

# Neoliberal Capitalism, Resistance and Crisis of the Left in India

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## Introduction

Neoliberal capitalism is no longer restricted to one geographical location. It is universal. Those who opposed the universal categories on grounds of it being undemocratic, homogenizing and limiting are confronted with the fact that capitalism is a universal phenomenon and the battle against it has to be fought through the universal category of class. Only a political struggle grounded in commitment to an exploitation free world can contest the callousness, aggression, arrogance and unimaginative world of capital. However, this struggle is not easy as ruling class, today, has at its disposal technology and instruments that ensure maximization of profit and limit the realization that capitalists survive only because labour creates value that is unjustly appropriated by it. This was realized by Engels when he was writing preface to *Wage, Labour and Capital*:

“In the present state of production, human labor-power not only produces in a day a greater value than it itself possesses and costs; but with each new scientific discovery, with each new technical invention, there also rises the surplus of its daily production over its daily cost, while as a consequence there diminishes that part of the working-day in which the laborer produces the equivalent of his day's wages, and, on the other hand, lengthens that part of the working-day in which he must present labor gratis to the capitalist.”

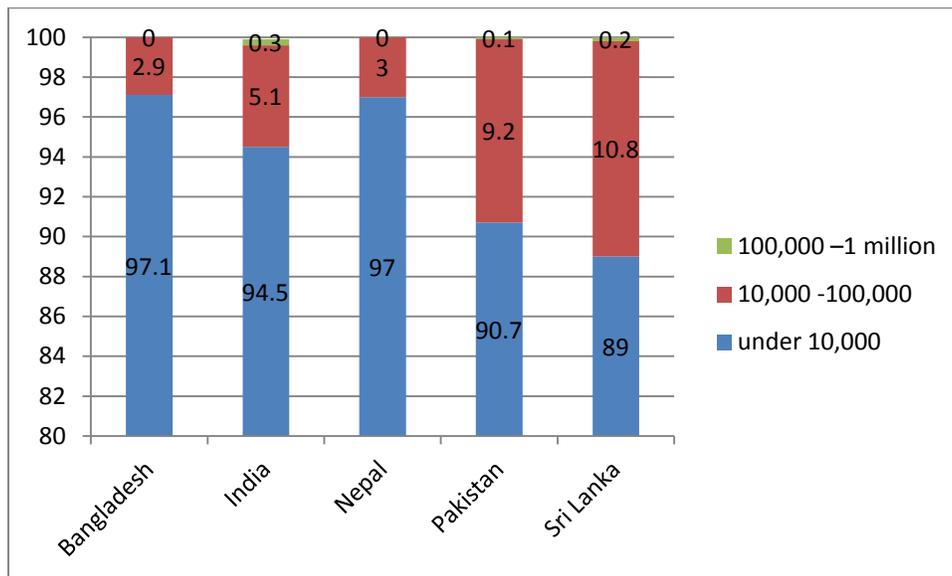
Neoliberalism takes this whole process to a whole new level but also produces contradictions that threaten capital's own existence. These contradictions are generally latent and come to the surface when capitalism is in crisis. Recent times have also shown that crisis is there but capitalism successfully manages it, largely due to absence of a sharper and potent class consciousness. For instance, in recent times one has seen an extremely narrow understanding of the idea of privatization. The Indian state, in case of Indian Railways, has been trying to tell that they would not hand it over to private capital but in reality component of its operation are being gradually privatized. In other words, contradictions are to be sharpened and made use of in order to defeat the rule of capital. This paper is an effort to briefly map the situation of pauperisation and marginalization that contemporary capitalism has produced in India while a few keep getting richer and how it also produces possibilities of resistance from the Left which is somehow lacking.

296,438 farmers have committed suicide in India between 1995 to 2013 (Sainath, 2014). Almost 60% of total health expenditure in India was paid by the common man from his own pocket in 2009 as over 39 million Indians get pushed to poverty because of illnesses annually. In fact, illness is one of the major causes of indebtedness in India as nearly 47% and 31% of hospital admissions in rural and urban India, respectively, were financed by loans and sale of assets (Sinha, 2012). Educationally, there has been a

segmentation of schools wherein the poor, girls and other marginalized groups go to ill-equipped state run schools and those wanting a 'better' education go to the private schools. The drop-out rates are still huge leave aside the issue of quality in education. The pauperization of teaching labour-force like any other site of production continues unabated.

On the other hand, poverty is increasing amidst the clamour of a high growth rate. In fact, the growth rate has been driven by the skewed wealth accumulation in a few hands. This skewed wealth accumulation, generally, has happened because of failure to share the fruits of rising productivity in form of wages with workers. In fact, reports have indicated that the real wages have not grown at the same speed as the growth of labour productivity (ILO, 2013, p.46). In last few decades the gap between rich and poor has increased in India. The larger picture shows that there is a vast gap between those having income under \$ 10,000 and those having income above that. In fact, the difference between the richest 10% and the poorest 10% of population is huge.

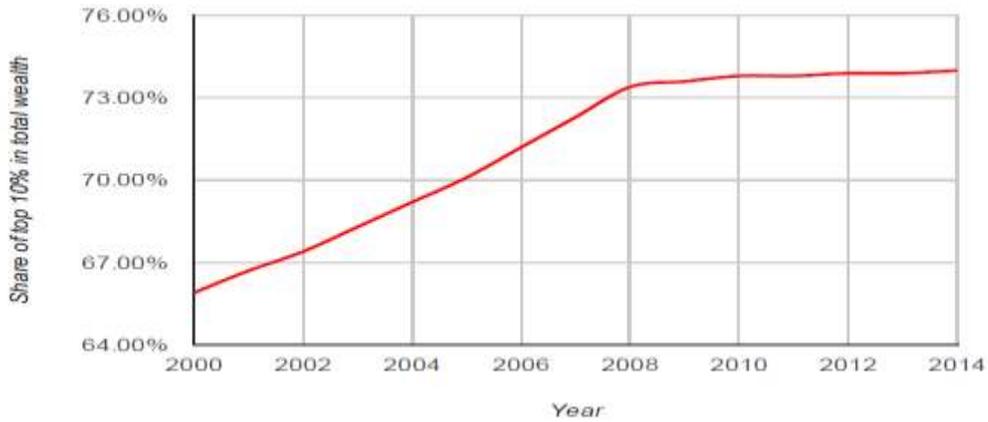
Chart No.1: High Net worth Individuals by region and country (Figure in \$)



Source: Credit Suisse (2014),

There is a growing tendency of polarization between rich and poor in the society today. While productivity increases it does not translate into improvement of condition of vast mass but rather in skewed accumulation of wealth as indicated by the figures below. In recent past this has happened steadily.

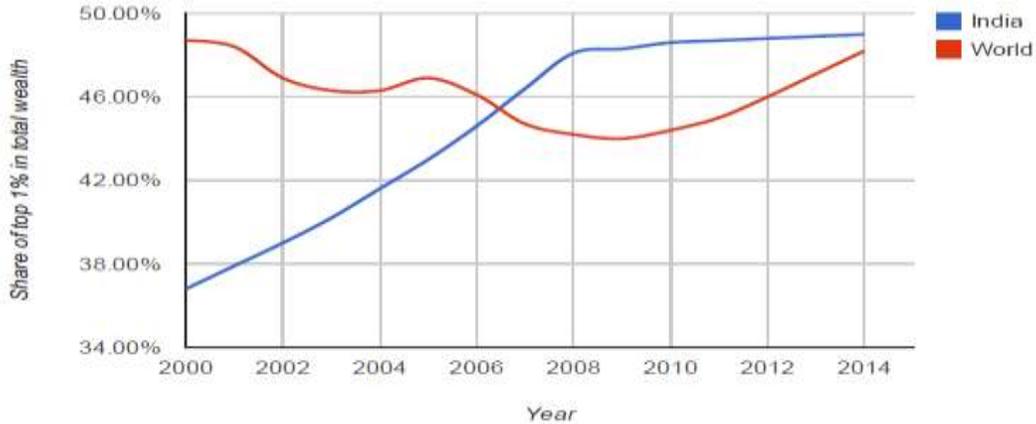
Chart No. 2: Wealth share of India's top 10% over years



Source: (Rukmini, 2014)

This growth in wealth of a few people has been obscene. In fact, it is so stark that the growth in their wealth leaves behind the growth of top 1% richest people across the world. In the year 2000 India's richest 1% had "a lower of share of India's total wealth than the world's top 1 per cent held of its total wealth. That changed just before and after the global recession – though the world's superrich are recovering and India's top 1% holds close to half of the country's total wealth" (Rukmini, 2014).

Chart No.3: Wealth share of top 1%



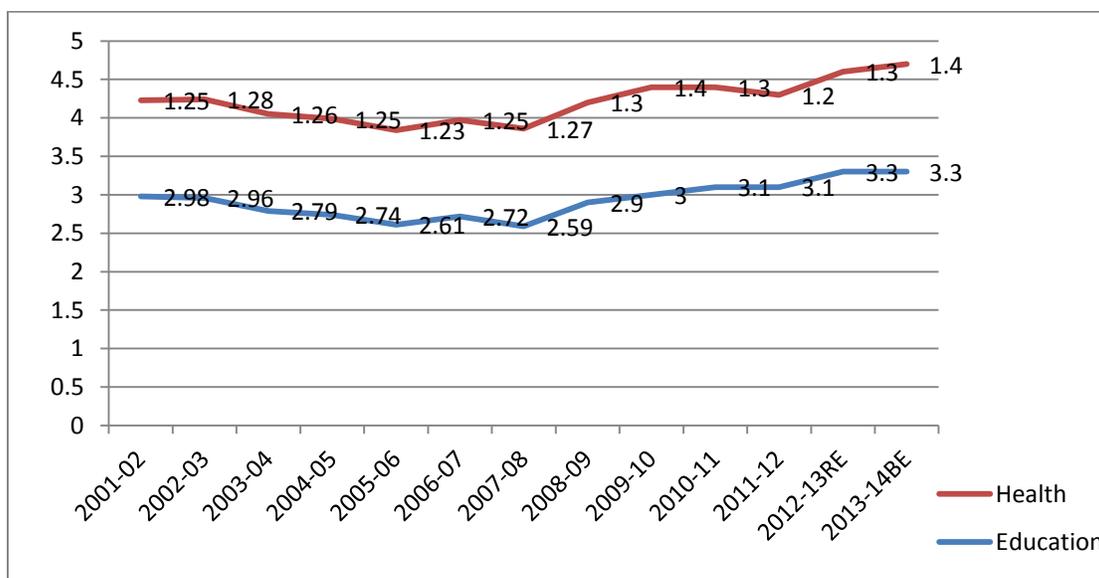
Source: (Rukmini, 2014)

The stark impoverishment of the vast mass of population is creating dehumanised living conditions for them. This dehumanization process emerges out of the social relations wherein the enhanced productivity of the workers is creating purchasing power for the owners of capital and not for workers. No doubt capitalism is destined to be this skewed at this stage but the process of dehumanization created commodification of every sphere of our existence when purchasing power does not grow accordingly for everybody creates a situation of crisis – the starkness of inhuman system. Capitalism is creating commodities out of education, health, social security but the consumers (every human is a

potential consumer today) cannot buy it. The earlier avatar of the welfarist state no longer exists as the state continues to withdraw from its responsibilities and subcontracts everything to the private capital. State managed enterprises are either sold off or the jobs are gradually subcontracted to private capital. Human resource companies are a big investment which supply workers to universities, ministries, banks, etc. this has pauperized the labour force by not only taking away their social and economic security but making them underpaid without any rights to question the employees. With the state already spending less on social sector (Chart No.4), it further decides to cut down the budget on the two basic human needs such as education by about 11000 crores<sup>1</sup> and health budget by 6000 crore rupees<sup>2</sup>.

Apart from this over past two decades one has seen pauperization of labour force. Wherever possible the jobs have been contractualised – ranging from university faculty, school teachers, health staff, clerks to house-keeping staff. It is pertinent to remember that it is not merely about giving up *responsibilities* but giving away *business* to individuals at the cost of lives of a large mass of people that is reflected in this attitude of the state. This is what state withdrawal means – creating space for expansion of private capital in areas where it was not present.

Chart No.4: State Expenditure on Health and Education of Gross Domestic Product



Source: Collated from different year Economic Survey, Ministry of Finance, Government of India

The contractualisation of labour force is not new, specifically when one confronts the agrarian economy, which contributed a greater share to the economy at one point of time. For instance, it contributed

<sup>1</sup> See Mehra, Puja (27 November, 2014) Social sector funds slashed, *The Hindu*, available at <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/social-sector-funds-slashed/article6637180.ece> (Accessed 28th November 2014)

<sup>2</sup> See NDTV (December 23, 2014) India Slashes Health Budget, Already Among World's Lowest: Report, available at <http://www.ndtv.com/article/india/india-slashes-health-budget-already-among-world-s-lowest-report-638877> (Accessed 24th December 2014)

51.9% of the GDP in 1950-51, which is reduced now to 13.7% in 2012-13<sup>3</sup>. This agrarian economy always had a very adhoc arrangement vis-à-vis employment and wage and the struggle of the landless workers historically bear a testimony to this. The landless agricultural labourers in most parts were at the mercy of the landed gentry as laws which existed were implemented half-heartedly.

Similar developments could be seen in the urban sphere where the trade union struggles did win a lot of battles but all those gains are now being reverted back by the rule of capital. For instance, the idea of an eight hour workday, which was achieved after great battles, hardly exists today as in some sectors technology takes *work* into a realm of timelessness and in some other sectors pauperization of the workforce compels them to work longer hours for instance the security guards or factory workers. Another dimension of accumulating wealth of a few at the cost of pauperisation of vast mass is reflected in the fact that “real worker wages have been stagnant in the three decades to 2013 while real productivity has increased at an annual average rate of 7%. Real wage growth has languished at an average annual rate of 1% between 1983 and 2013, lagging real productivity improvement” (Singh, 2015). As private capital becomes aggressive, expands into new areas to sustain and maximize surplus accumulation through all means assisted by the state it has contributed to pauperization of workforce. Situation becomes grim when one finds state in collusion with private capital resorting to violence of worst nature. This violence occurs across different workplaces – whether school teachers or university faculty are beaten up by mercenaries of private capital (the police and hired goons) in different cities or workers of different factories are beaten up and put behind bars for months and years.

The state owned enterprises have been handed over to private capital – disinvestment of public firms, privatization of airports, freeze on regular employment in different spheres to doing away with pension and bringing into ambit of market basic necessities such as health – all have impacted the majority of masses in an unprecedented manner. This is what neoliberal capitalism does. It brings everything under control of market and state, hitherto seen as welfarist it sheds all its inhibitions to assist private capital in taking over whatever possible with aim of accumulating as much wealth as possible.

This becomes visible when one sees huge population working as contractual and casual workers with meager salaries battling for survival and on the other hand number of billionaires competing with their global counterparts. A survey of the world around us reveals the kind of life that the new economy has brought for most of the people. The informal sector that flourishes – from the delivery man of food-joints to the courier delivery person to the workers in restaurants to the subcontracted house-keeping staff and administrative personnel in the offices all are underpaid, struggling to survive whereas the other side of horizon has inflow of massive wealth. Globally the accumulation of wealth in few hands has happened. Unabashed exploitation of natural resources and exploitation of vast mass of population has created such a situation that 1% of the richest people in world own 40% of the wealth (Randerson, 2006).

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<sup>3</sup> See Economic Times (August 30, 2013) Agriculture's share in GDP declines to 13.7% in 2012-13, available at [http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2013-08-30/news/41618996\\_1\\_gdp-foodgrains-allied-sectors](http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2013-08-30/news/41618996_1_gdp-foodgrains-allied-sectors) (Accessed 10 October 2013)

It is interesting to note that the International Labour Organisation while trying to show that there is a great discontent against the governments as indicated by the data does not show inequality as one of the major causes of this discontent. This became evident in the ILO *World of Work Report 2011: Making markets work for job* wherein possibility of social unrest emerges as a major concern (ILO, 2011, p.1).

Though it recognizes many factors as responsible for unrest across the world it does not look at the widening gap between the rich and poor across the world and in South Asia (Financial Express, 2014) and therefore the question of distribution of wealth or the exploitative social relations that characterizes capitalism as the inevitable cause of social unrest even though it may not be very apparent in the unrests that have happened in some of the regions. The need to locate the social unrest or the increasing rich-poor gap within the capitalist production process and social relations becomes necessary and this can also be ascertained from the trend of declining share of labour's income in economy in recent times as highlighted by The *ILO Global Wage Report 2012/13*. The reports points out that the view that the income of labour as well as capital will grow as countries become more prosperous is no longer valid as one finds the share of labour in income declining (2003, p.41).

Today a huge proportion of wage and salaried population in India lives on \$2 or below in India (ILO, 2013, p. 30). There has been a trend globally to pay profits as dividends and an "increased pressure on companies to reduce the share of value added going to labour compensation" (ILO, 2013, p.44). On the other hand, "the top 10% of wage earners now make 12 times more than the bottom 10%, up from a ratio of six in the 1990s" as per an OECD report (TOI, 2011).

Consequently, pauperization of the vast mass due to the informalisation and contractualisation of economy combined with the predatory character of corporate sector further pushes them to poverty and marginalization. It seems illogical as well that the economy which survives on commodification of each and every aspect of life does not pay much attention to the relationship between labour compensation and ability to consume. In long term ignoring this relationship often leads to crisis. However, the corporate sector proudly projects how the prospects for private capital will be better in the days to come. One estimate says that there is huge potential for them in the health sector due to growing presence of private capital

Chart No.5: Private Capital's vision of Health Sector

- Healthcare revenue in India is set to reach \$ 280 billion by 2020
- Private sector's share in healthcare delivery is expected to increase from 66 per cent in 2005 to 81 per cent by 2015
- In India, private healthcare accounts for almost 72 per cent of the country's total healthcare expenditure
- Private sector's share in hospitals and hospital beds is estimated at 74 per cent and 40 per cent, respectively.

Source: IBEF (August 2014a)

The same think tank projects a rosy picture for the future of private capital in education

Chart No.6: Private Capital's vision of Education Sector

- The emergence of the un-organised private education sector in India has opened a door of opportunities for many companies
- With increased corporate investments in the sector, the share of private schools in the total number of schools have increased over the past few years
- Schooling segment in India expected to be \$44 billion
- The private education sector which was valued at \$50 billion in 2008 is estimated to reach \$115 billion by 2015

Source: IBEF (August 2014b)

### ***Neoliberal Capitalism and Possible Resistance***

It is apparent that the situation is grave – everything is being given to the private capital which works on only one primary premise – that of profiteering and accumulation of wealth for a few at the cost of the majority. This is happening when poverty, even by conservative estimates is around 29.5%<sup>4</sup>, and the cost of living has gone up while social security is non-existent and economy appropriates surplus through lowering wages and substandard working and living conditions. These are neoliberal times. These are darker times as human existence is constantly being forced to submit to the rule of capital. The idea of freedom, social collective and dissent are on decline as capitalism uses every individual against the self concealing our self-defeating existence as the success of our individual lives. Such profound and devious is the design of capital in our times, a stage termed neoliberal. There has been great amount of literature that has debated the origins and nature of neoliberalism in general (Dumeneil and Levy, 2011; Harvey, 2005; Saad-Filho and Johnston, 2005) and there have been specific works locating its demonic character for the social sector. Following characteristics of neoliberalism can be found in India (Kumar, 2014a):

1. The market becomes the organizing principle of all aspects of our life- political, economic, social, and cultural- as commodification pervades all of them.
2. The distinction between public and private diminishes/ vanishes as private takes over everything that is public, including the 'sanctified' so-called security systems.
3. Politics increasingly and overtly becomes a domain of the ruling elite, as number of millionaires and billionaires rise in formal democratic institutions. Indian Parliament has become a place for them now as indicated by the figures.
4. While 'resource crunch' becomes an excuse for the State's inability to manage health, education, pension, et cetera, the State, simultaneously, doles out huge monetary benefits to corporate houses as tax waivers and subsidies.

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<sup>4</sup> These are estimates of the Rangarajan Committee. For details see Singh (2014) and GOI (2014)

5. Poverty increases in real terms (if not in definitional terms of the State, which manipulates its definitions and figures) and so does the gap between those who can afford to be buyers in the new commodified economy and those who cannot.

6. The market expands and creates monopolies in such a way as to give impression that it can cater to everyone (according to their capacity and, thus, not ignoring any segment of population) trying to generate illusions about its predatory nature.

7. Through an unprecedented control over ideological apparatuses, the market creates a chimera of 'hope' and 'aspirations' that keep telling the masses about unlimited 'possibilities' under neoliberal capitalism. This temporal intoxication is broken by crises that the economy faces repeatedly.

8. By pumping into individual imagination illusory impressions of the world, it tries to push its darker side into oblivion (such as farmer suicides, hunger deaths, malnourishment, environmental catastrophes, et cetera) though they resurface time and again.

9. The idea of 'social justice' is destroyed as the State reduces its role and hands everything to the market, which believes in its criteria of 'competition' and mutilated notion of 'merit'. Social concerns and historical constructs are no longer factored in the idea of 'justice'.

10. There is growing intolerance towards *dissent* and *dialogue*. It is seen as hampering the smooth functioning of the institution and is taken as an 'attack' on its endeavour to attain the goals that it has set for itself.

11. It is more aggressive in terms of governance. Hence, it not only manipulates the existing bourgeois democratic structures such as the Parliament or regulatory bodies such as University Grants Commission but also resorts to physical violence against those who resist.

12. There is increasing surveillance of public as well as private lives. This emanates from the fear that private capital has come from masses engaging in acts of resistance and subversion.

13. Ruling class has no respect for the rules of governance which it has created. It manipulates them to suit its own interests.

These characteristics create situations that facilitate the accumulation process of private capital under contemporary times. Result is huge disparity in ability to consume (ironically in an economy that thrives on the idea of consumption):

Chart No.7: Disparity in Ability to Consume

- "Nearly 40% of the rural population of India had MPCE below Rs.800 and about 60% had MPCE below Rs.1000. About 10% had MPCE above Rs.1650"
- 60% of rural population had MPCE less than Rs.1000 (\$20)
- 10% of rural population had MPCE over Rs.2500 (\$50)

- 60% of urban population had MPCE less than Rs.1600 (\$32)
- 10% of urban population had MPCE over Rs.5800 (\$116)

Source: GOI (2011)

This inequality is also epitomized in somebody living in a 27 storied residence<sup>5</sup> or a 2000 crore residence<sup>6</sup> on one hand while the majority live in dilapidated housing and living conditions.

Chart No.8: Housing and Living Conditions in India

- Around 62.3% houses do not have bathroom facilities in rural India
- Around 59.4% houses do not have latrine facilities in rural India
- Around 65.8% houses in rural India are of pucca type<sup>7</sup>
- Around 59.4% houses in rural India has separate room for married couples and the figure for urban India is 57.6% proving insufficiency of space in houses<sup>8</sup>

Source: GOI (2013)

There is not much that can be expected out of a system which has increasingly been dominated by the bourgeoisie which has captured all instruments of what is termed the representative democracy. After all, most of the Members of Parliament today are millionaires and billionaires. “..the average assets per winner for 281 BJP winners analysed is Rs 11.59 crores, 44 INC winners have average assets of Rs.16.71 crores, 37 AIADMK winners have average assets worth of Rs.6.47 crores and 34 AITC winners have average assets of Rs. 2.51 crores” (ADR, 2014, p.10). In this situation of heightened aggression of capital one finds the anti-capitalist forces being pushed to the margins – electorally as well as in terms of movements. In fact, absence of movements has led to their electoral decimation as well. This situation has not arisen suddenly but is a result of accumulated political deviations that characterized the left in the country and which continue to be there even today.

### ***The Left in these difficult times***

When the CPI(M) was defeated in West Bengal (in 2011) after over three decades of rule there was a sense of despair especially with the exuberant bourgeois propaganda machine foretelling the end of the Left in India. It did not end there. Prakash Karat, General Secretary of the CPI(M) after its defeat said

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2053231/Worlds-expensive-house-Antilia-Mumbai-lies-abandoned.html> (Accessed on 20th June 2014)

<sup>6</sup> <http://photogallery.indiatimes.com/celebs/celeb-themes/expensive-celebrity-homes/articleshow/34338130.cms> (Accessed on 20th June 2014) as well as <http://daily.bhaskar.com/news/ENT-inside-shah-rukh-khans-rs-2000-crores-bungalow-mannat-4368549-PHO.html> (Accessed on 20th June 2014)

<sup>7</sup> “A ‘pucca structure’ was one whose walls and roofs were made of materials such as cement, concrete, oven burnt bricks, hollow cement /ash bricks, stone, stone blocks, jack boards (cement plastered reds), iron, zinc or other metal sheets, timber, tiles, slate, corrugated iron, asbestos cement sheet, veneer, plywood, artificial wood of synthetic material and poly vinyl chloride (PVC) material” (GOI, 2013, p.30)

<sup>8</sup> This also relates to the fact that “overcrowding has various adverse effects to leading a healthy and undisturbed life and hence is considered as an important problem to be addressed by urban planning” (GOI, 2013, p.33).

that "Those who have written our epitaph will be proved wrong". The defeat of CPI(M) and the exuberance of media compelled over two hundred 'leftists' to issue a statement<sup>9</sup> saying that

*"the Left in India is not the Left parties alone and therefore the defeat of the Left parties does not mean the defeat of the Left (emphasis original). The Left in India has never been reducible to these large parliamentary fronts and party machines, much less to the groups embattled in the forests of India, but has always been a much wider spectrum of organisations, movements and forms of struggle that range from the hundreds of left-wing trade unions that exist in the country in all the major industrial centres, unions that are essentially independent of party control and seeking today to form a national federation, down to the dozens of popular campaigns and the organisations connected with them"*.

The signed document furthermore said that

*"We feel that the defeat of the parliamentary left *should* mean space for a stronger left movement, a 'new left' if you like, that reflects the aspirations of the mass of people more creatively, with more imagination and greater integrity"*.

The collapse of CPI (M) as an electoral force represents the inevitable – inevitability of *working class* politics becoming a bourgeois state and still claiming to retain its class character. This, no doubt, leads us to many complex questions such as what role does one take upon if participating in the parliamentary politics and to what extent can one immerse oneself in bourgeois practices. The collapse brought out debates about distinction that one needs to draw between Left as a state and as a movement as well as the questions of coping up with 'vices'/deviations that a bourgeois state carry within itself. For instance, being part of a state/government would one implement the policies and programmes of a bourgeois system, hence, carrying forward the lineages of class based inequalities and perpetuating it? As an example would one not try to be innovative and subvert the bourgeois system by thinking of alternative banking systems or create education materials and policies that teach subversion rather than perpetuating the same ideas that the capitalism asks one to do? If these questions were asked then a little more clarity could be achieved in haziness that engulfed Left politics due to diminishing distinction between the Party and the State. 11.59 It also told us about the disconnections that the parties have developed over time with the masses by creating a distinction between party and movement, leave aside the question of workings of the party (Kumar, 2014b). No doubt there has been a need to recognize the resistances against capital wherever it has been taking place but there is also a need to clearly outline the nature of politics that these places have carried within themselves. In other words, while many a times resistances become instrumental in not only exposing the malaise that capitalism carries within its womb but also in bringing forth the inner contradictions of capitalism as a system but how far do these resistances become effective instruments of working class struggle remains a point to be analysed in greater detail. Also, it remains to be seen as to what kind of new spaces have opened up for the Left in the aftermath of CPI(M)'s defeat though capitalism in its neoliberal avatar continues to be more and more inhuman, callous and inconsiderate albeit more sophisticated.

Recent times also saw huge support from some kind of 'Left' to temporal assemblies against corruption, transparency and democracy, specifically in the city of Delhi through the new political formation called Aam Admi Party (AAP). It came like a wave when Left of different hues and colours saw huge

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<sup>9</sup> This can be found at <http://kafila.org/2011/05/24/end-of-the-left-in-india-statement-after-recent-election-results/> (Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> June 2013).

transformatory potential in such a political formation, especially when it was getting good response from the population on the margins as well as the 'middle class'. The discontent brewing in society took populist overtones as bourgeois politics began exploring different vistas. Left was also seen trapped within this populism as its class politics seemed to be taking a backseat. The dilemma that it was confronted with was a little different (compared to that of the dominant bourgeois parties) – it found AAP taking similar social democratic agenda that Left wanted to take up or was already taking up in different forms. These new political tendencies further added to the weakening of the parliamentary Left.

Even the abject situation, as pointed above, which has been produced by capitalism, has not fomented a powerful Left assertion. It has largely been because of the failure of the dominant Left to put working class politics before any other concern. The attack that neoliberal capitalism unleashes on social sector has been rampant but an alternative to the project that bourgeois politics presents has also been lacking from the forces claiming to represent working class. In other words, whether it has been about opposing the flawed Right to Education Bill (2009) in streets or in the Parliament when it was being put through (even though Left was had huge presence inside Parliament) or whether it has been about resisting commodification of education and health the 'working class' failed; the required opposition to the privatization of public sector also failed to generate any heat which could have forced the Indian bourgeoisie represented through the state to rethink its policies. Neoliberal politics has increasingly become aggressive and we are at a stage when it pushes its agenda of giving more and more space to the capitalists to not only use resources of the state (ideally belonging to the masses) but also seeks to hand them over whatever can get them profit. This happens when economic pauperisation is widespread. Ironically, the working class stands marginalised along with the swelling discontent against the system.

At another level, historically, the Indian Left fell prey to identity politics. It is not to deny the attention that caste as an important issue should have got but the Left could not effectively differentiate itself among masses from the political formations which originated as caste based formations but eventually ended being agents of certain segments of Indian bourgeoisie and its politics. This became apparent when the Left lost a huge mass base to political formations which flourished on issues of caste based equality and justice. No doubt, Left also has to explain issues such as the absence of dalits from its leadership, etc. Finally, it failed miserably at any effort to locate identity politics within a class based transcendental politics. Linked also to this has been its (specifically the Parliamentary Left) failure to conceptualise and understand the idea of 'worker' itself thereby not able to make inroads when informalisation of economy happened at mass scale. Hence, teachers or journalists could not battle it out in streets along with other workers as they believed themselves to be part of another class. All this weakened it further at a moment when strength of the Left would have really mattered against the aggression of neoliberal capitalism.

Lastly, the Left needs to critically introspect about the way Party has worked (Kumar 2014b). It has to reinvent organizational practice by de-hierarchising it and establishing the idea of horizontal dialogue as a political practice not only within the party but between the party and the masses as well. The battle against neoliberal capitalism is passing through a weak moment but the upsurge is bound to happen as capitalism gets embroiled in its own contradictions – when economies no longer work simply through the success stories of a few rich while the vast mass gets impoverished; when promises cease to be electoral weapons; and when the *essence* becomes the reality.

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