

On "United Front and the Left": P.C. Joshi Memorial Lecture

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I consider it a great privilege to be able to deliver this P.C. Joshi Memorial Lecture. I came to know him fairly well in the early 60s when he was leading mostly a life of communist intellectual, after being deprived of active leadership of the Communist Movement. He was sad at the treatment meted out to him but he never complained about it and never for a minute thought of himself as anything but a Communist. But it was also a fascinating experience talking to him and discussing with him the complexities of the Indian situation and the role of the Communists at that time and their inability to comprehend the role of the Indian National Congress in our national development. In many ways Joshi was a quite essential "United Front personality" and genuinely believed in working together with the Congress both during the anti-imperialist struggle and post-independences national reconstructed.

The only comparison that I could make of Joshi with any other leader in India or abroad was with Antonio Gramsci. He was not as erudite as Gramsci, which very few people were anywhere in the world. But he was a

Communist of a similar ilk, without any dogma, always prepared to confront any point of view, “a thinker with an open mind, disciplined in the search for truth”. Gramsci edited a daily newspaper “*Ordini Nuovo*”, which had the motto “to tell the truth is revolutionary”, which Joshi would love to uphold.

I can not resist quoting directly from Gramsci something that could have easily been said by Joshi himself. “We must not conceive of a scientific discussion as if it were a Court Room proceeding in which there is a Defendant and a Prosecutor who, by duty of his office, must show the Defendant guilty. It is a premise in a scientific discussion that the interest lies in the search for truth and the advancement of science. Therefore, the most advanced thinker’ is he, who understands that his adversary may express a truth which should be incorporated in his own idea, even if in a minor way. To understand and evaluate realistically the adversary (and sometimes the adversary is the entire thought of the past) means to have freed oneself from the prison of ideology in the sense of blind fanaticism. One has then arrived at a critical frame of mind, the only fruitful stance in scientific research”. [Reference 1.: “The Open Marxism of Antonio

Gramsci", New York, 1957 p. 5-6. As I read out this quote from Gramsci, I can hear as if Joshi himself was speaking it out.

I don't intend to go into all the aspects of Gramsci's thinking which would be relevant for understanding Joshi in this short lecture today. I want to concentrate on only two aspects. First, Gramsci has been recognised as "the analyst of the super-structure, per excellence". Secondly, Gramsci was a great theoretician of the United Front strategy. Indeed, much of his conceptualization of the United Front was derived from his conceptualization of the super-structure and its interaction with the structural base. In fact, few people are aware that Gramsci had an enormous influence on Lenin during the days of the Third International, which first adopted a Resolution on the United Front, which clearly spelt out the difference between the Russian situation where a Revolution had already taken place and the European situation where "it was necessary to begin by organizing and preparing for Revolution with a strategy for longer perspective", when, as the International's Resolution affirmed that "Communists are prepared to act together with those workers who have yet not recognized the proletarian dictatorship, social democrats, members of Christian Party, non-party, Trade Unionists, etc." (Reference 2 : Gramsci

and the State: by Christina Buci-Glukomann, London, 1980 P. 186-195)

Buci-Gluckomann.

It is interesting to note a fascinating conflict of stand between Lenin and the Left Wing Communists at the international, such as Bela Kun, Thalheimer, Terracini. These Left Wing Communists believed that the Russian Revolution was an act of a Minority Party, disciplined and well-organized, without bothering about such pre-conditions for Revolution as the winning of the masses, or majority of the working class, who were still very much influenced in Europe by social democracy. Lenin's denunciation of the stand is very much worth quoting "Terracini says that we were victorious in Russia although the Party was very small. Comrade Terracini has understood very little of the Russian Revolution. In Russia we were a small Party but we had with us in addition the majority of the Soviets' workers and peasants, deputies, through out the country. Do you have anything of this sort? We had with us almost half the army with their number at least 10 million men". In accordance of this critic of Leftism, Lenin spelt out that "to win we must have the sympathy of the masses. An absolute majority is not always essential, but what is essential to win and retain power is not only the majority of working class (in the sense of

the industrial proletariat) but also the majority of the working and exploited rural population". In spite of the strong opposition from the Italian, Spanish and the French delegations, the Resolution on "24 Points on the United Front" was formally adopted in January 1922 when the International stressed the necessity "for a common platform with the social democrats and Christians, with a view to minimum economic and political reforms". It also envisaged the possibility of a "United Front Government" with a social democrats supported by the Communists.

Gramsci was wholly with Lenin on this recognition of the necessity of the United Front, where the governments might not yet be the "dictatorship of the proletariat", not even historically inevitable transitions stage towards the dictatorship", but as Gramsci put it "where they are formed they may become important starting points for the fight for the dictatorship". Clearly by the proletarian dictatorship the international meant the government of the Communist Party, but there was also a recognition that the Communists were not in a majority, not even a majority among the working class and therefore it was necessary for the Communists to form alliances with other working people in the industries and in the rural areas and through that to win over the masses and work for

basic economic and political reforms, even if they were just the starting points, moving towards a Socialist Revolution.

Both Lenin and the Third International were talking about the United Front as a strategy for capturing power by the communists. There may be a distinction between the situations where the communists are already holding state power and countries where the communists were far from acquiring the strength of exercising power on their own and had to be content with consolidating the different sections of the people toward social transformation.

Gramsci described this difference in terms of a war of maneuver as distinct from a war of positions. Whereas the Bolsheviks had already captured power in Russia, the communists elsewhere, especially in Europe, were adjusting themselves to a war of positions, striking at the enemy at one point, compromising with it at another point and adjusting their strategy based on specific conditions. The war of positions implies war on many different fields striking the opponents at the points of their weakness, in collaboration and alliance with other forces with similar objectives. In the war of position, the strategy of fighting with a United

Front is almost inevitable as the relative strengths of the different parties would vary from place to place and time to time. The seizure of power may be quite remote and may have to go through a process of sharing of power with some forces with superior capabilities and with support from the masses. It thus rules out any premature attempt at seizure of power and even allow for an indefinite period of incubation of revolutionary social transformation. In other words the objective of the United Front may be to build up the collaboration of different like minded forces, where the communists may have to play a second fiddle to more mass based organizations.

Gramsci was keen on this military analogy to highlight the flexibility of the approach towards a revolutionary movement and also the risk of premature attempt to seize power without building up the strength through mobilization of the masses. It is interesting to note that Gramsci recognized the Nationalist movement led by Mahatma Gandhi in India, as a war of position which “at certain moments became a war of movements and at other underground warfare” (Reference 3: Gramsci Prison Note Book P-229). Gandhi’s movement was a political struggle, an attempt to mobilize the masses as compared to direct confrontation with

insurrectionary conflict. As Gramsci noted "If the English believed that a great insurrectional moment was being prepared destined to annihilate their present strategic superiority, then it would suite them to provoke a premature outbreak of the Indian fighting forces and then decapitate the general movement".

Gandhi's mass moment was a great moral force but also a superior fighting strategy. As Gandhi put it the power of Satyagraha was based upon the immutable maxim that government of the people is possible only so long as they consent either consciously or unconsciously, to be governed. Addressing the imperialist government, Gandhi wrote "you have great military resources. Your naval power is matchless. If we wanted to fight with you, on your own grounds, we should be unable to do so, but if (our) submissions are not acceptable to you, we cease to play the part of the ruled. You may, if you like, cut us to pieces. You may shatter us at the cannons mouth. If you act contrary to our will we shall not help you and without our help we know that you can not move one step forward".

(Reference 4: M.K. Gandhi "Indian Opinion and Hindu Swaraj" quoted by Sashi Joshi in her "Struggle for hegemony in India". Sage Publications, 1992 P-38]

Quite clearly, Gandhi was a great strategist. He knew the weak points of the adversary and he knew points of his strength, which were his abilities to mobilize the masses against the imperial forces. Instead of confronting them directly and provoking their repression.....Gandhi chose to undermine the British rule, by mass movement of non-cooperation and civil disobedience, on the correct assessment of constraints imposed on the British government by their democratic system. This was not appreciated by the communists, who pressed for insurrection by overestimating the strength, although they were a small party without much influence even among the Left. As a result, they were left out of the mass movement. Their policy should have been to join Gandhi's movement and influence their course of action through forming a United Front with the Left forces within the Congress. Instead of that, they isolated themselves by attacking the Congress and abusing its leadership including Nehru who unequivocally represented the Left within the Congress.

Although these issues refer to the communist approach to the United Front in the pre independence period, they reflect an attitude which, I am afraid, prevails even today. It was M.N. Roy who formulated a position of the Indian Communist, in the second congress of the Comintern which

characterized our national movement as bourgeois-democratic, limited to “the small middle class which did not reflect the aspirations of the masses”. The masses were apparently moving towards revolution independently of the bourgeois-national movement. According to Roy “the masses distrusted the political leaders who always led them astray and prevented them from revolutionary action” and “it would be a mistake to assume that the bourgeois –national movement express the sentiments and aspirations of the general population. [Reference 5: See G. Adhikari, “Documents of the History of the Communist Party of India: Volume 1, Peoples Publishing House].

It is strange how M.N. Roy would come to these characterizations of the national movement led by the Congress and of masses moving towards a socialist revolution which gave an opportunity to the communists to lead and organize. Even long after M.N. Roy was ousted from their movement, the communists were obsessed with exercising “hegemony” of national revolution despite their very insignificant strength. This was expressed in the refusal of the communists to form United Front with the Congress. All these were despite a very clear formulation of the United Front strategy by Lenin in the Third International in January 1922. The International stressed the need for “a common platform with the social democrats and Christian parties envisaging the possibility of a United Front Government with them in Europe. The communists all over the world following this lead from the

International were prepared to act together with workers who had not yet recognized even, “the necessity of proletarian dictatorship” or any “historically inevitable transition stage towards the dictatorship”. There would be some “organizational contacts with the socialists” who should prepare for a strategy of longer perspective to bring in socialist transformation. But in the intermediate period a United Front of socialists and non socialists would only work towards that long time perspective.

Clearly building up a United Front movement would involve two question: the question of strategy and the question of identifying the partners in the United Front. The question of strategy would be integral related to the question of goals and the nature of the parties and their relationships with the goals of the movement. The strategy involves how to bring the parties together and the choice of particular objectives for the movement that could mobilize all the parties. But such issues of strategy would presuppose a proper characterization of the parties, which could potentially join the United Front and fulfill their objectives. It is not possible to form a United Front with every body irrespective of their goals and interests, which are derived from the ideologies they pursue.

It is in the identification of the partners, and parties representing the different social forces who could potentially form a United Front with the communists and more broadly with the Left, that Gramsci's ideas made a

major contribution. As we noted above, Gramsci was fully with Lenin in formulating the International's strategy of building a United Front.

But Gramsci went much beyond Lenin by bringing in his perspective of the superstructure which gave a philosophical rationale for formulating the theory of the United Front. Gramsci's perspective of superstructure is fairly well-known and I need not go into that. Everybody now accepts the large degree of autonomy of the superstructure from the underlining base of production relations. But I would only like to emphasize that an autonomous superstructure can produce different world views for different groups of the people in a society, based on history, culture, language and ethnic relationships. It would be necessary to analyze those world views in concrete and historical terms, to decide which social forces and which parties could be brought together in a United Front.

As Gramsci put it "all men are philosophers", meaning everybody has a world view and in most cases they remain unexamined and uncritical, derived from language, common sense and popular religion and folklore. "Since every person is a member of some social grouping", as Gramsci put it "elements of a world view typical of that group are imposed on the individual. That social group can be as large as one's own village and province, or it can be as narrow as a single "wise" patriarch or a "local

witch” with magic powers. The imposed ideas may have originated in the “intellectual activity” of the parish priest or that of a local petty intellectual pickled in his own stupidity. [Reference 6: Preliminaries to a Study of Philosophy in “The Open Marxism of Antonio Gramsci” translated by Carlo Marzani New York, 1957.

Gramsci goes on to say “one always belongs to some social groups, and precisely to that group, where people share substantially the same way of thinking and working. One is always a conformist, one is always as it were a ‘collective man’ a person within a social group”. The question therefore is to determine or ascertain the historical character of the conformism of that social group. “If a person’s world view is not coherent but disjointed and sporadic, then one develops a bizarre and capricious personality. Such a personality will have within it elements of the caveman alongside the most modern scientific concepts, remnants of parochial prejudices from past historical epochs, as well as institutions of a rising philosophy suitable to the entire human species, united throughout the world.

I could not think of a better way of describing the contemporary Indian scene dominated by these groups. If you look around yourself you would recognize many such cavemen, even though they often reveal scientific or semi-scientific temper on other areas of concern. But from the point of view of our current concern, what would be the role of these groups in building a United Front at the Left? First, following Gramsci an attempt has to be made to examine the characteristics of these groups in terms of their antagonism or complementarily with the working class, which has to play a legitimistic role in that United Front. The notion of the hegemony of the working class as spelled out by Gramsci may have charged overtime. But a United Front of the Left has to be anchored to the ideologies of the working class, in association with the peasantry and other working people. On that basis, we have to build up a road map of national development around which an alliances of a United Front of different groups and their representative parties can be formed.

Second, if the relationships are not antagonistic attempts must be made to persuade these groups to subject their world views to a critical examinations to get out of the disjointed and sporadic view and to have a consistent world view recognizing the advantages of complementarily with

the position taken by the working class. The approach is quite different from the usual partisan approach to forming United Front only with 'like minded' parties of similar interest groups or parties that get together for short-term convenience. As these groups are parts of the superstructure, they are guided by uncritically formed world views and unless their interests are basically antagonistic like that between capital and labour, most of these social groups are potential partners in the United Front, provided they can be persuaded to critically examine their world views and appreciate the advantages of the United Front.

The essential pre-conditions of the forming of such United Front is our ability to formulate the world view of the working class through, as Gramsci put it, "critical self examination", because, as I mentioned above, the working class has to play the hegemonistic role in the United Front. By "hegemony" Gramsci meant "moral leadership of a social group through the sum total of its concepts, actions and methods". Gramsci believed that Lenin had sharpened and developed this concept and gave it a concrete expression in Bolshevism.

But today it is necessary for us to define this “working class” in a somewhat broader form than in the early or the middle 20th Century. Every Communist has to think about it seriously if he or she has to subject the world view of the working class to critical scrutiny. In fact, the definition of the working class was left somewhat ambiguous even by Marx himself. In the Third Volume of Capital, Marx started a Chapter formulating this definition, but unfortunately could not complete it before his death. And today, after Gramsci’s writings it may be quite difficult to have a unique world view of that working class as a social group. The workers come from different social groups in the country with different world views, as we have noted above. The unifying factor of their being situated in the production relation, as not owning the means of production but subjected to exploitation by the owners of those means of production, may not always be strong enough to overcome the influence of the ideology of the social group from which they are drawn.

In other words, in discovering the world view of the working class, the Communists may have to invent it for them to provide a well-reasoned framework of thinking and not just go blindly or mechanically by “economism” or mechanical application of the notion of exploitation. For

Gramsci who recognized the pluralism of the world view of the social groups from which the workers are drawn, the working class is an abstract concept that determines the development of the production base of the system, following the logic of the production relations in a capitalist society. A worker is one who produces value, without exploiting anybody else, by using the means of production and improving productivity with technology. 'Worker' has an antagonistic relation with 'capitalist', who owns the means of production and lives on the surplus value produced by the workers and is guided by the tendencies in the rate of profit in all its activities. Some further examination of this relationship should make it clear that in actual practice some workers may also own some capital and the cause of capitalist may include many social groups other than industrial entrepreneur who survived on the surplus value produced by the workers. Some of them may also be, part time equivalent to, workers, producing some value out of their labour. Clearly the interest even in the production system can be intermingled just as they are in the superstructure. But the dynamics of base or the structure is determined by the conflict between labour and capital, as defined in terms of the means of production.

The world view of such a working class is essentially the philosophy of Socialism, when the whole society becomes owners of means of production eliminating the scope of exploitation. Clearly the stages through which that socialism can be achieved would depend upon the context, the stage of development or productive forces and the institutions that govern their relationships. The task of the Communist movement would be to workout that programme of developing Socialism and converting that into the world view of the working class and build up the complimentary between them and the interests of the social groups who form the alliance of the United Front.

I want to conclude this lecture by pointing out the necessity of all of us getting involved in that exercise of forming the United Front. We must not be guided by sectarianism or dogmas, but genuinely work for building up a programme for socialist transformation and constructing a road map for the country as a whole. The old debate about the relevance of market mechanism and central planning is not relevant any more. Markets have to be taken as instruments which can be used to achieve designated goals. For that we may need in different degrees and different situations globalization, free trade and economic reforms and we should not be tied

down to any artificial constraints on our thinking. What we should engage in designing is a roadmap of development which would encompass most of the messes in the country and would develop the productive forces through changing production relations, which can be led only by a group that represents our abstract concept of the Working Class.
