

Knowledge as Commodity

(Ashok Rudra)

NO communist ever found any fault with Lenin's definition of communism as electricity plus power in the hands of the Soviets. As a matter of fact, it has often been quoted by communists as illustrative of the capacity Lenin had to bring out the very heart of a complex matter in a brief phrase. It is this formula that happens to be the corner stone of the Communist Programme adopted by the 22nd Congress of the CPSU. Yet, there is one man who would certainly have taken serious objection to this definition of communism and that man is Karl Marx. Marx would have pointed out that while electricity and soviet power are indeed necessary they are not sufficient for a communist programme. For the central idea of communism according to him is the liberation of man from the fetters that prevent his self-expression. The development of electricity and other industrial products is indeed very much necessary to promote man's self expression, and power will indeed have to be exercised by the soviets to administer these products. But much more is necessary to ensure man's free development,

Marx was no" however there to raise objection when Stalin took upon himself the task of developing electricity and soviet power with result?; that are well known. Soviet power has been used not only to administer things but also to administer men an extravagant understatement and instead of electricity serving men, men have been made to serve electricity. The philosophy underlying Stalinist planning was the development of industry as an end by itself. Soviet people today are indeed better fed, better schooled and in many ways better off than their czarist five-fathers; hut with all that they are not very rear to Communism as Marx visualised it. While production of steel and electricity has gone up at remarkable speed. there has not been a corresponding progress in the realm of human values. There is, in the Soviet society, a tremendous concen-

tration of power in the hands of a few and new social strata have emerged that enjoy privileges and indulge in vulgar extravagances comparable to that of the moneyed classes of capitalist societies. The level of maturity reached by the masses in matters of taste and of artistic appreciation seem also to be very low, lower than in many Western European countries. The Soviet man is becoming more and more epicurean and less and less promethean.

Socialistic Pattern

In India too there are certain schools of thought that measure progress of society exclusively in terms of the rate at which the production of commodities advances. Kilowatts of electricity and million tons of steel are the units in which Welfare is attempted to be measured. The Good is defined as something that is conducive to a higher rate of growth of national income irrespective of its distribution end irrespective of the use to which it is put. Among those who think in this fashion are a considerable section of our socialists and socialise pattern-wallas. For them, socialism is nothing more than a society with a large public sector and that too they find necessary only because industrial development of our under-developed country seems to call for it. They are not interested, as some other socialists are, in a higher order of civilisation. They are quite satisfied with the value system of capitalism and with the individual's place in a capitalist society. If we are to follow these socialists we would be building for ourselves a society that would be a cross- between the present day American society and the present day Soviet society, vested, no doubt, with an important inheritance from the value system of our immemorial traditions.

Dr Paranjape * of course does not talk of communism or socialism; but it is the view of welfare and progress we have just sketched above that underlies his whole treatment of the problem of flight of technical

personnel, so that the suggestions he comes out with make dismal reading. For criterion he chooses 'efficiency' as understood by the private sector entrepreneur. He implicitly makes the assumption, which many people make without ever substantiating it, that private sector enterprises are run more efficiently than public sector ones are. His suggestions therefore inevitably amount to asking the public sector units to be run on the same lines as private sector ones.

The private sector enterprises naturally approach the problem of personnel as it would approach any other problem, that is, with the basic philosophy of capitalism which can be summarised as: The supreme law of life is the Law of Demand and Supply. From woman's virtue to scientist's talent, there is nothing that cannot be purchased. If in any given situation, you do not get what you want, the only thing to do is to raise the price. But never raise the price of a commodity beyond its marginal productivity.

It is this philosophy which Dr Paranjape would have the public sector enterprises adopt. He would "certainly not think it desirable to introduce the service or cadre concept as it is understood in our Government Services"; he advocates, "a basically different approach . with less emphasis on fairness to employees and more on the requirements of efficient production". He would have them look upon their technical personnel as not integrated human beings, but as bundles of commodities subject to the Law of Demand and Supply. It is this that makes him come out with his recommendations regarding variable maximum pay and variable annual increments. You do not put a whole human being to work; you buy services. Hence you raise salary and

* H. K. Paranjape, "The Flight of Technical Personnel in Public Undertakings : A Study Report", The Indian Institute Of Public Administration, New Delhi.

even lower it in proportion to the service you get.

Technical Difficulties

Incidentally, philosophy of man apart, this approach will give rise to difficulties on purely technical grounds. Dr Paranjape does not obviously realise the scientific difficulties involved in developing "methods of appraisal and some common standards of appraisal". Measurement of merit is not a problem that has as yet been satisfactorily solved. Adoption of many of the recommendations of Dr Paranjape regarding remunerating personnel in proportion to their merit, irrespective of age seniority, etc would only bring about in the public sector enterprises the moral atmosphere that prevails in the private sector ones, where arbitrariness reigns supreme albeit the fact that the lure of money and the threat of dismissal do maintain a certain type of efficiency in which the businessman is interested.

One can raise another objection on equally technical grounds. The existence of different levels of remuneration for the same qualification is not the only factor that accounts for flight of personnel. Whenever there is a continuing shortage of any commodity supply in relation to its demand there will be a tendency for the prices to keep rising and this will apply equally well to the salaries of technical personnel in so far as they are treated by the market approach. Technical personnel do not however sell themselves once for all; they only hire out their services. As no employer would normally raise the salary of a technical worker voluntarily in keeping with the higher terms offered to new recruits, the personnel already employed would perforce be obliged to continually go back to the market to get themselves re-valued. As long as there would be shortage in the supply of technical personnel implementation of Or Paranjape's recommendations will not do anything to reduce what he calls horizontal migration; they will only accelerate an inflationary process in the market of technical skills.

I however want to get away from the technical aspects of the question and come back once more to their

philosophical foundations, symbolic of which is the recommendation that the highest pay in the public sector enterprises should be raised from the present Rs 2750 to Rs 5000 to be comparable to the remunerations paid in the private sector. It is not that Dr Paranjape is unaware of the fact that his recommendation goes against one of the accepted principles of socialist pattern, namely reduction of inequality; but he has imposed on himself the choice to treat as a "given decision" of the government not to attempt any "control over the wage/a and salaries to be paid by private sector undertakings to their employees". It is quite true that it would be unrealistic to expect one to accept Rs 2750 in a public sector enterprise when one might get Rs 5000 in a private sector enterprise;

but is it equally true that the general level of efficiency will suffer if a National Salaries Policy is adopted for the entire economy, covering both the private and the public sector to bring about a less scandalous disparity in pays? Must we necessarily rule out the possibility of a climate being created where personnel are treated as human beings and not, as bundles of commodities; where technical personnel work primarily for the satisfaction they get out of work and not to be able to roll in luxuries; where morale could be made to depend not on the absolute amounts paid as salary but on the relative positions in which personnel are placed? Must we give up even the attempt to bring about such a climate merely because neither the USA nor the USSR has achieved it?



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