or the socialist assumption that we would have a state that will, through progressive taxation and a series of welfare measures, force redistribution of wealth and income. The concern being expressed is that something has gone wrong with both the technical processes of accumulation of capital through investment priorities and induced rates of saving, and the political processes of forcing the rich to share their wealth with the poor through the instrumentality of the State.

Much of the debate on the poverty line, on sectoral balances and imbalances and on the rise of an Intermediate Regime based on the interests of an intermediate class is addressed to this failure. Same is the case with the Technological argument that we were lagging behind other countries because of a technological lag and because of the hold of misleading ideologies like self-reliance and import substitution.

In fact while the earlier kind of progressive economists' argument for the state to intervene on behalf of those under the poverty line through radical measures still continues, the major economic argument that has been gaining ground over the last fifteen years, and in particular during the decade of the eighties,

is of a technological or techno-economic kind, in conjunction with a new ideology on the relationship between the state and the economy, namely that of liberalization and privatization, lowering the thresholds of the State and raising the thresholds of the Market, and alongside that, opening up the country's economic process to enable it to get integrated into the global economic market, both through a larger and broader role given to economic expertise provided by transnational corporations and international bodies like the World Bank, and through a large dose of technology transfers, first to increase the sophistication of Indian technology through imported technologies, and then to create indigenous technological capabilities that will put us at par with the 'advanced' nations. Now, there has been some tension between the technological patriots out to make the country self-reliant in the latest of technologies and economic management through new policies pursued by the State, the ideologies of liberalization and privatization who believe that the market holds the key to broadening the economic base and in the long run fulfilling the needs of the people at large, and the proponents of Western style modernization through collaboration with, indeed entry into the country of, transnational corporations with a view to making the country's economy an integral unit of the world capitalist market. But underlying all three is a new economic philosophy and a new confidence that would shift the emphasis from considering the state as an agent of distributive justice to one which facilitates the model of modernization and the rise of a technocratic class of managers operating at all levels of the economy - including the more decentralised ones.

Common also to all three schools - the technological patriots, the liberalization pragmatists, and the modernization through transnationalization enthusiasts - is one common thread: depoliticization and a model of governance that is managerial, 'rationalist' and benevolent towards the people in the image of a system that dispenses welfare and justice rather than permits social struggles for the same as the latter is likely to create too much of a noise factor and will force the state to be too accommodative of the demand side of the system and make it less an instrument of the supply side of the economy which is what a Techno-Managerial model of economics is after. Depoliticization is written into a model in which abstractions of GDP rates, saving ratios and technological coefficients rule the roost and the human beings, social formations and even the structure of State power are left out of purview.

Incidentally, as far as these abstractions go, the approach of depoliticization goes back much longer and went hand in hand with the economic bureaucratic logic that thought of political issues as either residual issues or as responsible for the economic logic not being allowed to work unconstrained and unimpeded.

The technocratic twist to the economic logic (which was in some ways inherent in that logic given its non-political paradigm)

led to deeper distortions that have pushed economic management into a no man's land. It led to the emphasis on technology transfers from the imperial centres which in turn led to a sharp departure from self-reliance and produced a psychosis in which things alien were preferred to things indigenous, made us targets of indiscriminate imports, created a class of consumers bent upon acquiring ostentatious lifestyles, gave rise to a corrupt elite and a corrupt State, made us turn more and more not just to foreign investors but also to highly expensive borrowings in the open international market, all of this leading to the payment crises, deficit budgets, inflationary spirals and an exploitative fiscal system that, while providing incentives for exports, led to increasing resort to dip into the poor men's meagre earnings and savings if any. From now on economics became the art of firefighting with rising rates of debt servicing, subsidised exports out of an economy that had less and less surpluses left and had become less and less cost-effective, and resort to ever growing borrowings and collaborations abroad at increasing economic and political costs given the compulsion to go around with a begging bowl and increasingly desperate implorations to foreign investors with promises of favourable climates at home and acceptance of more and more draconian 'conditionalities' which meant a closure on trade union activity, violation of minimum wages legislations and a massive growth of the unorganised sector composed of bonded women and children and migrant labour kept in order through a rising reign of repression and mafia bandobust.

The issue that I want to address myself to in this lecture is how the earlier statistical pursuit of economics from capital-output ratios to poverty line and GINI index analysis and the later gaining ground of the techno-managerial model which has since forced economics into a firefighting operation on behalf of the consumer class have left out of their calculations - if not their concerns - the social question that has been looming large and shaking our very faith in the system, in the State under which we are asked to organise our lives, and of late in the very Constitution and the institutional order and legal instrumentalities that were supposed to provide a framework of justice if not equity but have demonstrably failed to do so. I want to argue that it is by giving up both the economic and technocratic visions - in which either numbers or computers are supposed to produce results - that we can deal with the social question, the human question, the questions of rights and liberties of the people.

Hence the need to focus on social policy as distinct from both economic policy and technological choices. For what has gone on so far in the name of Development has been anti-Development, what has gone on in the name of Progress and Modernization has been a massive structure of exploitation. And the much talked of integration of the domestic economy and its integration in the world market, has in fact resulted in deep social schisms, massive fragmentation of civil society and a corrosive envi-

ronment of atomistic competition and group clashes that have riven asunder the whole social fabric, in the process creating deep pathologies like communalism, caste animosities and religious turmoil. This has happened because it was a model of development that was devoid of any democratic content, a model of nation-building that kept a large part of the presumed 'nation' out of its institutional and programmatic framework and a model of the State that was colonial, pre-empted by the consuming classes and, by becoming increasingly dependent on the external world, denying to its own people even subjecthood, let alone citizenship, 'participation' and the capacity to hold the State accountable to even its own self-proclaimed commitments. Macro-economic developmentalism has undermined the very rationale and roots of democratic rights. It has created the phenomenon of Two Indias on which I have written and lectured at some length in recent years - one India that has access to the trinity of the modern State, modern Technology and the modern Market and the other India kept out of and way beyond any access to this trinity.

Today, as we find ourselves on the thresholds of a new democratic consciousness - all over the world as well as in our own midst - we need to think anew of the basic approach and point of departure of how and in what way we can rebuild this highly fragmented and divided and atomised and tattered society into a nation once again and towards a truly independent and inclusive and self-reliant statehood.

I want to propose that what we need to think about and develop in the years that lie ahead - in this decade of the nineties - is not merely an alternative framework of economic policy, not even an alternative model of development or an alternative paradigm of science and technology and an alternative of knowledge - all of which we need to continue thinking about - but a well thought out and articulated social policy, one that addresses itself to the reality of a society in deep turmoil and widening chasms, of not just millions of marginalised people but scores of marginalised communities and social segments, of the poor, the oppressed, the humiliated, the insecure, groups full of not just destitution but also fear and loss of faith and psychic erosion and isolation.

Now, we never had a considered social policy - despite all the talk of our being a plural society. For this culturally and ethnically plural society is also a society full of poverty and social disparities, of regional imbalances and of diverse eco-systems at the receiving end of which are the exploited tribal and hill peoples, the variety of 'backwards' rendered so by virtue of being deprived of their natural resource base, or one continuing to be so feudal and repressively feudal as to lord over hordes of bonded labour with their women being considered like chattel and subjected to acts of male vandalism by the landed castes who themselves are so socially divided as to indulge in gang warfare and blood baths of revenge and retaliations spurred by family and caste feuds.

Traditionally, we had an extremely precisely worked out social policy - based on a caste hierarchy organised around the varna and jati differentiations. This still survives in the minds of many but has been under the impact of many forces. We the moderns announced long back that we want to replace the caste society by a more egalitarian and more just social order, but beyond chanting those ideological mantras, had never come up with an alternative social policy. Nor did we do so when we realized the logic of our being a plural society that called for a democratic articulation that was different from what had developed in more homogeneous and unitary societies.

To be sure, we have had a plethora of social legislation and point programmes. India has perhaps the most extensive structure of schemes covering all aspects of the social situation and all types of social segments - be they marginal farmers and landless labourers, dalits and adivasis, backward classes and other backward classes, minorities of various types, women and children, migrants and bonded labourers, industrial workers and those employed in the unorganised sectors, construction workers and unemployed labourers, and of course for all types of entrepreneurs and would-be entrepreneurs, even women entrepreneurs, investors and depositors and loan borrowers and even those seeking loan write-offs. You name a social or economic or even political stratum, even the sick of various types and the handicapped and the mentally deranged

- there is a scheme for each and, in all probability, a legislation too. We have a lot of other stipulations too, in some of which we were ahead of others as, for instance, in the whole area of reverse discrimination or what we call reservations for jobs and access to educational opportunities and even elected positions around which quite a lot of case law and authoritative pledges and commitments have got built. Even countries like USA and UK seem to have taken a leaf out of our experience and compare favourably the steps we have taken in the light of their own although in their case 'affirmative action' also and especially include women whereas we are only beginning to think of reservations for women and that too more as promises held out than promises kept (with the single exception of Karnataka at the Panchayat level). We have another kind of special deal in the case of religious minorities, such as the personal law relating to marriage and inheritance or in respect of special privileges accorded to the running of minority institutions in the field of education and the like though in all this we have underwritten discriminatory rather than emancipatory kinds of treatment.

Which brings me to my main observation. While there has been a whole array of schemes and pronouncements, including legislations and even constitutional provisions that deal with social segments of various kinds, we do not have as yet even the elements of what can be called Social Policy that is based on a set of principles and values, or even considerations of a pragmatic kind that are held together in some kind of a system. We have both inherited and

developed further, through processes of development and modernization, a highly inequitable social order that has built into its operating structure a large measure of social oppression, vindictiveness, brutalization and humiliation that is backed by a repressive apparatus of physical coercion, intimidation and terror that emanates from the very interstices and agents of the State. Both the oppressive and the repressive structures draw upon more native processes of social vandalism and atrocities that are perpetrated by paid agents of landlords and communalists, and of late, electoral candidates and their agents who draw upon the same style of vandalism and violence.

Quite apart from the more serious manifestations of social oppression there is the broader and more pervasive issue of marginalization that has been growing in the wake of increasing dualism of both the economy and the social order. The emerging scenario is one of a big push towards marginalization of several social strata in objective terms and an attitude of dispensability and deliberate exclusion, associated with shades of class, ethnic and racial contempt, in subjective terms on the part of a large cross-section of the elite. It is with reference to this scenario that political and social thinking in terms of a framework of social policy has urgently become necessary.

There is another pressing reason why we need to evolve a coherent social policy. It is that many of the specific initiatives and

approaches that we had adopted have each run their course and face some kind of an internal deadlock as well as a growing political backlash. This is the case with reservations of the type we have pursued, namely availability of government jobs and placements in institutions of higher learning that would enable deprived communities to become qualified for middle class jobs or government or a few professions like doctors and lawyers. On each of these the larger middle class has started hitting back somewhat ruthlessly. At the same time there is also evidence of growing alienation of large segments of the eligible castes and classes from the few that get qualified and move up. Reservation as a policy may get a lot of lip-service endorsements but is in a state of thorough crisis. What is more, it is not a policy that is extended to really basic issues such as land rights, access to village commons, availability of wells and water resources, and the general condition of women belonging to these classes who continue to be mauled and raped.

In a way the same has happened to legislation protecting minority lifestyles and personal and family codes. For reasons I do not have to go into, the issue of Muslim Personal Law has run into heavy weather both from the communal elements in the party system and from human rights groups who are working on modern universal assumptions of feminine rights. Worse still, the growing antipathy to the issue of personal law gets transferred into larger animosities such as reflected in either the Ramjanmabhoomi-Babri Masjid conflict or issues like Article 370 for Jammu and Kashmir. In some

ways the same applies to pleas of retaining special cultural rights of tribals and the hill peoples as part of a cultural approach to a plural society. It is all getting engulfed into a larger cesspool of communal and anti-minorities sentiment which is a result of the larger failure to evolve a policy that is sensitive to the combination of two related factors: socio-economic marginalization, and attack on specific cultural and ethnic rights of diverse communities.

In the meanwhile a number of things have happened as a result of the model of development that we have followed that are prejudicial to the deprived sections of our people. I have in mind two sets of problems, one on the ecological front and the other on the ethnic front. Ecologically the destruction of the natural base of the people that has gone on as a result of deforestation, desertification, social erosion and the crumbling of water tables has eroded the survival prospects of the poor and in particular of the strata of population that were dependent on forests and the village commons and other common property resources. Even schemes meant to improve ecological and social erosions, such as wasteland and dryland development, or the attempt to reach portable water to the poor have been hijacked by not only the upper rural segments but also the entry of the corporate sector and even entrepreneurs from abroad. On the ethnic front, the homogenising impact of the development process and the growing disparities in its wake have pushed tribal and other ethnic groups into the political arena of struggles based on claims of nationality, regional auton-

omy and even separation and secession from the Indian State. Over time this has become prone to exploitation by criminalised and mafia segments of the party space which has led to a transformation of legitimate demands into confrontations that are then dealt with ruthlessly by police and para-military forces. What is not often realized is that underlying the growing ethnic divisions and insurgencies and convulsions lie basic issues of social and economic justice, and the failure of the system to promote the values that go with a democratic and just political and social order. All this has also given rise to a series of regional movements that have been occasioned by growing social disparities, regional disparities, ethnic revolts and ecological imbalances, affecting the very health of the federal polity. The latest assertion of federal and decentralist principles as operating norms of running the Indian State, on which there is not just the commitment of a particular set of (hitherto opposition) parties but a growing consensus across the board, may not mean much in the absence of attending to the root causes of the centre-periphery alienation that looms large in the functioning of the Indian Constitution and its institutional infrastructure. The whole problematique of building a democratic polity is bound to remain problematic if we are not to face up to the deeper social causes of the present malaise.

Let me say that I have no readymade model of social policy that should inform our thinking on development and democracy. But I am convinced that we need to move towards such a policy

framework. All I can do in the short time available to me is to simply recapture the analysis already laid out and outline five major dimensions along with an interrelated set of policies that can be evolved, producing in their overall thrust a package that can make sense holistically and provide a framework of social intervention.

First, there is the broad class dimension which presents a complex of class, caste, gender and generational factors; class being the predominant one but in our own special Indian setting. There is not just urgent but crying need to arrest the growth of disparities, inequalities, exclusions, discriminations and disenfranchisements that have resulted in wide-ranging despair and disillusionment among such a large variety of classes that have virtually been pushed outside the social and economic system. Large segments of the dalits in their diverse social settings and the various types of bandhwa mazdoors, the women of these sections and of the various categories of backward castes and classes and forest dwellers who are subjected to gruesome atrocities, their children forced into labour camps and the unorganised tertiary sector, and the growing criminalization of many of these segments - all this is growing and certainly needs to be halted.

Second, there is the ethnic dimension of deprivation and marginalization that goes beyond the class and caste factors and emanates from the particular form that pluralism has found under conditions of growing centralization and homogenization, growing

repression and displacement, dislocation and exclusion. It is a mistake to think of the ethnic dimension as being a product of an inherently plural society, as if it was natural to such a society and hence inevitable. It is a result of pluralism gone astray under a repressive authoritarian system of ordering social stratification, one in which the integrative dimension of nation-building has dismally failed and generated massive alienation and disenfranchisement. The worst affected are of course the tribal populations but increasingly immersed in the whirlpool of ethnic exclusion are also religious, certain linguistic and a few OBC type of minorities. The increasingly discriminating treatment of all minorities ranging from the Muslims, Sikhs and some of the Christians to the dalits and adivasis, all of them treated in ways that present them as sources of discord and danger by middle class Hindus and their organisations who have donned the garb of a numerical majority, despite the inherently plural character of Hindu society, has produced an explosive situation that calls for a clear policy from the Indian state.

Third, in part building on the ethnic and in part independent of it is the regional dimension of growing disparities and growing alienation from the national centre. It is a dimension that is slowly getting transformed into both inter- and intra-state conflicts and confrontations, arising essentially from a growing sense of despair that is a result of the very processes that have created such vast disparities. Usually we think of disparities as just another aspect of the scenario of conflict found in any society. In fact both regional

and economic disparities in India, especially the regional kind, are endemic to a condition of structural dualism that has emerged from a striking convergence of inherited inequities from the traditional social system and the deep schisms produced by the modern development process. It is a territorial expression of a fundamental condition of exclusion from the body politic, from the framework of the State and in a deep kind of way from the civil society. There is real need to attend to the regional dimension of structural dualism. We can ignore it at our peril.

Gravely reinforcing the social, ethnic and regional aspects of the structural crisis that has engulfed us is the fourth major dimension, namely the environmental one. It is a dimension on which I feel more pessimistic than on all the other dimensions. There seems to be an almost irreversible drift towards ecological degradation following the technological paradigm of development from which no major segment along the party political spectrum is willing to depart. The technological and world integrative model of development engulfing both urban and rural areas in all societies which is now the dominant model (as compared to the earlier model of urban industrialization in limited regions of the world) has an in-built erosion of the resource base of the people. Even a shift toward fulfilment of minimum needs of the people and a welfare state orientation which can correct class or ethnic disparities do not guarantee safeguarding people's access to a bountiful environment. In the meanwhile major disasters like Bhopal and Baroda and fallouts from nuclear installations will

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continue, and, as we have learnt from the Bhopal experience at great cost, it is again the poorer and marginal sections that are the worst hit by ecological disasters. Similarly, the march of deforestation and the downing of water tables have hurt the same sections. Any comprehensive design of a social policy must necessarily include recapturing the environmental imagination and grounding any radical package of socio-economic transformation in a recovery of the natural resource base of the social structure. Our work so far on and understanding of the structural crisis facing us, including radical theorizing on it, has somehow been bereft of the ecological dimension. We need to come forward with a holistic perspective on social policy that interrelates the condition of marginalised and excluded strata and the situation arising from ethnic revolts and regional convulsions with the phenomenon of marginalization of the larger peripheries of the environmental landscape, and move towards a package of policies that is at one and the same time socially sensitive and ecologically sustainable and makes possible the recovery of lost spaces along both the social and environmental thresholds. Only thus can the democratic aspirations of the people find a deeper root and a wider comprehension.

What we need is an integrated view of both the developmental and the democratic challenge facing us. This can only be achieved by shifting attention from economic firefighting following the macro crisis in which the dominant development model has

driven us and from giving in to the techno-managers who will definitely push us towards an irreversible scenario of Two Indias, to coming to grips with the structural crisis head-on, and doing this by disaggregating the macro-scenario and attending to the diverse yet highly related situations facing the large suffering minorities in the social space. We need to give up treating the problems facing the dalits and adivasis and the exploited classes and women and children and the bonded and other oppressed strata as things that will automatically be sorted out once a degree of capital accumulation takes place and the benefits of the same spread through the good offices of a secular state. There is no such automatism in developmental progression. Nor, as I have repeatedly emphasised in recent years, does the liberal democratic paradigm enable us to respond to the exploitative and oppressive structures of an inequitable social order. Instead, the need is to pressurise both the developmental framework of policies and the democratic structures of institutions to be amenable to the needs and demands, emerging pressures and struggles, of the diverse social strata that have so far been losing in the race for progress and competition and mobility towards a place in the world middle class. Determined interventions to reverse this model of survival of the fittest through the play of both the market and the bureaucracy can only be achieved by, as I said, disaggregating the system and rebuilding the national endeavour from the micro settings of the exploited, the oppressed, the marginalised and the excluded. The present model of macro economics has, through its earlier

failures and contradictions, come to a position of treating these strata and peoples as dispensable. It is by putting them at the centre of the policy process that there is any chance of injecting a sense of purpose and commitment to our democracy. The democratic awakening that is afoot is harkening us to respond to the calls of those condemned to the bottom of the social pyramid and save them the trauma of chaos and violent repression under which they will be submerged if we failed to respond to their call. It is a call for a new framework of policies and a redefined role of the State in civil society.

To recapture my argument, the struggle for social justice is crying to be recognised as an inherent feature of the promise of democracy. But the development paradigm is unable to respond to it.

The issue is that the problems and concerns on which the people get agitated are quite different than what either the parliamentary and party systems, these radical antagonists, the development-wallahs, or the champions of pluralism have gotten involved in.

We face a curious dilemma here: In our (social scientists') attempt to achieve a maximal state performance (raising living standards for all upto high levels of income, achieving a fulsome unity of the country in total non-violence, providing a wholly clean

government, solving with some finality major problems), we have lost the capacity to provide minimal needs, respond to minimal demands, produce a moderate state of justice and cleanliness in public life, or reduce continued violence in the social order to tolerable limits. But what the people are asking for is the latter, not the former. They would no doubt welcome the former (viz. a perfect state) if it was possible. But that is not what they are asking for!

We have never really thought of fulfilling people's democratic aspirations in this manner, namely fulfilment of a package of minimum provisions and facilities for all, in food, in access to drinking water, in health and nutrition through para-medical and ancillary services, through education that focusses on literacy and elementary and functional education for all, through transport and roads and area planning that is built through intermediate and relevant technologies, through a system of welfare that caters to absolutely the basic minimum needs of the poor and the rural people, through a structure of administration that deals with these minimum demands instead of the more sophisticated and ambitious model of governance, and above all a system of both representation and administration of justice and human rights through judicial institutions that attend to people's pressing problems and conflicts.

The reason why we have not thought of the economic, social and administrative components of democracy in any adequate

manner and got ourselves limited to only the political dimension of democracy and human rights is worth going into. The real reason is we have had for too long a model of top down economics that is also intellectually and aesthetically satisfying to the middle class mind apart from providing them a whole structure of privilege and status and lifestyles.

It is an extremely serious situation in which we have landed ourselves. Following a top down and centralised model of economic development and dispensation of justice, we have created a system that has found itself incapable of dealing with major problems, producing in the process growing discontent and disenchantment among the people and isolation of power centres and the middle classes with a yawning vacuum in the spaces that divide the two. It is in those spaces that deeper pathologies like communalism and 'fundamentalism' find a fertile ground and the normal democratic process gets stymied and rendered impotent as a result of these maladies.

In the meanwhile, given these growing schisms and yawning gaps, the institutional edifice that we had at one time created has suffered major erosions and a combination of personalised, techno-managerial actors and agents has emerged that has tried to fill the institutional void. One common characteristic of these three - personalised power brokers, feudal and caste alignments and techno- cratic and managerial agents - is their attitude to the suffering

humanity. There is no empathy in their minds for this humanity. For the poor and the powerless, the dalits, the women, the ecologically impoverished, the tribals and the so-called backward classes - for these there is no place in the minds of these new type of elites operating outside the institutional framework, lacking in accountability and soon moving into equations and deals that form a large culture of corruption and influence - peddling on which not only the whole structure of black money and slashed away funds thrives but also leads to trading away our interests as a nation through deals like Bofors, the submarines and the Airbuses - an all-out model of corruption of public life against which the electorate has recently revolted and signalled a warning to the new inheritors of power as well. The warning bells that have been sounded should take us to the heart of both the institutional-cum-political and the developmental-cum social crises in which we find ourselves. They could well be lost on the new leadership that may get into the arrogant posture of having 'won' elections and having 'defeated' their rivals, and may also get lost in the same old jungle of bureaucratic functioning and managerial and technocratic super-structure - and forget the basic reason why the change in power was brought about by the people.

The agenda that emerges is not a spectacular revolutionary one of capture of power with a view to producing a national utopia. It is instead far more mundane yet far more basic - of taking the people seriously, respecting their thinking and wisdom, produc-

ing structures and institutions and technologies that can respond to their needs, and adopting attitudes and values that respond to their voices, the voices from below, the voices of the powerless who have once again entrusted power to a set of parties within the parliamentary framework but are expecting them to transcend that framework and come down to the bottom line.

Now this new stirring of change, coming from the poor and oppressed, the dalits and the tribals and also from the youth all over the country, more than from the urbanite middle classes and the upper rural strata, is asking from us who are committed to civil liberties and democratic rights, something far more fundamental than we are used to. It harkens us to get down to basics, to show our solidarity with the oppressed and the powerless not in terms of some utopia that we come up with but in terms of basic and minimum needs that they are concerned about. And similarly rethink our conceptions of national unity, regional and ethnic diversity, and the just and humane demands of people who have lost confidence in a New Delhi-based conception of the nation-state in relation to which they have for long felt powerless and alienated.

Can we respond to this new stirring along socio-economic paths and political and institutional modalities that will arise from a basic allegiance to the marginalised and excluded peoples and communities? The scenario we face is in many ways frightening - unless we are willing to come up with the courage of our convictions,

to do justice to people and classes and regions whom we have through our own past actions driven out of the system, to align ourselves with them, to get a sense of power by a solidarity with those outside the kernel of power.

The question is: are we really willing to align ourselves with the powerless and the excluded, including those that we have alienated politically? Do we have the courage and the will to come forward and respond to this question? Are we willing to not just wipe the tears and heal the wounds and be with the depressed and the downtrodden, but to fearlessly oppose all vested interests that prevent us from doing our various bits in this direction?

It is a completely different agenda that is picked up from the peripheries and built upon from them - as I said, fulfilling basic needs of life sustenance and nurturance, basic social security and removal of the worst forms of oppression and exploitation and marginalization. It is the fear of moving into a new terrain emerging from the masses that we have to eschew. Only then we will be truly free and provide freedom to our people - genuine freedom. We have long suffered from a fear of freedom, especially the freedom to move into unconventional terrains. Let us move away from this fear of freedom towards a freedom from fear. Only then will concerned intellectuals become part of the people they are supposed to identify with but from whom they are still found at such a distance.