

# SEARCHING FOR DAVID'S SLING

## Tapping the Local Resources of Hope

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The Empire, globalisation, hierarchy and hegemonic universalism - these are some of the major challenge of today for the subordinated peoples everywhere in the world. We do not have commensurate instruments and mechanism at the global level to come to terms with these dreadful realities. But there is always a David in human history. The future of the victims and their hope for a different world lies in the search for the sling in their resources and in their resilience in the midst of what appears at this moment as a hopeless situation for themselves and for the entire humanity.

### **The Mood of Disenchantment**

In a contribution to a conference recently held in the University of Seville, Fred Dallmayr invokes the reaction of an international judicial luminary's to the way Saddam Hussein was displayed before the world-press and TV screens "shackled and dishevelled". This is "pretty much what the Roman Emperors used to do to defeated barbarian kings". In a melancholic tone he adds that things have remained much the same since the time of Caesar in spite of the "Christian Civilisation".

I think it would be more accurate to say that humanity did take efforts to rise up and move forward in civility, but the point is that events like the wars on Afghanistan and Iraq have thrown us back to the abyss, raising basic questions about humanity, its survival and its future, specially its weaker ones. The reason is not far to seek: We live in a period in which Empire and globalisation, hierarchy and justificatory universalism rule the day. The net result is the creation of a world gripped in insecurity and devoid of hope. This is true as much of the developed world as the developing ones, albeit originating from different sources.

It is interesting to note that the insecurity caused by plague in Medieval Europe led people, as Norman Cantor notes, to the search of pleasures precisely because all that one has is the present, and no one knows what could befall the next moment. Today's culture of consumerism and pursuit of pleasure are symptoms of deep insecurity, and not of contentment and hope. For instance, the frustration deriving from sheer lack of a job among the unemployed, and the fear among the employed of being thrown out at any moment with no future prospects, are a deeply worrying situation. In developing countries, the volatile and unjust political situation, and the negation of bare necessities of life drive people to have recourse to terrorist suicides or starvation suicides - in both cases, the root-cause is simply desperation.

Could the utopias of the past come to our aid? The answer has to be unfortunately in the negative. The disenchantment with many past utopias is due to the fact that, while they mystify human consciousness, they were unable to move the victims towards a realistic goal, and in terms of strategy, they were steered by the elites who claimed to represent the people - while in fact, most often they did not - and even more, exploited them for their power and vested interests, as the dynamics of many revolutions have borne witness.

### **The Onslaught of a Conservative "Revolution"**

It appears to me that globalisation today plays some kind of mythical role as revolution did in the past, and could be considered as its functional equivalent. Writing the history of Russian Revolution, Leon Trotsky observed that "the most indubitable feature of a revolution is the direct interference of the masses in historic events. ... The history of a revolution is for us first of all a history of the forcible entrance of the masses into the realm of rulership over their destiny". Despite the cosmetic use of modern terminologies, globalisation as a project is a conservative revolution taking the world to the restoration of capitalism without restraint. It is not a revolution of the people, but manufactured for the people by others who reap the benefit as the tyranny and terror that followed many a revolutions in the past amply demonstrate.

Globalisation is a mystification which is naked violence dressed up in respectable apparel for public appeal. It could hardly be a matter of hope as much as the past revolutions were for the ordinary people. I think, in these circumstances, advocating globalisation as the new-found hope for the developing countries would be tantamount to Spain advising Switzerland to invest its entire wherewithal to build up a strong navy to defend itself!

### **The Loss of Legacies and the Poor as Defenders of Reason and Humaneness**

A pall of gloom envelops humanity as some of the important achievements of its centuries long struggle are thrown to the winds overnight. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) which the United Nations saw as the "common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations", are at serious stake today. International law and conventions regarding the treatment of prisoners and under-trials have been eroded by the claim of exceptionalism by the Empire. In the realm of labour, the struggles waged by the working class for their legitimate rights and security of employment for the past one hundred and fifty years are brought to naught by casualisation of labour which is a pliable form of domination. The social entitlements do not have any more place. All are to be surrendered on the altar of the Empire and the market, so it would seem.

These legacies are replaced with queer logic and opportune ideologies. As in the past, the present Empire too is based on ideological justification for its domination. We are all witnesses to the unabashed and routine "collateral damage" explanation after the murder of the innocents, and the dogma of "pre-emptive strike" as *causa belli*. Such ideological shibboleths of the Empire have lost credibility. The victims have begun to realise through their native wisdom that the concern of the Empire and liberal capitalism for the poor is as much real as the tears of the wolf seeing the lamb getting wet in the rain.

In the face of such developments, when even international institutions are unable to restrain the course of events, much less challenge them, for the victims there remains no other means than to turn to their rich local resources to keep burning the flame of hope and dream for another

world. In a world in which the Empire, globalisation and hierarchy and hegemonic universalism are at work, ironically, the poor through their resistance have become the defenders of reason by unmasking the abuse of power and its arbitrariness by the Empire desperately trying to cover its moral nakedness with a semblance of reason. In their own way and with local intellectual and cultural resources, the victims question what are taken to be self-evident, namely, that there is no alternative to the present model of economy, and that maximisation of profit is the ultimate human happiness. They also challenge the divorce between the economic and social which serves to bury the ideal of the welfare state.

### **The Well-springs of Humanity**

By turning to their own local resources, people respond to the crisis that envelopes their daily lives, and the destiny of humanity at large. I do not think that events like World Social Forum or the dramatic protest at Seattle against WTO has the capacity neither to pull down the Empire nor to arrest globalisation. However, it has high symbolic value, and new symbols indeed are the need of the hour. These events represent the confluence of many streams of dissent, protest springing from local sources to form a mighty river.

The local resources invite us to direct our attention to the deep humanity inherent in human beings which goes beyond considerations of one's advantages and profits, and beyond the ideology of competence. I am reminded of a parable of Mencius the disciple of Confucius. If a child were on the brink of falling into the well, we spontaneously reach out to save it. And this is done not to win public acclaim or to merit the gratitude of the parents of the child. It is imply something which the humanity deep down within us impels us to do. The local resources of ordinary people is replete with deep humanity, and they have found expression in their practices of daily life, their stories, songs, proverbs and so on.

Affluence creates a weak person and a fragile culture. On the other hand, the confrontation with human suffering and response in terms of compassion has developed in the victims some of the values we require to sustain a different world - solidarity, humaneness, the spirit of sharing, the technique of survival, readiness for risk-taking, endurance and steely determination in the midst of adversities. In the world of the victims, unlike in the world of the Empire and globalisation, the good does not get identified with the "successful". The good and the just are ideals the world needs to relentlessly strive after. Some of these values and perceptions have got crystalized in their culture of every day life. Their cultural resources reflecting the values and ideals of a future world help them face their lives with courage at individual and collective levels,

### **Generating Hope - The Dynamics of Resistance**

The hope for tomorrow lies in the resistance of today. But the resistance against the Empire and globalisation often assume an ambivalent character. On the one hand there is the practical necessity to comply with the existing order of things; on the other, there is the refusal to surrender and acquiesce to the inevitable. What appears as compliance out of survival necessity co-exists with the practice of resistance. At an individual level, Galileo exemplifies this situation, and he is a metaphor for the plight of the subordinated peoples. While he had to exteriorly assent to the view that the earth does not move, something which the infamous Roman Inquisition demanded of him, yet his spirit triumphed when he at the conclusion of the trial whispered sotto voce 'e pur si muove' (...and yet it moves). In most local traditions, we have the example of an interplay of acquiescence and resistance.

The resistance may not be always open, but it there, and it manifests itself in innumerable ways and forms in daily life. This is true of the way the dalits (the untouchables) in South Asia go about with caste-hierarchy and its oppression, and the peasants in Malaysia resist the exacting landlords. After extensive field study, on the modes of resistance by Malay peasants, James Scott observes:

They [Malay peasants] require little or no coordination or planning; they make use of implicit understandings and informal networks; they often represent a form of individual self-help; they typically avoid any direct, symbolic confrontation with authority... It is my guess that just such kind of resistance are often the most significant and the most effective over the long run...Everyday forms of resistance make no headlines. But just as millions of anthozoan polyps create, willy-nilly, a coral reef, so do the multiple acts of peasant insubordination and evasion create political and economic barrier reefs of their own. 9

This dynamics of resistance that has been present since millennia at the local level in the various civilizations is now enacted at the larger global stage. The fact that people accommodate to globalisation does not mean that we could, on that basis, project it as the future of the world. For, deep down there is another dynamics at work, namely that of resistance. The resistance derives from the experience of the woeful effects of globalisation and Empire on their daily lives; it also stems from the realization of the absence of humane ideals and noble values in the present oppressive order. The forms which take on at the macro level reflect the local resources and experiences as could be witnessed in the protest against WTO or in the events of World Social Forum to which I referred earlier.

Arundhati Roy who has been a fearless voice today against the power of the Empire and its warmongering shows how the small people with their resources can resist the Empire and thus move into the realm of hope. In her address at the closing rally of World Social Forum at Porto Alegre, she said, what we need to do is "to lay siege to it [Empire], to shame it, to mock it: with our art, our music, our literature, our stubbornness, our joy, our brilliance, our sheer relentlessness - and our ability to tell our own stories". These "weapons of the weak" obviously will not bring tumbling down neither the Empire nor arrest the march of globalisation. But they have a power which comes from human ingenuity and resourcefulness that neither armaments nor economic power can withstand long.

In the month of March this year, while visiting South Africa where Gandhi woke up to the harsh reality of racial oppression. I read the voluminous autobiography of Nelson Mandela - "Long Walk to Freedom". The book fascinated me immensely and made me realize what does tapping of local resources mean, and how local leaders with utopian dreams are formed and shaped. Apartheid was something unique and Mandela, this colossus statesman from the rural Africa, could mobilize the resources, symbols and strategies from the land to fight an oppressive regime. The way this iron-fisted system was loosened and finally dismantles tells us the importance of sustained dissent and protest in confronting systems of power and the efficacy of the local resources.

### **Cleopatra's Nose and the Course of History**

It is an irony that some of the ideas and justificatory frames of thought discarded long ago reappear in new avatars. One such is historical

determinism as it appears in the work of Francis Fukuyama. What he has done is to carry to an extreme formulation the underlying sentiments of the votaries of neo-liberalism. In effect, the claim that the final phase of human history has arrived with the triumph of capitalism is a form of determinism bordering on fatalism, and is not very different from the one which invoked the will of God for the justification of unjustifiable injustices, and for the legitimacy of oppressive institutional orders. Such claims do not allow any room for the agency of the subordinated peoples and the victims of our history for imagining alternatives and a different order of things. The victims are confronted once again with what seems to be the recurrent myopia of all empires and systems, namely to believe that with them the human history has reached its apogee.

The grand deterministic scheme of universal history projected by Hegel is the last thing the marginalized people are prepared to believe in (No wonder that Isaiah Berlin has placed Hegel among the six enemies of freedom!). For him, history is the history of winners and those who are successful; the losers and victims have no place. Francis Fukuyama seems to suffer under the weight of this tradition. The new historical credo is nothing but market and liberalism, and all that the "wretched of the earth" have to say is "Amen," But this is not what the victims of history are going to do, if we go by the groundswell of resistance and protests from every corner of the world to the prevailing order of things.

The hope of the marginal peoples rest on a different conception of history, and its future. The local experiences and wisdom tell that history is incalculable and full of imponderables. In their scheme of things, history is not a concatenation of predictable events following the scheme of cause and effect. Science, on the basis of available data makes projections for the future which is different from hope that of another order. Subordinated peoples rely on hope which is tied up with moral reason and emancipation. Hope breaks the cycle of reasoning in terms of cause and effect, and creates room for surprises and the unknown. For the subordinated peoples and victims hope is kindled by the experience of indignity, suffering, deprivation and injustice. No one believes more in the unpredictable character of history as the marginalized of our world. This belief leads them to refuse to equate the inevitable with the just.

How ordinary people keep alive the hope in spite of all projections to the contrary, is illustrated by an Indian proverb that says "There are thousand suns beyond the clouds". It inspired the title for a captivating book on hope by the well-known French journalist Dominique Lapierre. The insights of ancient historians like Thucydides and modern thinkers like Pascal converge in the same direction. If only Cleopatra's nose was a little shorter, world-history would have taken a different course, and if only Cromwell did not have that little piece of sand-grain in his bladder, the face of Europe would have been completely different. The poor of the earth can live much more comfortably with insecurities trusting in a different course of history, than the elites who would like the history to be nothing but the replication of the present, for fear of the unknown.

### **Countering the Hegemonic Universal**

Like history, the marginal peoples have another conception of the universal. In fact, the future of our world and its hope lie in the resistance of the subordinated peoples to the prevailing conception of the universals. The Empire, globalisation and hierarchy seem to share the same kind of understanding of the universal: It is an expansionist and assimilationist view that denies the subject hood of peoples and ignores difference and pluralism. Universality, obviously, is not to be confounded with ubiquitousness. Organized greed and selfishness could be present everywhere in the world, as is happening with the expansion of capitalism and market, but it does not mean that they could qualify to be universal, which is, at bottom, a spiritual quality of transcendence.

True universality is possible only where there is sacrifice and renunciation. The ability to accept the other, moving out of one's cultural, ideological, national or ethnic cocoon will mark the quality of universality. Therefore, the universal could be present very much at the local level in the experience of subordinated peoples, the illiterate villagers and powerless identities; it could be glaringly absent among the well-to-do living in metropolis bent on themselves with little regard for the other. The poor are attuned to the spirit of genuine universality promising hope for our world, while the worldwide expansion of selfish pursuit is not. The latter is the enemy of universality.

### **The Art of Negotiating the Borders**

From a historical point of view, we know that no civilization or culture developed in isolation, but always in a movement of give and take. We see this best exemplified at the grassroots in the lives of the poor. There is basically a world-view in which the borders are porous and always negotiable, and could be reconstituted ever anew as so many micro studies indicate. They have also developed cultural resources for communication and understanding, chief among them is, what I would call, the art of negotiating across the various borders. This art is woven into the culture and its various expressions in daily life.

Today we need to affirm these sources and this art as hopes for a different world over against the dangerous view of "The Clash of Civilizations" which has as its basis fear and insecurity, and as its goal the assertion of power. The well-publicized book of Samuel Huntington, despite some sprinkling of universalism, is basically a fundamentalist call to the West to arm itself against the onslaught of other civilizations, particularly the Islamic and the Asian. In the process, the author espouses the view that the United States should defend its European cultural roots and should not give in to the dangers of multiculturalism. It is this set of ideas that are unfortunately, being translated into the foreign and domestic policies of the Empire. All this again forces us to look deep into the culture and ways of life of the subordinated peoples as guardians of peace, as they are also defenders of genuine universalism. At the grassroots level the common struggle for survival brings people together. The xenophobic discourses and irritations in the West regarding the legal status of foreigners, immigrants and refugees stand in stark contrast with the compassion and deep humanity with which simple people accept each other and help each other in daily life without regard to ethnic, religious or linguistic background.

### **Conclusion**

To what extent early Christianity as a movement of the marginalized was responsible for the decline of the Roman Empire is a question to which probably no definite answer will ever be found. But one thing is clear that Christianity projected another set of values and ideals different from the ones on which the Empire relied upon - power, army, subjection and domination. The Christian movement of the marginalized of the time was also a powerful critique of the Roman Empire to which bestial and chaotic images are applied in the Book of Revelation. Monasteries with the "blessed simplicity" and spirit of community embodied an utopian vision of the future and a different way of life.

The underdogs of history of today do not have the type of weapons required to challenge the might of the present Empire and its military

presence policing all continents and seas; nor do they have the power to withstand globalisation and the powers of transnational corporations and the international monetary bodies. Instead they search for the sling of David. What they do have are their human ingenuity, resilience and their cultural weapons. To realize how much the local resources are able to project a different image of our world, we need to only pay attention to the worldwide environmental movement. It draws its inspiration and strategies from the local wisdom and resources to become a formidable force in our today's world, . This realization can only augment our hope.

The present situation of crisis and desperation have galvanized the victims to forge deep solidarity and to pool together their local resources to resist the powers that be. In this struggle, one thing has been achieved quite decisively in the past couple of years, namely the pulling down of the ideological pillars on which the Empire and globalisation have been resting. The worldwide movement for a different world has exposed the hollowness of justification for domination, for war, for violence and for the inviolability of the market. We can only hope that it will not be long before the local torrents really turn into an inundation to submerge all that is inhuman in the present dominant order of the world. We also hope that a different world is not only possible, but that the twilight of this different world will appear soon on our horizons.