
FOR STRUGGLES, GLOBAL AND NATIONAL

SAMIR AMIN INTERVIEWED BY V SRIDHAR

The antecedents of the World Social Forum (WSF) can be traced to January 2000 when a small group of about fifty activists, representing trade unions, intellectuals, peasant organisations and other social groups, gathered in Davos. Samir Amin was among those assembled at the 'Anti-Davos in Davos'. Amin spoke to V Sridhar of India's *Frontline* magazine in Hyderabad, where he was participating in the Asian Social Forum (ASF) in January 2003. Excerpts from the interview :

What is the significance of the WSF–ASF and the regional fora that have emerged in the last few years as a challenge to imperialist globalisation ?

I consider these events important, although there may be problems with them. There are many, and growing, social movements around the world, different in nature, struggling either on social fronts — for the defence of labour and of the rights of the popular classes, or on political fronts for basic political rights. There are the feminist movements, ecological movements and many more. These movements are fragmented, in the sense that they are mostly national-based, or, in many cases, local-based. Most deal with a single issue or with a single dimension of the problem, without articulating it into an overall alternative political project.

This is the result of recent history. Social organisations that emerged after World War II gradually reached their historical limits. I am not only referring to the Soviet pattern of the alternative, but also to events in China, the erosion of the social democratic pattern in the developed capitalistic West, and the erosion of the 'national populist' alternatives in the South.

As a result of these developments we have moved into a period characterised by fragmentation. There will be no alternative to the present powerful system, neoliberal globalisation or imperialist globalisation, which is a new phase of imperialism, unless these movements come together to articulate an overall alternative. You cannot fight on a single front. Even if you are successful on that front, success will be limited, fragile and vulnerable because things are inter-related and because, in the final analysis, we need an

overall alternative in all its dimensions. This alternative vision will have an economic dimension. But the political, social, and cultural dimensions will also have to be addressed. The WSF is not an organisation with a common political platform for devising strategies. It is not a forum open to everybody. Participating organisations must adhere to a charter — saying they are opposed to neoliberalism, not necessarily to capitalism; opposed to militarisation of globalisation, not necessarily imperialism, which means much more.

You have said that a unified movement of the peoples of the South is a prerequisite for change in the present situation. What is the role of the peoples of the North in this ?

I am an internationalist, a Marxist, socialist, and universalist. I am not a chauvinist, certainly not a Third Worldist. The world is one but a very unequal one. Capitalist development, which has shaped the modern world, has done it on the basis of growing inequality among nations and within them as well. For the last five centuries there have been countries at the centre and at the periphery. A major element of the global system is its imperialist dimension. Imperialism is synonymous with the growing polarisation among nations. It is based on the rationality of capitalist profitability. The awareness of popular forces in the South, which is at the periphery of the global system, is a fundamental prerequisite for any change.

After World War II, there was a gigantic movement of the peoples of Asia and Africa for national liberation. They had one target — independence. But the forces that united around this demand represented different classes. In countries such as China, Vietnam, and Cuba, the leadership was with the radical Left. In India it was with the middle classes during the fight against British imperialism. In Africa and in the Arab countries, a variety of forces led the movement. The leadership in these countries understood that they not only needed to support one another but also build a common front after independence, based on their common demands. That is how Bandung (the birthplace of the Non-Aligned Movement) happened in 1955.

The common front yielded results, creating a space for these countries to achieve several decades of relatively high rates of economic growth. There was industrialisation and great efforts in education and in other fields. In political terms, it enabled these countries to transgress ethnic, local and national chauvinisms. The alliance among nations was based on politics, depending heavily on the countries' position against imperialism. In Egypt, Nasser was an ally of India, and not Pakistan, because India had an anti-imperialist position unlike Pakistan. The fact that Pakistan was — Russian, Chinese and the more radical of the national liberation movements — reached their historical limits.

Were these countries also not bargaining between two camps — imperialism, on the one hand, and socialism on the other ?

Sure, that is true. The Soviet Union provided ideas — good in some cases, but bad in many cases — and, in some cases, good armaments (laughs) to these countries, which acted as a check against imperialism. It was not possible for the US to act like a gangster as it does today, when it can unilaterally decide to bomb any country in the world.

But due to the erosion of the leaderships' support bases, these countries entered a vacuum, resulting in regression on all fronts. Afro-Asian solidarity eroded. This opened the way for other patterns of pseudo-solidarities, which are very reactionary, based on ethnic or pseudo-ethnic chauvinisms or on religious fundamentalism. Let me put it polemically : if the majority of the Indian people accept Hindutva, if the majority of people in the 'Muslim' countries accept the nonsense of political Islam, there will be no change on a world scale if these are not transgressed by another vision of human solidarity.

How were the limits in these countries reached ?

There was some room for development because colonialism resulted in low levels of industrialisation in a few countries, and none at all in many others. So there was room for industrialisation after national liberation. But as they moved along, investment and technology became costlier. These countries inherited social systems with low levels of education, offering enormous room for upward mobility for people through education. As long as the children of the popular classes (the lower middle class and the peasantry) could move up through education — like in India, Egypt and many other countries — the system benefited from legitimacy. Even if they were not democratic, they were seen as delivering *something*. Countries that had high rates of economic growth, accompanied by not-increasing levels of inequality (I do not mean socially just), and those that offered upward mobility for large sections of society, enjoyed credibility and legitimacy. Some of these countries were semi-democratic, like India. Others, like Nasserite Egypt, were not democratic at all. But they were equally legitimate and credible because they delivered. Once the system could not progress within the same logic and same basis, the political system became more corrupt and lost legitimacy. This created a vacuum, which reactionary forces started to occupy.

How do you characterise the current phase of globalisation, in contrast to previous ones in history ?

Globalisation and imperialism are not new. The history of capitalism is the history of imperialist expansion and was always global. What was the colonisation of India, if not globalisation ? The building of the Americas since the 16th century was globalisation, as was the slave trade, which played a crucial role in the building of the Americas. Later, colonialism was globalisation. And globalisation has always been imperialist globalisation, never been achieved by peaceful and equal negotiations between peoples. That is history. But we would be wrong if we think that it is the same old story. An efficient counter-strategy can be developed if we focus on what is new.

The dominant discourse today, the Rightist one, says : “Well, change is always for the better and happens spontaneously. Change is always painful, but is only transitional. The market, that is, capitalism will by itself solve the problem in the long run (when everybody is dead)”. That is not even ideology. It is propaganda. But this is what is repeated daily by politicians, written everyday in newspapers, shown daily on television and even presented as There Is No Alternative (TINA).

We have to look at what is new in a different way. How can popular forces re-organise to reduce the damage associated with global capitalist expansion ? What

can they do to impose their own agenda in the short run, to create the conditions for an alternative ? The alternative, in my opinion, is socialism. It had the same name in the past and will remain the same in the future too. But the way we imagine socialism will not be the same as our fathers.

You said that the nature of imperialism today is different from that of the past. Has it anything to do with the way globalisation is different today ?

Imperialism had always been characterised by rivalry among major powers. The Spanish and the Portuguese against the Dutch in the 17th century; then the British against the French; and the German–Japanese against the others, still later. It was on this basis of rivalry among the imperialist nations that Lenin — correctly at the time before the First World War — thought the system must lead to a revolution because it will lead to war, which the proletariat, being the victims of the war, will revolt against. History proved Lenin right. There *was* a revolution. Whatever happened afterwards is another story, but there was a revolution.

After World War II, the US and Japan became allies, Japan in a subaltern position. The US and western capitalist Europe came together after the Marshall Plan and the formation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). In geographical terms, the world capitalist system includes the US and its outer province, Canada, capitalist Europe, at that time limited by the Iron Curtain, now also going a little further east, and Japan. After World War II, the imperialist powers put an end to their rivalry because they had a common enemy, the Soviet Union. They paid more attention to their common interests rather than the rivalry among themselves.

The Soviet Union has now disappeared, but these countries have not become rivals again. This is reflected in the economic management of the global system — the functioning of the G7, a group of the most powerful nations, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO). These are not global organisations; these are organisations of the *Global North* — of the capitalist centre. There are no major differences among these countries within these organisations.

We ought to ask ourselves a number of questions. First, why are we in this situation ? Second, does this mean there are no contradictions among these countries ? Third, if there are contradictions, in what ways are they different from contradictions of the earlier period, in which imperialist countries were in rivalry ? Fourth, how do the contradictions relate to North–South relations ?

I suggest, as I have done at other meetings of the WSF, that capitalism has entered a new phase, of a higher level of centralisation of capital. This has laid the basis for the solidarity of capitalist interests at the global level. During Lenin's time, before World War I, and continuing till about 30 to 40 forty years ago, monopoly capital needed a large market that could be accessed as an empire. A capitalist centre or metropolis with a number of colonies or areas of interests was the norm. That was the basis on which rivalries among the imperialist powers existed — on the sharing or re-shaping

of colonies and the control of the global system. Today, the bosses of big business also say that in order to be efficient, transnational corporations (TNCs) need to access markets on a global scale. The globe is therefore the terrain on which competition among them is fought out.

But these monopolies also need a global system to operate. The change in the nature of imperialism does not negate the importance of changes in the processes of labour and other dimensions, which need to be taken into account so that the popular classes can reinvent efficient forms of organisations. But to be efficient at the global political level, and in North–South relations, it is a basic fact that imperialism now operates collectively as a triad, represented by the US, the EU and Japan.

There are contradictions among these powers but the nature of the contradictions is different. There is no common state, and capitalism cannot operate without a state. The claim that markets without a state rule capitalism is complete nonsense. There is no single state, even confederal, of the North. Even Europe with its Union is built on national states, which in many cases have deep historical roots. Therefore, how is the political dimension of collective imperialism to be run ? That is an unsolved question.

You have said that there is a tendency for the “centres of gravity” of countries to fall outside the domain of nation states. What does this mean for the peoples of these nations, in terms of a search for an alternative ? And, how does such a system operate and what are the contradictions in such a system ?

The centre of gravity has moved from inside nations to elsewhere, and this has happened to all nations. This change is related to the size of dominant capital, which is global in scale. Since these are major decision-makers, they cannot be submitted to a national logic. At the European Social Forum (ESF) in Florence, many people felt that a new Europe should be built. They said that a political Europe was needed, not necessarily with a unified state because, for historical reasons, there are nations with a long history of a common language and culture. Some suggested a kind of confederation. But such a Europe also has to have a common political reality. Another Europe, like another Asia, is possible.

This new Europe ought to be based on a social compromise between capital (because we cannot imagine the end of capital immediately) and labour and other popular classes. But this other Europe cannot happen without changing its relationship to the South and if Europe continues to be a partner in the collective imperialist system.

Regionalisation will strengthen the capacities of the countries of the South. This can be based on, for instance, history and culture, as in the countries of Latin America, which have two closely related languages, Spanish and Portuguese, to link them. The other common factor is a common enemy for over two centuries — the US. I do not think Islam can provide the basis for such regionalisation. But the Arab countries, with a common language, could be the basis for unity among nations. There has never been a history of these countries being unified by a single state, except in the imagination of the nationalists. But this alliance must be based on politics, not merely a common market.

Even the larger countries face the menace of imperialism. The Americans do not like large countries. China and India are too big. There are differences within countries. Let me address frankly the case of India. There are different nationalities, languages and groups and Hindus and Muslims. The way the power system deals with this diversity is creating problems such as the rise of communalism.

What is the position of the nation-state in this search for the alternative ?

The need for a common front does not negate the crucial importance of the nation-state. For a long time in the future, we will need the nation-state. Markets have to be regulated at the regional and global level, but first at the national level. This change has to start from inside countries. That is why the nation-state is so important.

In summary, what principles could govern another kind of global system ? The first is the logic of the transition to socialism. This will combine the criterion of capitalism, that is, efficiency as measured by profitability; and the criterion of social justice. Although the term 'social justice' is very elastic, certain elements can be defined in concrete terms. It would mean jobs, reasonable and decent wages, schools for children and decent healthcare. That is social justice, not socialism. These are not going to be produced by the market, but will be imposed on the market by a social policy of the state. This however associates capitalistic criteria with social criteria, which will be in conflict. But the system recognises this and therefore manages them without allowing the market to dominate society unilaterally. It also recognises the fact that the free play of markets creates problems for society. Therefore, society will solve the problem through the exercise of political power. If such a system is obtained in several countries, then we can create the conditions for regional arrangements among them and for changes in the global system.

The second condition needed for substantial change is genuine democracy. Social change in the past — whether of the Soviet or Maoist type or of the national populist types in the Third World — had very little or no democracy at all. They were controlled and directed in many ways, with varying degrees of the negation of democracy. Very little was left to the initiative of the popular classes. But while people want progress, they also want liberty. We cannot remake the Soviet Union or Nehru's India. There are no remakes in history. Democracy in the dominant discourse is based on delinking it from the issue of social justice. This works, if democracy results in social progress, and people find it credible. The main reason for the move backward towards religious fundamentalism, ethnic solidarities and so on is the failure of democracy.

Imperialism and cultural fundamentalism go together. Market fundamentalism needs religious fundamentalism. Market fundamentalism says : subvert the state and leave it to the market at the global level to run the system. This is done when states are disempowered completely; and, within states, if the popular classes (the victims) are disempowered by the negation of their class identity. Moreover, the system can be run politically if the South is completely divided, with nations and nationalities hating one another. Religious and ethnic fundamentalisms are perfect instruments for ruling the political system. This is the reason why they are supported — ideologically, politically,

even financially — by imperialism. The US has always supported Islamic fundamentalism, for instance, the Saudi Arabian regime, Pakistan and the Taliban. It continues to support such regimes even today, though now in a covert manner. In Europe it uses ethnic movements to achieve its goals as in Yugoslavia.

Interview

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