

Growth with Social Justice

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Die Redaktion

Yesterday's clichés have a haunting quality about them. For weeks on end, tired season piling on tired season, the slogan keeps churning, whirling: 'growth with social justice', that will-o'-the-wisp of a twin goal — economic development to be married to an optimum effort towards a larger measure of equality in this hierarchy-laden society of ours. Let it not be said — even in malice retrospectively thought out — that the intent was altogether missing toward the beginning. This year's Union Budget did raise one or two heart-throbs. Nothing much perhaps in terms of actual outlays, nothing much perhaps in terms of a thorough overhaul of the inter- and intra-sector allocations. But at least there was a certain ring of empathy in what the Prime Minister was trying to say. As of that moment, one almost felt like believing that the time had indeed come as the Walrus said; as if hail, blithe spirit, we were indeed moving into a dazzling era of egalitarianism. It is barely a half-year since those dizzy spring days; and yet, in this mid-point of the dull summer, even the memory of all that would seem to have wilted. Prices have maintained their long march; the employment- and welfare-oriented projects are lost somewhere in the files; bureaucrats in the North Block have recovered their prevaricating equipoise; the season for socialism is ended for the present — could it be till the next Budget, or till the next election manifesto?

Take the instance of the banks. Oh, where are the promises of yesteryear? Banks, the outposts of capitalist conspiracy, were managed by the few for the few. This arrangement was going to be changed. The banks will march into the countryside, mingle with the landless, take counsel amongst the artisans, chalk out the blueprint of growth along with the proletariat. The pattern of lending will be revolutionised: the poor will be sought out, the irritant of the collateral will be shoved aside. The rate of interest, for the deserving, will be nominal; the millenium will be around.

In confabulations in New Delhi, the Finance Minister quotes stylised statistics about the magnitude of shift in the flow of credit to agriculture and the small-scale sector over the past twelve months. Cosmetics once more, or is it worse, a case of mindlessness, where you ask no questions and are told no lies? In several senses, it is business as usual, the only marginal difference being the discovery of the commercial banks by the kulaks and of the kulaks by the commercial banks. Look

at the composition of the interim boards of directors: what river of social compassion is going to be set on fire by this roster of brahminic names? Nothing gets altered in this ancient land of ours: the same old clerics would ensure that, on the pretext of socialism, the kingdom of elites survives forever.

Growth with social justice, did you say? Growth with social justice, nods A; growth with social justice, echoes B; growth with social justice, mimics C. Between the genesis and the mimicry, there hardly falls the shadow. No need to apologise for the impressionistic blurring of distinction between illusion and reality, for illusion is the reality, reality is the illusion. Everything merges with its contrary. The Prime Minister pulls some obtrusive, or not so obtrusive, strings, and Sant Fateh Singh's Akali Dal overnight transforms itself into an incarnation of socialism. The party of no-nonsense Punjabi kulaks wears its heart out for the sake of the landless labourer; proclaims its faith in the nationalisation of general insurance and foreign trade; is for the imposition of a ceiling on urban property; horror of horrors, it even comes out for a ban on private transactions in foodgrains trade. Words have been rendered devoid of context, so why worry over what the Sant says, or even over what Yeshwantrao Chavan says? In this clime of ours, a senior brother will manage the Indian Cotton Mills' Federation; you will hear him raise his shrill voice against the umpteen villainies perpetrated by trade. A junior brother will be the drill-master for the East India Cotton Association, declaiming on the perversity of the mills. Since it is all in the family, tucked away somewhere in the countryside will be a near cousin, a s a t r a p of co-operative farmers, inviting the attention of the world to the dark doings of trade and industry. The sun goes down: you will find the three, snugly assembled in the twilight, waving vigorously black flags at the cussedness of the Government. As the night grows darker, there is a change of locale: they are now in a New Delhi luxury hotel closeted with a Union Cabinet Minister, exchanging reminiscences, and contemplating new romantic bindings. Each of them is for socialism, each of them is for growth with social justice.

Growth with social justice, says the Prime Minister. Forget about social justice, where is growth? Despite the marginal embellishments in Punjab-Haryana and the ritual of public relations, the rate of growth in agriculture still maintains a near-perfect correlation with the progress of the monsoon. Nothing really significant or substantial is taking place in the other sectors either, despite the allegedly 20 per cent increase in the Plan outlay and the various tax and investment incentives put across through the Budget. Private entrepreneurs are sitting it out, maybe because, the lady's disclaimers or no, they suspect the General Election to be round the corner. The placidity in the public sector is equally impressive. This is the age of indolence; why bother to exert yourself when that surrogate, the mongering of cliches, will do equally well? Besides, the moment you try to push, you will be pushing against this or that class interest. There can be no growth without cost. Nobody is willing to underwrite the cost. The Prime Minister cannot afford to demand any sacrifice from any group unless the group is compensated adequately somewhere else. Everybody is for being subsidised; nobody is for being taxed. And if the arithmetic cannot match, so be it.

We will thus wait, the age of indolence is the age of waiting. There will be incessant talk of socialism and, simultaneously, aggravation of income inequalities. There will be talk of economic growth but an interregnum of low investment, with a

consequent spread of unemployment. Concern for an expanding socialist sector will be combined with a moratorium on the activities of public enterprises. There will be much pontification over the uplift of backward regions; translated into vernacular, this would mean a few stealthy industrial licences from Udyog Bhavan and a few stealthy loans from the Industrial Development Bank of India for the sharp ones. Meanwhile, red triangle or no, population will grow at a near three per cent rate; per capita income will languish. Economists, inside Government and outside, will compose, in the manner of poetry, models of futuristic growth, with or without a finite time horizon, with or without one or two utterly improbable caveats thrown in with or without a string of absurd, out-of-this-world assumptions. The Pareto optimum will be at work: none will be any wiser on account of these models, perhaps none too will be any worse off. Neither growth, nor social justice, but the social fabric will somehow be maintained, despite the Naxalites; they, in any case, do not belong and, therefore, do not count. The Prime Minister will campaign round the country, her charming evocations will grow more charming with every day.

Despite the chanting of the *m a n t r a m*, there will be neither growth nor social justice. But it will not really matter. India, after all, will continue to move on its own inertia: nobody will be able to do it much good, but then, nobody will be able to do it any harm either.