



Social Democracy in India: Opportunities and Challenges

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In a discussion, on the occasion of the release of the book *Social Democracy in Practice* by the former International Union of Socialist Youth (IUSY) member, Pradeep Bose,¹ the veteran social democratic ideologue Surendra Mohan² said, “Social democracy is the best ideology for India, and it works better than others”. If that is so, it begs the questions: Why is social democracy not on the center stage of Indian politics? Why is a social democratic party not the biggest one in India? Before we answer these questions, let us critically examine the claim made by Surendra Mohan.

Perhaps, in an inadvertent endorsement of Surendra Mohan's assertion, a visiting French comrade asked his fellow delegates, “We should learn from India.” What did he really mean? What does India

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have to offer the world in terms of social democracy? And how could social democracy be the most preferred ideology for Indians? The obvious answer consists of India's culture of synthesis, politics of pluralism and multiculturalism, decentralized governance and the new liberal market-based democracy.

India started its political and economic journey on a typical socialist path. It was quite different then. Against the backdrop of anti-colonial struggle, India chose to

follow the policy of self-reliance, a mixed economy with the 'commanding heights of economy' in the state sector. The first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, could not envisage that his kind of socialism—one of statism—would compromise the very freedom he had fought so hard to win. State domination was certain to suppress the innovative energies and entrepreneurship of the people. India got steeped in bureaucratic socialism, not of the Soviet type though, which was the ruthless extreme.

¹ Pradip Bose's book, Social Democracy in Practice, was published in 2005—the editor.

² Surendra Mohan was a member of the upper house of the India parliament from 1978 to 1984. He is known as “the last Gandhian socialist”—the editor.

Since the 1990s, India has been moving away from state socialism. India began as a full-fledged democracy with adequate provisions in the constitution and setting up institutions. Since 1990, India began to create the material basis for social democracy by encouraging business, empowering

civil society and repositioning the state. The government came up with several innovative policies in order to create synergy between the three sectors—state, market and civil society. Many such policies were meant to alleviate poverty, enhance transparency and elicit responsiveness in governance. We may discuss a few of them.

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The Right to Information Act of 2005 provides that any citizen of India may ask for information from a public authority, which is required to reply expeditiously or within 30 days. Since the law was passed, a daily average of 4,800 right to information (RTI) applications are being filed. In the first 10 years of the commencement of the Act, a whopping 17.5 million applications were received.

Another flagship scheme that was meant to alleviate poverty and hunger is known as MNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) enacted in 2005 under the Congress-led UPA (United Progressive Alliance) government. It has two prominent aspects which could qualify it as a social democratic policy. It provides, as a social security measure, a guarantee to work and earn. It aims at enhancing livelihood in rural areas by providing at least a hundred days of wage employment in a financial year to every household whose adult members are available for unskilled manual work.

Third, Article 41 of the Indian Constitution provides that the state shall, within the limit of its economic power, make effective provision for securing the right to work. The idea behind this provision is that individuals have the right to work or to take part in productive employment. It should be noted that this was enacted in 1950 by the Congress government. In a short period of two and a half years, the first non-Congress government of Janata Party—led largely by Social Democrats—introduced the concept of *Antyodaya* into their economic policies. *Antyodaya* literally means 'unto the last,' and is meant to touch the lives of the poorest of the poor.

Fourth, another structural innovation by the UPA government was the constitution of the National Advisory Council (NAC), which worked as a bridge between Indian civil society and the government. Set up by the Indian National Congress on 4 June 2004, the NAC's role is to devise policies and advise the government on the betterment of India's poor. The NAC lent a social democratic touch to the UPA government by focusing on progressive social policies. A socialist cabinet minister in the UPA government characterized his government in a jest: "Our government is economic right and social left."

The current NDA (National Democratic Alliance),³ which has been in power since 2014, has been devising a good number of welfare schemes relating to income, health and sanitation, and livelihood. But ironically, these are more rhetoric rather than real projects on the ground. However, there is no gainsaying that some of the schemes, populist as they are, have caught the imagination and aspiration of the people giving the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) electoral dividends. That poses a threat to social democrats who should be claiming the progressive platform.

A plethora of such welfare policies which continue to be announced every now and then cover cash transfers, insurance on health and education, livelihood security, pension schemes, protection of the elderly against a future fall in their incomes due to uncertain market conditions, and providing universal access to banking facilities with at least one bank account for every household. So far so good. But these policies, while benefitting the poor to some extent, do not qualify

to be the foundation of a social democratic politics as the current government is found wanting in other areas that constitute its principles. Both the Congress and BJP governments had a few welfare policies, but could not be said to be representing social democratic politics.

How does one build a robust, distinct and functioning social democratic politics in India? There are a few organizing and ideological principles that need to be sorted out before we begin to usher in social democracy in India. First is to create a distinct national political platform in the form of a party or a coalition which would call itself social democratic. There is one party in the state of Uttar Pradesh with a socialist moniker; it is called the Samajwadi Party (Socialist Party). But it is a state-based party

without much global outlook and engagement which is also a necessary element of social democracy, known as solidarity within and across countries.

Second is addressing the issue that creates confusion and dilution of social democracy's distinction. The preamble of the Indian Constitution says, "We the people of India, having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a sovereign, socialist, secular and democratic Republic." So many politicians and parties call themselves socialist; even the BJP which is now a far-right party once called itself "Gandhian Socialist." So, the challenge is to build a genuinely functioning social democratic party whose members understand and practice social democracy in their daily lives.

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Image: gulfnews.com



³The National Democratic Alliance is a coalition of center-right and rightwing political parties led by the Bharatiya Janata Party—the editor.

Third, social democrats are often confused with the Communists who were a part of the ruling alliance led by Congress. They talk of socialism in their brand. In the 1990s, they had torpedoed the non-Congress and non-BJP alternative led by the social democrats through their tactic of entry-ism and deliberate destabilization of the center. Even now, some socialist comrades consider the Communists as progressive for their “pro-poor appeal” and do not hesitate to associate with them. As I write this, Congress is in formal alliance with the Communists in the ongoing West Bengal state elections. Such comrades do not realize that while they are democratic socialists, the Communists are democratic Stalinists, as Lord Meghnad Desai⁴ characterized them. The viable alternative is the social democrats with a center-left progressive platform without the Communists, the left communalists, and the right.

Fourth, early socialists in India were educated people with deep convictions and commitment. But they were too strong personalities to remain together. Socialist factions and parties got identified with them, and whenever they clashed, parties split or defections took place, so much so that splits and factions became the second nature of the socialists. A comrade who became a minister at the Center, despaired, “Socialist leaders are good people but lack organizational discipline causing socialism to be seen as anarchism.” Madhu Dandavate,⁵ an ideologue and an unblemished socialist leader, recorded in his autobiography a conversation with the visiting former social democratic Prime Minister of Britain, Jim Callaghan, who said to his Indian comrades, “We too fight a lot in our party (the British Labor Party), but we do not

break the instrument of our struggle and campaign, that is the party.” Social democrats in India must heed such advice.

Fifth, the ideology must be redefined and recast in the current context in order to include local cultural attributes. So far, social democracy is known in the world by four of its cardinal principles: liberty, equality, social justice and solidarity. Three more are to be added to capture the Eastern realities including those in India. They are dignity, identity and pluralism. Of course, such values have to be embraced universally as the hitherto mono-cultural societies in the West are becoming diverse

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under the process of globalization marked by the movement of people and services, and the influx of refugees.

Sixth, India has a huge youth population, more than 50 percent of the total population, and by far the most in the world. They are both idealistic and aspirational in nature. It will be strategic to inspire them with idealism as well as provide them with material scope for the fullest growth of their potential. So, growth and justice will have to go together, so should production and distribution. The institutions of market and politics have to interact, whereas civil society rises to tame both the rapacity of the market, and the authoritarianism and populism of the state. In India, civil society is vocal and vibrant. It has slowed down a bit under the disruptive impact of the pandemic. Yet, there have been protest movements of high intensity by students, women and farmers. In fact, the farmers' protest that began in November last year is still continuing against the apparent privatization of the agriculture sector with three new laws passed in Parliament.

Finally, in order to win power and implement social democracy, social democrats should stand out as the “party with a difference.” They have to combine ideas and action, idealism and pragmatism. They have to initiate reforms while reflecting social realities. We have had varieties of socialism: the scientific socialism of Karl Marx, the evolutionary socialism of the Fabians, the democratic socialism of the Europeans, the revolutionary socialism in America. Now it is time for practical socialism in India and Asia that combines democracy and socialism while creating a new political culture with high standards.📍

⁴Lord Meghnad Desai is a British economist and a former member of the Labour Party—the editor.

⁵Madhu Dandavate was a trained physicist who became a member of parliament from 1971 to 1990—the editor.

