

CHAPTER - II

History of the Indian thinking on Socialism :

A Brief Overview.

2:1 The Genesis of The Socialist Ideology.

Scientific socialist thought in India is a product of modern era. Indian's conquest by the British led not only to the loss of her political freedom, it also brought to light India's social and economic inferiority to the west. Early nationalist thinkers of India wanted attainment and restoration of national identity. The new wave of Indian nationalism emerged as 'the quest for a new national identity.' The nationalist thinkers hailed the British rule as a boon as it had sown the seeds of change and progress in India which had been static and staghant before the coming of the British.

In the West new thinkers and reformers had appeared who advocated the necessity of the replacement of the capitalist society. Marx was important of them who had emerged as the most formidable critic of the new industrial capitalist society and as the precursor of the philosophy of socialism. Marx presented in 1848 a full statement of 'scientific socialism' in his "Communist Manifesto." This statement has been exercising a tremendous impact on sensitive minds in different parts of the world. The Russian Revolution in 1917 created a stir and aroused and awakened the minds of the countries who were under colonial rule. The Russian Revolution demonstrated that an oppressive and tyrannical rule could be over thrown by the common ordinary people if they were alert and well-organised.¹

2.2 The Growth of Indian Socialism.

The term 'socialism' is generally used in a variety of senses, to connote different politico-economic programmes and courses of action which are often widely divergent. It should be admitted that though socialism is a universal phenomenon in contemporary ideological thinking, ambiguity remains regarding the meaning of socialism. In India a broad socialistic approach has developed within the Indian freedom movement. Some Indian thinkers were influenced and drawn towards socialism.

The Indian Renaissance of the second half of the 19th century gave rise to certain national ideals, including democracy, a broad form of socialism, non-violence, anti-imperialism, anti-racialism, Asianism and cooperative internationalism.² These ideals were influenced to a certain extent by Western political and economic thought but these ideas bear a distinct imprint of Indian thinking, traditions and culture. These ideas were essentially derived from Indian's own cultural and intellectual tradition and have a linkage with Indian history and historical conditions. V.R. Mehta rightly observes : "By the middle of the twentieth century, Indian thinkers began to move specifically towards socialism, which while deriving its inspiration from the development of socialism in the West, would yet incorporate the specificity and identify of Indian society."³

The growth of Indian socialism during the period, the first and the second world wars, can best be studied in the political and social context of the time. Its growth was not a straight line, rather suffered from false starts and setbacks; it was affected by the hostility of the British authorities, recurrent economic crises, the changing international scene and the rather violent shifts in the attitudes of the Communist International towards the national struggle in India. The organisation of "Left Politics" took place in the face of official opposition

and congress suspicion. There is no doubt that socialist ideas and parties gave a certain social content and occasionally a sharper edge to Indian nationalism as represented by the Indian National Congress.⁴

Marx's radical views attracted the Indian nationalist thinkers. They sought to expose the drawbacks and limitations of British rule and revealed the economic plight of the country as the result of her drainage of wealth by the colonial masters. The early nationalist thinkers like Dadabhai Naoroji, B.G. Tilak, Ramesh Chandra Dutt, Gokhale, Justice Ranade did a commendable job in exposing the evil designs of the colonial rulers and in arousing the sentiments of Indian people to revolt against the foreign domination Bipan Chandra Says :

"The Indian national movement was basically the product of the central or primary contradiction of colonial India, the contradiction between colonialism and the interests of the Indian people. This was its material basis."⁵

At this time national consciousness began to grow apace. It is to be pointed out that the development of transport and communications through the railways, post and telegraph and press helped the growth of such consciousness. The first popular movement began under the leadership of B.G. Tilak in Maharashtra in the 1890's and the partition of Bengal (1905) gave a great fillip and a radical turn to the nationalist movement. It is significant that in 1906 Dadabhai Naoroji, in his presidential address to the annual session of the Indian National Congress, placed before the people swaraj or self-government as the goal to be attained.⁶

The writings and speeches of these liberal leaders pointed out the economic maladies of the country but contained no direct idea of socialism, yet the economic unrest generated by their writings helped in the gradual growth of a socialist ideology in the country.⁷

The revivalist movement in the country towards the end of 19th century and beginning of 20th century also generated consciousness through the socio-religious reforms, and gave direction towards the growth of socialist ideology in the country. The Theosophical society also contributed to the growth of socialistic ideas in the country. Anne Besant saw in Indian thinking rich tradition of socialism.⁸

If we seek to analyse the thinking of Indian thinkers on socialism and socialistic ideas we will notice that different thinkers viewed, examined and discussed socialism from diverse viewpoints and angles. It is remarkable that no two of our thinkers agree on what precisely socialism connotes.

Vivekananda called himself a socialist. He was a social reformer. He presented a balanced view for both society and the individual. Vivekananda understood that in a perfect society there should be proper harmony between man and the aim should be a synthesis between spiritualism and materialism. Vivekananda was deeply devoted to the cause of the liberation of the poor, and the downtrodden. Vivekananda harped on the moral foundations of national cohesion and solidarity for the regeneration and rejuvenation of Indian nation. It should be mentioned that Vivekananda enriched the moral foundations of Bengal nationalism, in theory and practice, by dint of his innumerable writings and speeches.⁹

Bankimchandra Chatterjee was a creative social thinkers. He was a keen observer and an analyst of the social realities around him. He depicted in his novels the social maladies and inequalities and provided remedies for their eradication. In 1879 he published his essay on "Samya" in which he made a frontal attack on various forms of inequality in society.¹⁰

Mahatma Gandhi is regarded as the greatest revolutionary of the present

century. He is a man of action, a realist and a pragmatist. He is hailed as the greatest mass mobiliser in India. According to Gandhi, equality is the essence of socialism. Gandhi was of the opinion that the virtue of socialism was that it regards all members as equal, none low, none high. He was quite emphatic that since socialism is pure as crystal, it requires crystal like means to achieve it. He wrote, 'Impure means result in an impure end.'

Gandhi's conception of socialism was ethical, based on the possibility of reform in human nature. He was a great exponent of truth and non-violence. Gandhi argued that Western democracy, Fascism and Communism were all unacceptable to India, because they were all characterised by the absence of true freedom, whether individual or collective, inequality and exploitation. Gandhi was opposed to communism and the soviet system of government, as he detested violence, regimentation and dictatorship.

Gandhi was convinced that true socialism can be established by satyagraha alone. He wrote, "It is the highest and infallible means, the greatest force. Socialism will not be reached by any other means. Satyagraha can rid society of all evils, political, economic and moral."¹¹

Sri Aurobindo was emphatic in rejecting capitalism and communism and in suggesting a new type of socio-political order closely resembling democratic socialism, although he discussed the future more from the point of view of humanity as a whole than from that of India. M.N. Roy was a humanist and following Renaissance thought he accepted man as a point of departure. He accepted the principle of the sovereignty of the individual and tried to integrate it with democratic theory.¹² M.N. Roy wanted man to perform his social responsibilities without surrendering his liberty. M.N Roy was not in favour of a communist revolution. He was a socialist of a kind but was deeply opposed to all forms of totalitarianism. In relation to humanism, his objectives were of

libertarian kind. Roy gave almost importance on individual freedom.

The New Humanism of M.N. Roy aimed at a secular, rational morality for opening a new perspective before the world. The New Humanism of M.N. Roy rejected the economic determinism of Marx and considered the human will as the motive force of social evolution. He affirmed that revolution must go beyond the mere economic reorganisation of society for the sake of creating a new world of freedom and social justice.¹³

During India's freedom struggle, a serious debate was going on in the country about the goal and purpose of freedom and on what should be the social and economic content of political independence. It showed the desire of the Indian elite to define the picture of future India when they would be called upon to 'build' after the British has left. One ideologue of the national movement, Jawaharlal Nehru, wanted the country to accept the goal of socialism for free India.

"Of the leaders of all-India stature, Jawaharlal Nehru was one of the first to be attracted to socialism,"¹⁴ opines Sankar Ghose. Nehru would not like to define socialism in precise and rigid terms, Nehru once said : 'What I want is that all individuals in India should have equal opportunities of growth, from birth upwards, and equal opportunities for work according to their capacity.' Socialism appealed to Nehru 'as a philosophy of life.' He viewed socialism as 'the only key to the solution of the world's problems and of India's problems.' Nehru sought to evolve a social philosophy for the construction of Indian society on the basis of equality, social justice and individual freedom. Nehru was a pragmatist. He said, "I am not enamoured of these 'isms', and I want to forget the 'ism' attached to it. Our problem today is to raise the standard of the masses I should like to set them on the right road and I do not care what 'ism' it is that helps me to set them on that road, provided I do it."¹⁵ Nehru

believed that socialism was bound to come to India, even though in establishing socialism India "may evolve her own methods and may adapt the ideal to the genius of her race."¹⁶

Subhas Bose writes in 1931 that socialism, justice, equality, freedom, discipline and love constitute the essence of socialism, According to Jayaprakash Narayan, voluntary subordination of one's interest to the larger interest of society is the keynote of socialism. Jayaprakash writes :

The objectives of socialism are : Elimination of exploitation and poverty; provision of equal opportunities to all for self-development; full development of the material and moral resources of society and utilisation of these resources in accordance with the needs and wishes of society as a whole rather than in accordance with the dictates of profit; equitable appointment of national wealth and social, educational and other services between all who labour and serve society.¹⁷

Narendra Deva retained his faith in democratic socialism. He believed in a classless society, but he said that Indian socialists must remain wedded to the ideal of democracy and to the policy of effecting changes peacefully. Rammandhar Lohia defined socialism as 'equality and prosperity.' Lohia harped on the need of an independent doctrine of socialism with a distinct stamp of Indianness. Lohia feels that Indian socialism cannot be built by following Marxism blindly. Asoke Mehta planded for an Asian socialism which would be revisionist, democratic and pacific.¹⁸ Mehta favoured Western concepts of social democracy and democratic socialism than Marxism.

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NOTES & REFERENCES

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