

# Leaders of social CHANGE IN INDIA

Ten ideologies, The great asymmetry between agrarianism and industrialism  
Orient BlackSwan, Rs 795

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Before the arrival of Fabian Socialism in India, Swami Vivekananda, one of the early apostles of Indian nationalism, was the first Indian to use the word 'Socialism' and welcome it. He aroused great pride in the glory of ancient India among Hindus; however, he saw in the caste system the greatest weakness of Hindu society and gave a clarion call for its abolition. He had in fact prophesied in the last decade of the nineteenth century that the twentieth century would herald the age of the Sudras (backward castes). Although he was primarily a spiritual personality, he laid great emphasis on the material prosperity of the nation, and economic justice for the poor. As a consequence of his two-dimensional legacy, he became an icon for both the rightist Hindu forces and Communist parties. He has remained one of the supreme icons of modern India, cutting across all ideological barriers.

In India, apart from Nehru, socialist thought received spirited support from Subhas Chandra Bose, Jayaprakash Narayan, Acharya Narendra Dev, Lohia, Ashok Mehta, etc. The great martyr of India's freedom struggle, Sardar Bhagat Singh, declared himself a Marxist, but deliberately chose not to join the Communist Party of India. In other words, he expressed sympathy for the revolutionary ideas of Marx, without speaking in favour of communism as such. He should therefore be considered a socialist. Vinoba Bhave, founder of the Bhudan (land donation) movement, needs to be noted as a utopian socialist. Above all, Gandhiji should be regarded as the greatest utopian socialist of India, if not of the world.



Gandhiji's political disciple, Jawaharlal Nehru, was the most senior and distinguished of all traditional socialists, says the author

Gandhiji was a multidimensional phenomenon, and a bundle of colossal contradictions. Here, we shall confine ourselves to a brief analysis of the utopian aspects of his message. He allowed himself to be influenced by the Bhagwat Gita, Jain philosophy, the Bible, Tolstoy, David Thoreau, etc. Being an organic genius, he formed his own complex synthesis. Gandhiji transcended typecasting and continued to evolve his personality and philosophy so radically, and yet so naturally, that nobody could dare to draw him into doctrinaire disputations. He rose from conservative Hindu positions to those of a social crusader. Nobody from the upper castes has contributed so much to the cause of the untouchables in India. He aroused the empathy of orthodox upper castes by drawing their attention to the historical iniquities heaped on the untouchables. Gandhiji had the supreme moral authority to describe any prob-

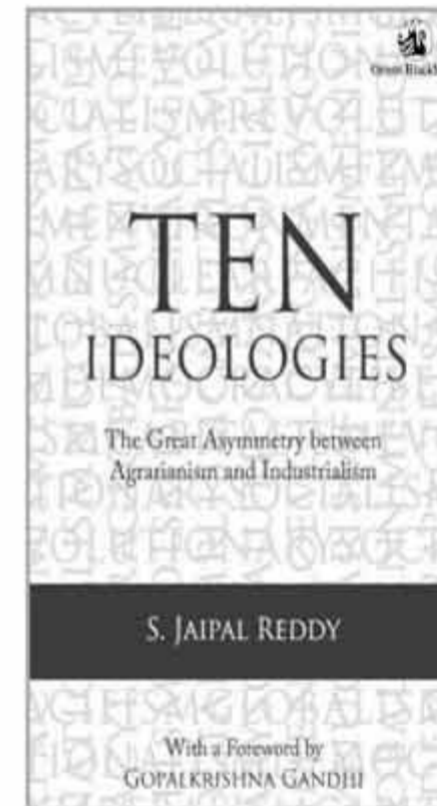
lem in spiritual terms. In his characteristic manner, he called the untouchables 'Harijans—the children of God', and persuaded upper-caste oppressors to perceive the problem of untouchability in that light. He laid down and enforced the rule that nobody could become a member of his party, the Indian National Congress, without a record of her/his personal service to untouchables. While doing so, he also preserved the unity of the Hindu community by persuading B. R. Ambedkar, the leader of the untouchables, to give up his demand for a separate electorate. What was more, he discreetly bade the leaders of his Party to entrust the crafting of India's new Constitution to Ambedkar, a genius who blended radical ideas with democratic procedures.

Gandhiji reposed faith in free enterprise, but wanted entrepreneurs to be the public trustees of wealth. He did not believe in possession,

and in this respect, he owed a direct debt to Jain philosophy, which preaches 'Aparigraha' (non-possession). He almost seemed to agree with Proudhon, who likened property to theft. He can also be likened to Charles Fourier, who had serious reservations about 'industrialism' and preferred agriculture. Gandhiji laid stress on small-scale industry for the purpose of maximising employment.

Like all utopian socialists, he was a philosophical anarchist in that he did not set much store by government, or in violent resistance to the government's policies. In fact, he pleaded for civil disobedience, à la David Thoreau. Gandhiji has gone down in history as the greatest practitioner of the technique of passive resistance (Satyagraha). Environmentalists now consider him their greatest icon, as he discouraged heavy industrialization and conspicuous consumption, which would inevitably involve pollution. Like utopi-

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an socialists, Gandhiji believed in voluntarism and conversion of the people through moral persuasion.

Vinoba Bhave, Gandhiji's spiritual disciple, launched the Bhudan (voluntary land donation by large landowners) movement soon after India's Independence, and succeeded in getting hundreds of thousands of acres of land distributed among the poor. Vinoba Bhave enrolled thousands of voluntary social workers in this movement. This was possible not only because of his personal efforts, but also because of the moral impact generated by Gandhiji's voluntarism during the freedom struggle.

Gandhiji's political disciple, Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964), was the most senior and the most distinguished of all traditional socialists. Nehru, who had been exposed to the philosophy of Marxism and Fabian socialism, was the first socialist to cut through the revivalist appearances of Gandhiji and identify his indefinable political genius. He could also perceive the adamant will behind Gandhiji's soft words and non-violent teachings. While adopting Gandhiji as his guru, Nehru retained his core beliefs of modern ratio-

nalism and democratic socialism.

Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose's (1897–1945) faith in socialism developed while he was a student in Britain. After he refused selection to the prestigious Indian Civil Service, he joined the Congress party to advance the cause of the freedom struggle. Although he accepted Gandhiji's leadership and admired his unique calibre, he had reservations about Gandhiji's unqualified endorsement of non-violence as the technique of the struggle for freedom. Unlike Nehru, Bose was a great believer in God, but he openly expressed his difficulty with the religious symbolism of Gandhiji's language, fearing that this would alienate religious minorities, including M. A. Jinnah. Netaji, unlike other socialists in India, thought that independent India would need a benevolent dictatorship for a short period, say of ten years, in order to make radical changes and expedite development. This, however, did not mean that he was in favour of any kind of dictatorship as part of his philosophy. He had no organisational problems with Gandhiji or Nehru, but he did with Sardar Patel. He also had an ideological problem with Patel's pro-capitalist stance. He was fond of Nehru because of their ideological like-mindedness, but later developed a problem with the latter's reluctance to distance himself from Gandhiji. These problems assumed a larger ideological character when Bose, as the president of the Congress party, began to advocate support to Hitler's Germany against Britain. It was at this stage that Gandhiji took a strong position against Bose. Bose, who always had reservations about the programme of non-violence, saw an opportunity to clinch the issue of India's freedom in World War II. Although Bose participated in World War II along with his Indian National Army (INA), which he raised on the side of Japan and Germany, he always re-

tained faith in socialism, democracy, and Gandhiji's leadership. It is not surprising, then, that Bose, at the zenith of his glory as the leader of the INA, referred to Gandhiji as the 'Father of the Nation' through his address on Rangoon Radio.

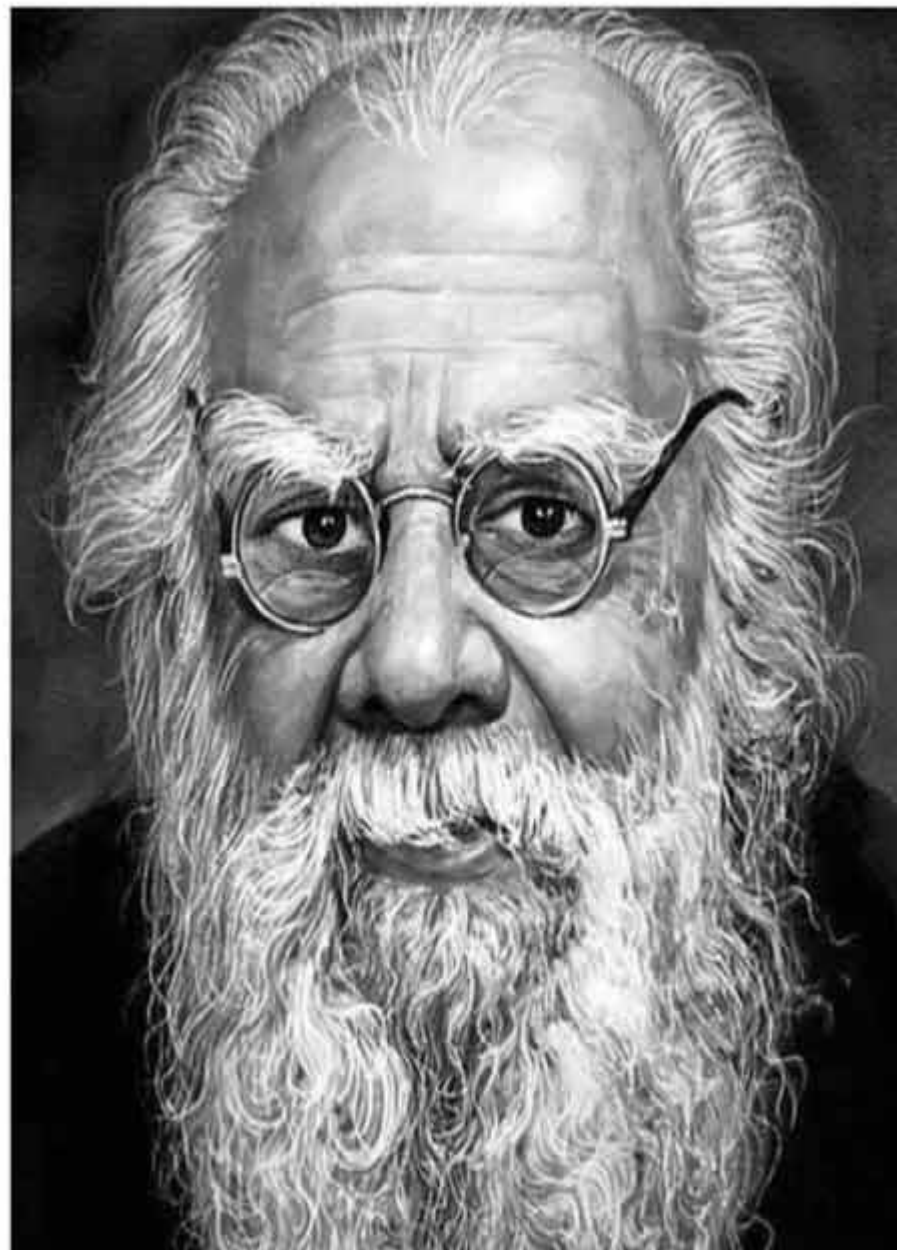
After Nehru and Bose, Jayaprakash Narayan (1902–79) was the most popular socialist leader during the freedom struggle and in independent India. On principle, JP chose not to study in Britain but in America, where he was converted to the general principles of Marxism. But he joined the Congress party under the leadership of Gandhiji upon his return to India, albeit with strong socialist reservations. JP, along with Acharya Narendra Dev, Ram Manohar Lohia, Ashok Mehta, and other stalwarts, formed the Congress Socialist Party under the umbrella of the Congress party, and strengthened their wing across the country with young recruits. They all voted for Bose when he contested for Congress presidency against the nominee of the Congress Working Committee, Pattabhi Sitaramiah, but did not agree with Bose when he differed from Gandhiji and took a position in favour of Hitler's Germany. They believed that Gandhiji's supreme leadership was indispensable, and that the fascism of Germany posed a far greater threat to the world than British imperialism. All of them participated vigorously in the Quit India Movement and suffered long sentences in prison. JP and Lohia escaped from Hazaribagh jail and led the underground movement.

After independence, they developed serious differences with Sardar Patel on both organisational and ideological grounds, and quit the Congress to form their own party. This decision, soon after the death of Gandhiji, was a great mistake, which they later admitted. At any rate, after the 1952 Lok Sabha elections, their new party was divided, with one wing led by Acharya Narendra Dev, Ashok Mehta, etc., and another led by Ram Manohar Lohia. This split prompted JP to quit electoral politics and join the Gandhian movement led by Vinoba Bhave.

Jayaprakash Narayan, who started his ideological career with Marxism, turned to utopian socialism and worked in the movement for about twenty years. JP's personal charisma did not diminish even after quitting electoral politics, as

people across the party's barriers recognised the selfless way in which he sacrificed greater prospects and high positions. JP pleaded for democracy without political parties, and thus became a philosophical anarchist. His senior colleague, Narendra Dev, stuck with the socialist party through thick and thin. He was noted for his exceptional erudition, particularly on ancient India; he studied the dead Pali language in which the Buddha spoke, and conducted research based on ancient documents. He wrote his original and voluminous account of Buddhist philosophy in Hindi. Unlike JP, Narendra Dev retained a steady propensity for Marxism and made a keen study of the problems of peasants and rural areas. Although he was never charismatic, he was by far the most scholarly and non-controversial leader of the Congress socialist party.

**R**am Manohar Lohia (1910–67) and Ashok Mehta (1911–84) were democratic socialists with no sympathy for Marxism as such. Lohia applied socialism to India's peculiar conditions, and theorised that caste in India was a more relevant factor than class. He went on to say that class would be abstract (nirgun) and caste concrete (sagun) in the Indian context. This theory defined him as a unique socialist thinker and took socialism, at least in north India (more particularly in UP and Bihar), to the masses. Even now, leaders of the backward classes, particularly those belonging to the Yadava and Kurmi castes, swear by Lohia's legacy. Another of Lohia's innovations was his insistence on Indian languages (including Hindi), as he thought that learning a foreign language like English would not only burden children, but also blunt their nationalism. In retrospect, not everybody in India would agree with him, as the world in the meantime has become far more globally interconnected, with English emerging as the most important international language. The third novel idea that Lohia introduced was the encouragement of small-scale industries, on the ground that heavy industrialisation was a Western model not applicable to developing countries in the East, particularly to India, with its vast population. In this respect, he agreed with Gandhiji, and was the first to do so among



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the socialists. Regardless of the merits of these three innovative ideas, there should be no difficulty in saying that he was the most original thinker in the Congress socialist tradition.

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B. R. Ambedkar should be treated as an outstanding social democrat, although he did not declare himself as such. By virtue of his birth on the lowest rung of Hindu society, the Dalit (untouchable) caste, he was a born socialist. But through education and exposure, he grew to be a progressive democrat by conviction. He took his Ph.D. from the UK and another from the US. He was a lawyer and an economist by training, and was a committed historical sociologist besides. Through his enlightened indignation, he became the peerless pioneer of progressive social causes, including that of untouchables. While highlighting the millennial misfortunes that have haunted his community, he rose above its anger and suggested remedial measures for mitigating the injustice in social, economic, and political spheres. He did not confine himself to righting the wrongs of his community alone; he wanted to extend the process to other backward classes as well. For all his soaring egalitarian vision, he was no roaring revolutionary, in a tearing hurry for change. He had the wisdom and the patience for slow change through constitutional democracy. As the leader of the Dalits, he made his inimitable socialist contribution through his role in crafting India's Constitution. While supporting India's

struggle for freedom in principle, he refused to join the Congress party on the ground that all Congress party leaders—including its tallest leader, Gandhiji—were from the upper castes, and therefore did not represent the masses of India, who comprised the Other Backward Classes, Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes.

**A**mbedkar confronted Gandhiji on this issue at the Round Table Conference in London (1930–32), and Gandhiji responded instantly by stating that India's future constitution would be shaped in a manner that would serve the weaker sections. Ambedkar, through the Poona Pact, secured a commitment from Gandhiji to the scheme of reservations for lower castes in legislative bodies, employment, and education. Gandhiji also gave him the unique opportunity to give appropriate shape to India's new Constitution from the perspective of secular democracy and for the betterment of the weaker sections. Ambedkar, a first-rate political thinker and jurist, rose to the challenge by proving himself the social conscience and democratic watchdog of India's Constitution. He later served as Law Minister under Nehru's Prime Ministership and played his part in giving new shape to the Hindu Code Law. While cooperating with

Nehru on the Hindu Code Bill in the face of conservative opposition from sections of the Congress party and the RSS, his reformist thirst for conferring property rights on women remained unquenched, resulting in his resignation from Nehru's Cabinet. Soon after his exit, he embarked on the task of re-establishing the religion of the Buddha. He converted himself to Buddhism on the ground that Hindu society had historically created the caste system and systematically promoted discriminatory social practices, while the Buddha alone, in his majestic moral manner, had sought to undermine the caste system. He was no simple convert to Buddhism, but rose to become its modern apostle and its new exegete. Ambedkar was an agnostic, and believed that the Buddha was the original agnostic. He was therefore opposed to both the main sects of Buddhism, Hinayana and Mahayana, and went on to found his own sect, Navayana. What was more, he wrote a detailed doctrinal interpretation of the Buddha's Dhamma. As a social revolutionary, he conducted scholarly research to trace the ethnic and historical origins of tribes, untouchables, and the other backward classes. Although Ambedkar came to be posthumously venerated as a supreme icon by the untouchables, other weaker sections, and progressive intellectuals, he was consciously opposed to the personality cult, believing that it would hamper free thinking and the functioning of democracy. Ambedkar's illuminating essay on the comparative study between the Buddha and Marx highlights his faith in philosophical liberalism and civil liberties. He was thus a unique socialist not only in India, but also in the modern world. Ambedkar was a technocrat par excellence, in that he was an accomplished jurist and economist, besides being a political visionary, Buddhist philosopher, and political theorist. His legend, like that of every other great pioneer in history, loomed larger after his death, and continues to grow. With the exception of Gandhiji, nobody can grow taller than Ambedkar in the history of modern India.

Ramaswamy Naicker (1879–1973), popularly known as Periyar, who started his political career with the

Congress party, founded his own movement and party, the Dravidar Kazhagam (DK). He propounded the theory that south Indians were Dravidians, who had been suffused with the false consciousness of being Hindus by the Brahmins of north India. He raised a banner of revolt against Aryanism to the point of identifying Lord Rama as an Aryan deity and Ravana as a Dravidian king. What was more, he openly canvassed for atheism and gave it the shape of a huge movement. In the process, he succeeded in demonising Sanskrit and Hindi as languages of north Indian domination. Since he singled Brahmins out as the ruling class, he succeeded in mobilising the lower castes. However, his own premier disciple, Annadurai, differed from him for personal reasons and formed his own party, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK). Annadurai grew to be more powerful than his guru and became the Chief Minister of Madras state (which would later be called Tamil Nadu) in 1967, riding on the crest of an anti-Hindi wave. After his death, he was succeeded by Karunanidhi as Chief Minister.

This movement became so powerful that today, Tamil Nadu is predominated by two Dravidian parties, the DMK and its breakaway faction, the AIADMK. This entire Dravidian movement, though ethnic in origin and motivation, can be described as socialist on the ground that it stood for the lower castes and weaker sections. Besides, the DMK with Annadurai as Chief Minister was the first to start welfare schemes on a large scale in independent India. In 1967, he offered subsidized rice for the universal consumption of the poor. Later chief ministers of all parties emulated his example by introducing wide-ranging schemes. The ultimate step in this process was the 'Ammu Scheme' (started by Jayalalitha as Chief Minister), which included idlis for one rupee. Apart from its brand of socialism, it is important to note that this movement had earlier stood for secession from India. However, the magic wand of Indian democracy put an end to that demand. As with every atheist movement in history, Dravidian rationalism has been snowed under by traditional devotion. Despite the social radicalism that the Dravidian movement unleashed during its early period, its parties are today no better or no worse than other parties in India.

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