



MANUSHI issue 140's choice of cover story, "Physician, Heal Thyself" by Madhu Kishwar, with its depiction of the anti-globalisation movement as an urban, elite-based phenomenon, and of Arundhati Roy as its celebrity-driven spokesperson, is unfair and accurate. It ignores the millions, nay billions, around the world who have been at the receiving end of the economic experiments of the last two decades, people whose opinions have simply ceased to matter.

The beginning of the essay, a scathing indictment of the Indian elite, shows Kishwar's analysis of current Indian society to be not so different, really, from that of the Anti-Globalisation Brigades (AGBs) she so decries. But her stance seems self-contradictory, as she subsequently assigns the blame for the widening economic divide to one set of the elite (the AGBs), while simultaneously placing her trust in another equally elite lot (what I will call the GBs or the Globalising Brigades).

One need not subscribe to the feasibility (or even desirability) of a classless society to recognise that class consciousness is the most powerful force in human affairs. The irritant in elite leftist rhetoric is precisely the fact that they are in conflict with their class interest and are hence suspect. Kishwar's

Debate

Unfair Criticism

Rejoinder to Madhu Kishwar's Critique of Anti-Globalisation Brigades

○ Prithvi Sharma

contention that "in today's India, [a] sense of a shared identity has been seriously eroded" selectively idealises aspects of our feudal past in much the same way as worshippers of "socialism" idealise the "classless society" of the future. Furthermore, whereas Kishwar's disapprobation of the lack of a common goal would seem to apply both to haves and the have-nots, her attack is directed mostly against the poor: against workers who, led by leftist leaders, cause factories to close, or against landless labourers led by the AGBs, who hold landlords as destitute as themselves responsible for their ruin.

Exploitation Still the Core

While one concedes that Gandhi did succeed in bringing together varied interests, the "common good" that he was pursuing was that of political freedom. This "common good" did little to disturb the interests of the class that he called the "trustees." This can be observed even in his other areas of work, such as his spearheading the labour movement in Gujarat. While he clearly saw the folly of violent class struggle, his prescription for a better society, based on his concept of "trusteeship" and of the complementary nature of labour and capital, was an implicit recognition of the centrality of class. In my view, had Gandhi been alive today, he would have been much chagrined, being the truthful man he was, to witness the overwhelming

imperative of owning classes to preserve their privilege, an imperative rooted in much stronger forces than imagined in the enlightened discourse of social "trusteeship." Therefore, if leftists fail to realise that exploiters are sometimes the exploited, it hardly justifies the conclusion that class privilege and exploitation are not the core of the existing economic structure.

For Kishwar to imply that not "articulating the rights of industrial workers in ways that forced the closure of [the industries they work in]" is in the workers' long term interest is simply a more nuanced version of the trickle-down theory – unless we let the rich get richer, they will not invest and we will remain poor! Yet, if the ever-widening divide between the rich and the poor has not put that theory to rest, one does not know what will. Much of what has been gained by ordinary people throughout the world – from workplace protection to minimum wages, from various types of social security to collective bargaining rights – has been achieved not by the goodness of trustees Gandhi so wistfully envisioned, but by the active struggle of workers to wrest concessions from those very trustees.

In her zeal for exposing the very real hypocrisies of the Left, Kishwar seems to be equating the message with the messenger and ends up,

therefore, attacking the message much more than I believe she really wants to. To take one example, we are told that in 2003 the Indian NGO sector received \$1 billion from various foreign donors.* This may be an accurate figure, but the next assumption, that “a very substantial part of these funds are going to AGBs,” is misleading, to say the least. Leave aside the Ford Foundation or USAID, even lowly Oxfam actively encourages “market oriented” solutions in its projects. And, further, whatever the foreign funds that may have flowed into the coffers of the World Social Forum, to imply that these do not pale in comparison to the clout and money available to the G-8 and the World Bank is a very troubling proposition.

Instruments of Privilege

Equally untenable is the article’s insinuation that many of the campaigns of the AGBs, such as highlighting of farmers’ suicides, are a conspiracy advanced via financial grants to the AGBs by First World economies that are currently feeling the pinch of globalisation. The developed world has much more powerful ways to end the hurt – if they are really hurting. In reality, it is precisely this fact that is the most potent argument against “globalisation” as currently defined – that once the cheerleaders of “globalisation” (and these are decidedly *not* the masses of India) determine that whatever it is that is being pushed as “globalisation” is no longer in their interest, they will simply replace it with some other more convenient slogan (“human rights,” “democracy,” “freedom,” “civilisation,” or whatever else the master races have chosen as the instrument of extending their privilege). Simply stated, this

* The figure is actually \$3 billion, as MANUSHI was later informed.



“globalisation” is not a voluntary act of sovereign governments based upon the needs of their people. To claim that Narasimha Rao had a surge of right thinking in initiating the liberalisation process is to ignore the dire balance of payments situation that left him with little choice.

The biggest obstacles to Milton Freedman’s free market world are not “protectionist” policies of Third World countries that prevent the flow of goods through a “draconian bureaucracy matched by a police establishment”; rather, these are created by the departments of immigration of rich countries and the



total lack of free movement of labour that they embody. Currently there are close to forty states in the US that have either passed or are considering laws to ban outsourcing. “Protectionist” policies, apparently, are bad only when applied by the poorer countries. The better-off can use them with impunity.

One fails also to see the relevance of criticising the use of Pepsi or McDonald’s as “easy and culturally compelling targets.” Is this not what one has to do when forging a movement of this kind? Was this not the point of Dandi? What is there in opposing Pepsi that implies that one should also not oppose Ford or Honda? Conversely, what is there in opposing Pepsi that implies that one should also oppose cell phones or DVDs? Portraying the opposition to Pepsi as Luddite, anti-progress, anti-modernisation sloganeering is a distortion. A principled opposition to Pepsi is an opposition to a phenomenon whereby a group of people with incredible amounts of money are able to use every social, political, economic, and media instrument to manipulate behaviour in ways that are socially detrimental to accumulate even more wealth. I once heard a statement by an executive of one of these companies that they were competing not with another soft drink, but with water!

Elitist Thinking?

Regarding the process of so-called “reforms,” Kishwar’s arguments are quite weak. If Arundhati Roy implies that something is wrong merely if it is done by the BJP, why does Ms. Kishwar follow the same logic in implying that something is right if it is done by both the BJP and the Congress? Her defense of the “liberalisation” regime begun by Rajiv Gandhi invests him with an almost prophetic vision, and her portrayal of the opposition to efforts at economic reform by

“influential” political elements shows somewhat of an elitist way of thinking itself. This same is again reflected in a later statement that “India’s economy is still over politicised.” When politicians respond to the vast masses, they are perceived as “politicising” the economy or, worse, pandering to vote banks. Yet no one says the same thing when financial markets, reflecting the interests of a tiny fraction of society, shock politicians into stupor, overnight. The recent defeat of the very symbols of globalisation, whether in Andhra Pradesh or Karnataka, and the victory of such economically “regressive” politicians as Laloo Prasad Yadav, must give some pause to the indiscriminate advocate of these ideas. Are we to blame this on leftists who continue to prevent the masses from seeing what is really good for them? Or is it that the people have finally figured out that they can’t really eat cake if there is no bread!

At the international level, conclusions drawn about the beneficial effects of globalisation are at best debatable. Kishwar’s examples are selective as she has excluded countries such as Argentina and Mexico. China’s example is also problematic. The advantage with which it operates its current global agenda is founded on the legacy of a brutal state that still denies basic political rights to its citizens. As a starving villager in Delhi you may not get a license to ply a rickshaw, but in Shanghai you can not only not ply a rickshaw, you can’t even be in the city – without a permit; you will be simply thrown out. As far as the economies of the south east Asian countries are concerned, contrary to folk lore, these were built on strong “protections.” The penalty for capital flight in Taiwan could be death. A closer reading of the world’s success stories would reveal that countries that have succeeded are those that have

followed what is in their own best interest; subsidising where it helps their industry, opening up when it suits them, and closing where it does not. And the biggest failure are countries that have swallowed the sermons of masters at face value.

Us Versus the Rest

One of the greatest myth perpetrated by the West and uncritically accepted by our intellectuals is that free trade, as defined by the GBs, has been responsible for the creation of their wealth. In reality, the First World owes its success – to use Kishwar’s own paradigm – to a much keener sense of “us” versus “the rest” and to a ruthlessness in pursuing interests so defined. Let me quote a memo written in 1948 by George Keenan, then head of the US State Department planning committee. “We have about 50 percent of the world’s wealth but only 6.3 percent of its population,” Keenan wrote. “In this situation, we cannot fail to be the object of envy and resentment. Our real task in the coming period is to devise a pattern of relationships which will permit us to maintain this position of disparity without positive detriment to our national security. To do so, we have to dispense with all sentimentality and daydreaming; and our attention will have to be concentrated everywhere on our immediate national objectives. We need not deceive ourselves that we can afford today the luxury of altruism and world-benefaction.” The rest, as they say, is history.

So as we listen to that doyen of market economics, Jeffrey Sachs, we should also give heed to Joseph Stiglitz, Nobel laureate and a former chief economist of the World Bank – not a lefty by any means. He writes: “As someone who was intimately involved in economic policymaking in the US, I have always been struck

by the divergence between the policies that America pushes on developing countries and those practised in the US itself. Nor is America alone: most other successful developing and developed countries pursue “heretical” policies.”

Kishwar is most accurate when describing government-spawned corruption, exploitation, and mayhem. However, she equates the wrong solution with the problem itself. Government is a solution to the problem of governance. It is not the problem itself. There is no question that the government’s handling of environment, water, health, and many other issues has been disastrous. But it is wrong to conclude that all we need to do is to let in the invisible hand of the market to take care of the mess. The implication that the State’s failure to provide for the public’s basic needs is cause enough to give this task over to multinational corporations is not substantiated by facts in any part of the world. We should remember Adam Smith’s caution about the “vile maxims” of masters. You cannot have a market economy when the two parties involved are the size of an Ambani and an impoverished villager in Orissa. It is as mythical as the socialist commune.

Even while we dismantle constraints against people’s pursuit of rational self interest, we need creative checks on the rapacious human appetite for accumulation at the expense of others. The West’s prescription of progress through growth (that we have adopted lock, stock, and barrel in spite of our much-vaunted pride in our “own way”) is disastrous in the long run. At best, it is a refusal to deal with the fundamental problems of human existence – of the need to produce and share equitably. At worst it is a ponzy scheme. One can certainly question my right as a beneficiary of

this ponzy scheme to argue against others doing the same. After all, why should the poor Indian elite worry about the last house on the hill? But then, it is not my hypocrisy that should be the issue.

In the end, while Kishwar rightly concludes that the State has been an instrument for transferring wealth from the poor to the rich, she sadly fails to see that the globalisation regime – from the Sardar Sarovar Dam to the interlinking of rivers and the computerisation of villages is a continuation of the same process. I agree that there is a great deal of smug selfcentredness about the Left that ill serves the cause of the people it pretends to represent. But, on the wider stage, the voices that speak for people are fewer than ever. For all their faults, I am glad that there is an Arundhati Roy or a World Social Forum. At least, they keep alive the idea that there may be alternative ways of doing things.

In her justifiable annoyance at the hypocrisy of the Left, Kishwar appears to be allowing herself to be hijacked by the discourse of the Right in the guise of “reforms.” One is dismayed at this trashing of an entire

critique of the existing world economic system and the priorities that engender it. We live in a world that falls way short of our expectations. To change it is a daunting task in which, in spite of good intentions all around, we keep failing. Hence the scapegoating. For the Left it has always been “the rich”; for the Right, “the government,” which to them is simply a front for “the poor.” But for our reformists, demonising the State has become a cover for attacking the fiendish leftists who are supposedly behind an apparent grand design to loot the public. Never mind that the Indian owning class, business or non-business, has always been at least an equal partner in this loot.

Having lived outside India for thirty years, I consider my legitimacy to respond to the charges leveled in “Physician, Heal Thyself,” to be far lower than that of those pictured on the MANUSHI issue 140’s front cover. I offer these comments with a great deal of trepidation. They should be taken for what they are worth. Granted, we need governance reforms. No policy can succeed without a responsive and accountable government. We do need to do away with laws that

keep a stranglehold on the entrepreneurship of our farmers, workers, businesses, or industrialists. But we also need to find ways to creatively subsidise areas that are weak, realising that there are some things that can not be left to the market. Regarding international trade, clichés about our being able to compete with the best notwithstanding, our policies need to be based, as Joseph Stiglitz says, on a careful understanding of what the successful do, and not on what they say. We also need a strong government that can exercise a measure of control over the increasingly influential lobbies for the owning classes that, in my opinion, will never have a sense of “shared destiny.” We need a federalist, decentralised government that can look after the national interest as defined by the interest of all people. We don’t need “globalisation” as defined by Wall Street or Dalal Street; we need globalisation and liberalisation as defined by the little guys. And, most crucially, we need vigorous civic society organs that know the difference. □

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