

“THIRD WORLDISM”: Reactionary Politics in Progressive Guise

Anila Cherian, Shan Manikkalingam and Robin Varghese

Third Worldism' has been a salient feature in oppositional politics in the last few decades. By 'Third Worldism' we mean the glorification and celebration of any phenomenon/movement regarding the third world that appears to challenge the West. Given the rise of cultural relativism, 'Third World' reactionary nationalism and fundamentalism have been masquerading as forms of progressive politics. A segment of the Left has mistakenly viewed these masquerades as representing a progressive alternative. Others have apologised for the excesses of 'Third World' nationalist and fundamentalist movements and governments. We believe this to be a truly dangerous trend. While opposition to the American intervention of the Persian Gulf was crucial, the subsequent defence, by some, of Saddam Hussein is a telling example of the pitfalls of Third Worldism. The support that some "progressives" gave the Khmer Rouge is "Third Worldism" at its horrific worst. Undoubtedly, resistance to all forms of imperialism has been and remains essential. However, forms of resistance that ignore class, gender, racial, and ethnic power relations must be reevaluated.

Definitions: Imposed Unity, Shattered Realities

Much of the problem with Third Worldism rests in the way the term "Third World" has been defined. The shared experience of colonialism and post-colonial dependency are the uniting features that popularised the use of the term. In the present historical context, however, the term is quite meaningless. With South Korea at one end of the spectrum and Mozambique at the other, the term Third World becomes an overarching identity, that forces an homogenisation of disparate historical, social and economic experiences/realities. The term originally reflected a historical and economic category; however, it has been transformed into a racial and cultural monolith that transfigured what once used to be a site of resistance into a site of resentment and despair. Moreover, it is an identity that exists solely in the negative, describing the major part of humanity as not of the 'First,' or what was of the 'Second,' worlds. In addition, there have always been those grey areas that defy categorisation, e.g. Ireland, Malta, Yugoslavia, and Israel. As a concept, Third World has been largely effective in the West and in discourse targeted towards the West.

As forms of domination become more subtle and multi-faceted and shared historical experiences grow distant, adherence to a universal Third World identity in the locational context of the Third World becomes tenuous at best. To this end, peasants and urban squatters, whose struggles are based on other identities - class and ethnicity, for example - see little or no validity in the term, Third World.

While resistance to all forms of imperialism is essential, it is sobering to note that anti-imperialist rhetoric has often been used by Third World elites to legitimise some of the worst horrors of our time. Indira Gandhi's imposition of the State of Emergency in 1976, Saddam Hussein's gassing of the Kurds, Abdul Nasser's persecution of the Egyptian Communists and Mengistu's war against the Tigreans and Eritreans are examples that come readily to mind. Adherents of Third Worldism have justified, ignored, or maintained a stubborn silence in the face of such nationalist excesses.

Reactionary Nationalisms

In addition to the definitional problems of the category, the political manifestations/practices it has generated must be critically examined. The rhetoric of Third Worldism has often validated reactionary politics under the banner of nationalism. Nationalism began, in the colonial world, as a means for emancipating the constructed, imagined 'nation' from colonial rule. But now it has become the legitimising myth for the preservation of a repressive order. In many of the post-colonial nation-states, proclamations of equality before the law have become meaningless because nationalists, who have draped themselves in the flag, have refused to extend equality into the social economic and political realms. In the drive towards 'nation-building,' a particularized and monolithic national identity is imposed by the post-colonial state, consequently denying alternative identities and visions of politics and reinforcing the dominance of traditional and new elites.

In his critique of nationalism, the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore parodies the hollow claims of the nationalist project:

When questioned as to the wisdom of its course, the newly converted fanatic of nationalism answers that so long as nations are rampant in this world



we have not the option to freely develop our higher humanity. We must utilize every faculty we possess to resist the evil by assuming it ourselves in the fullest degree. For, the only brotherhood possible in the modern world is the brotherhood of hooliganism.¹

Another worrying trend in much of the Third World is revivalism - specially its most acute variant of religious or ethnic fundamentalism. In trying to resurrect a pristine, imagined past, revivalist movements often valorize indigenous systems of oppression and buttress the privileges of the status quo. Like revivalism, nativism, a perspective that sees all that is indigenous as good, cleverly masks the serious and debilitating, class, gender and ethnic conflicts that exist in society. Unfortunately, cultural relativism lends a helping hand in preventing and abating opposition to fundamentalist forces. "Third Worldists," with their cultural relativist lenses, are hard pressed to acknowledge the existence of, let alone criticise, native systems of oppression. When they do acknowledge the existence of oppressive practices, such as caste discrimination, female genital mutilation, or Sha'ria [Islamic law], it is usually in the form of an apology.

Conclusion

The state or reactions to it is the arena in which regressive nationalism and nativism are encapsulated. In the limited world of 'modernise at any cost,' the state is held to be the unitary actor whose sole objective is self-perpetuation and power-goals valorized by 'Third Worldists' as essential to 'nationhood.' However, in the 'Third World,' the state itself, given its crisis of legitimacy, is a site of contestation. A state-centric view endorses the crushing of all oppositional social movements. When calls from peasants, workers, women, or minorities to alter the status quo are crushed, it is often nationalism that is used as the legitimising agent.

The unequal relationship between state and civil society seldom appears in "Third Worldist" discourse. The fragmentation and repression of society by the so-called anti-imperialist states is glossed over, and issues such as distributive justice and political accountability are ignored. The calls for "nation building," implicit in the arguments of those who call to "strengthen the state at any expense," have often permitted the dismissal of critical identities such as class, gender and ethnicity.

Another equally alarming development is the recent rise of ethno-nationalist movements that have adopted nativistic politics in their contest for state power. The BJP in India, and the JVP and the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka are examples of this. Often "radical" apologists justify these groups on the grounds that they are supposedly "organic," home-grown and oppose the West. Radical rhetoric aside, these groups oppose liberal democratic rights on the basis that they are Western, while advocating racist reactionary politics. Paradoxically, these same groups have uncritically embraced nationalism which also has its origins in Enlightenment Europe.

Professor S. Gopal of Delhi University argues that while Hinduism is used by the BJP as a nativist ideology to oppose the West, its conceptual origin lies in the attempts of German and British orientalists to categorise the religions of India.

Thus, the ostensibly anti-western politics of "Third Worldism" is ultimately derived from western ideas. This indicates that "Third Worldists," themselves, have not been averse to a selective appropriation from the west. The problem with Third Worldists, however, is not that they have borrowed from the west, but that they have only borrowed the bad.

Note

1. Tagore, Rabindranath 1976. *Nationalism* Madras: MacMillan India Ltd. (p 16).

Letter

Reading Qadri Ismail's piece [*Pravada*, July 1992] prompts me to make this point. The problem with Mr. Prabakaran, is not that he doesn't have a correct stand on the "woman question" and that he thinks that "women must be adjuncts to men in the struggle". The problem is that he is a fascist.

Tisarane Gunasekara
Colombo.