

Project for Economic Education

Founder
M.R.Masani

THE LIBERAL POSITION

10 03 99

The Requirements of Social Justice

Part I: Critique

After 40 years of independence, 8 five year plans, hundreds of laws leading to a veritable forest of rules offering a variety of special facilities to the underprivileged ranging from scheduled castes and tribes to women, in matters of education, employment, housing, etc. social justice is far from a reality. 53% of over 965 million people are under the poverty line i.e., unable to spend even a dollar a day on bare necessities. A mere 16 per cent of households enjoy the 'luxury' of electricity, drinking water and toilet facilities. This percentage is 3.9% if only rural households are taken into consideration. 71% of our women are illiterate. Barring a few states like Kerala and Tamil Nadu, rural health care is a sham and almost non-existent. Then there is the problem of the millions of the educated unemployed.

Though in any society some form of inequality is unavoidable the persistence of large-scale economic disparities, and the undignified living conditions of millions of Indians is a reality that cannot be overlooked. The satisfaction of a set of basic needs must have the highest priority, for without food shelter, clothing, health care and primary education a person does not become a human being.

The widespread caste prejudices and the continuing discrimination against the lower castes are a threat to social stability and peace. The social and educational backwardness of a vast section of the population inhibits its participation in the process of social and economic development not to mention human development. Hence the reduction of discriminatory social practices is an important part of the movement for social justice.

Women suffer from historical social and economic disadvantages. Even among the other categories of deprived communities they are the most deprived group. A liberal society must attend to demands of gender justice seriously.

The conception of social justice also encompasses firm commitment to the protection of human rights and civil liberties. Disabilities and problems of other groups like the physically disabled, child labour, tribals, and those affected by environmental pollution also form the agenda of social justice.

And these are India's most critical problems. These are at the root of much of the political unrest, social and ethnic conflicts, the growth of collective violence and the weakness of democratic structures in our country.

Part II: The Liberal Position

While Liberalism puts freedom first it is conscious of the fact that such freedom is hollow unless it is accompanied by a sense of security and equality. These may appear contradictory. They are not. The Liberal path to poverty alleviation is by strengthening the initiative of the poor to succeed as equals. It can be achieved through the principles of the market economy.

A large majority of our people lack the opportunity and the means to get the start they need to get out their plight. Liberalism cannot turn a blind eye to this fact because it threatens human dignity. A liberal social policy should aim at providing the most disadvantaged with access to

opportunities and, at the same time create a social net that strengthens their ability to cope with crises.

The Liberal position is that the state should not try to legislate the removal of income inequalities but should focus on the most disadvantaged groups and ensure that they survive with dignity and are able to compete on an equitable basis.

Successive governments have attempted to meet the basic needs of people by spending large sums of money on various subsidies, a variety of employment generation and poverty alleviation schemes. While these schemes have created a huge distributive bureaucracy only a small percentage of the sums sanctioned actually reach the intended recipient groups. They have bred corruption on a massive scale. A phenomenal amount of resources are wasted, destabilising public finances, harming economic development and burdening future generations.

In the light of the experience gained it would appear that the responsibility for undertaking and implementing such projects should be transferred to the local community through a process of devolution of power to make the people themselves responsible for remedying the situation.

A position can be taken that when people are put in control of the resources they create, it is possible for them to not only acquire economic independence, it is also possible for them to become socially independent, and therefore, take a step towards equality among their own kind, something which is missing in our villages even now. What is needed is a plurality of democratic structures right down to the village level which empower the citizen as a part of his everyday life. If this can be construed as affirmative action, then it is, in all probability, the most effective form in the long run, eventually obviating the need for positive discrimination.

Alongside of measures to liberalise the economy which would create new employment opportunities, there is need to encourage entrepreneurship and self-employment particularly in the light of fast developing technology. This would spur an upward movement of people and each entrepreneur can provide work for one or more persons.

Jobs and self employment opportunities have to be encouraged in sectors like agriculture, plantations, and in a variety of infrastructural activities etc., Employing techniques that involve a judicious mix of machines and manual labour, the country's enormous economic potential can be exploited to the benefit of the less fortunate sections of the population.

Without administrative and political decentralisation the goals of social justice may not be accomplished. Letting people decide what their development needs are will not only generate social and political awareness among them but also instill a sense of self-respect and build strong leadership at the local and community levels.

Based on a discussion and general acceptance of Part II of this Paper by a National Workshop on Liberalism held in Mangalore from March 26 to 28, 1999.
