

A Discussion Between A Politician, An Environmentalist, An Industrialist, A Farmer, A Scientist, A Labour Leader, An Economist, And BRF-ML

DISCUSSION CONCEIVED AND TEXTUALISED
BY SWAMI BODHANANDA IN 1997



POLITICIAN: I want to remove poverty, illiteracy, disease and protect the poor, the scheduled castes, backward classes and minorities from exploitation and discrimination.

ENVIRONMENTALIST: I am against huge dams, power stations, more vehicles on the road; I want to protect our environment, our air, water, soil, trees and the tribals.

INDUSTRIALIST: How can you remove poverty without generating more power, putting up more factories, manufacturing more vehicles and consumer goods? Is not poverty, disease and illness due to industrial backwardness?

FARMER: I constitute seventy five percent of this country. It is really sad that government cares only for the city and the middle class. I want control over resources - electricity, fertilisers, water, land, forests and seeds. And I am not in a position to pay for any of them. Paying taxes will only relocate resources from village to city; so I don't pay taxes. I want to travel free of charge in trains and in other public transport. Subsidy for fertilisers, electricity and petroleum products are my birth right. Government must buy my grain (I admit that inefficient methods of production has made my productivity the lowest in the world) at my price, or at a politically manipulated price. I will not allow market forces to function. Markets are no answer to poverty.

SCIENTIST: I am fed up with our science institutions which have become dens of nepotism, bureaucratic bungling and corruption. I have been in this institute my whole life; but nobody allowed me to do anything. Now they are delaying my promotion. What do the IAS people know about science? Had I been in the US I would have done something creative and been considered even for a nobel prize.

ECONOMIST: What we need is macroeconomic adjustment, holding the prices, attract foreign investments, blah...blah... blah!

BRF-ML: Can we agree upon a common goal?

POLITICIAN: Removal of poverty.

ENVIRONMENTALIST: Protection of environment.

INDUSTRIALIST: More production.

FARMER: Higher prices for farm products.

SCIENTIST: More R&D.

ECONOMIST: GDP of a middle income economy.

LABOUR LEADER: More wages.

BRF-ML: Are they irreconcilable or are they complementary goals?

POLITICIAN: What do you mean? The poor is becoming poorer, and the rich getting richer!

ENVIRONMENTALIST: Development at the cost of environment is suicidal. Let the tribals live in the forest. Let us not uproot them from their habitat. Recently I presented a paper on "Tribal roots of environmentalism" in a New York think tank seminar, and also held lectures at Washington, London, Paris, Tokyo and Sydney on the topic "Tribals in India" which were highly appreciated.

INDUSTRIALIST: If we are not allowed to put up more factories, and there is no peace in the labour front, production will not pick up, jobs will suffer, income will fall and as a result the rich may or may not become richer, but the poor will certainly become poorer.

POLITICIAN: We will nationalize all Industries, create more jobs, and overnight remove poverty by distributing national wealth equitably.

ECONOMIST: But what will you distribute? Unless wealth is created what is there to be distributed?

LABOUR LEADER: That is a capitalist argument - 'first create wealth and then distribute!' But we want first distribution of wealth; creation can be thought of later. After all wealth is accumulated surplus labour. Even 'capital' is 'surplus labour' according to Marx.

FARMER: We are the primary producers, the rest are living on us. Make the farmers rich, the whole country will become rich.

ECONOMIST: But in rich countries agriculture contributes only three per cent to the GDP. Ninety seven per cent of GDP comes from manufacturing, services and entertainment industries! But three per cent of world population consumes twenty five per cent of world resources and causes twenty per cent of world pollution. I am not at all happy with the state of affairs in advanced countries.

POLITICIAN: We don't want economic neocolonialism of USA and Europe. We don't want our industry to be controlled by foreign equity. We want foreigners to invest in India on our terms. Mind you 'no potato chips but only micro chips'. I threw out Coca-Cola in 1976, and then booted out Enron in 1996.

LABOUR LEADER: We don't want foreign competition which will make our inefficient industries totally sick. Our consumers will start demanding, corrupted by foreign advertisements, quality goods at competitive prices. More workers will be thrown out of jobs as companies downsize and restructure, which will cause more unemployment. I say it will be development without a human face. I will be constrained to call for a nation wide strike, and will be forced to paralyse the economy. I repeat: No privatisation, no foreign competition.

BRF-ML: Wait a minute! Let us not be carried away by our respective rhetorics. Is there any correlation between removal of poverty and production?

THE REST: Yes, but ...

BRF-ML: Is there any correlation between production and productivity?

THE REST: Yes indeed! Without productivity income will not increase, and poverty will not be removed.

BRF-ML: Without higher absolute and average income can there be higher wages for labour and higher income for farmers?

FARMER: But seventy five per cent of nation's income should go to the farmers because they constitute seventy five per cent of the population who can make or unmake governments.

ECONOMIST: On what criteria is this claim made? Is it on the basis of the number of heads or on their average productivity?

FARMER &

POLITICIAN: On the basis of number of heads. In a democracy heads count. We may even pass a legislation, by our majority, for equitable and universal distribution of wealth!

ECONOMIST: If income is shared on the basis of numbers, will it not discourage hardwork and thrift, and become a disincentive for productivity? A situation in which a few work hard, and others share the fruit will lead to a culture of grabbing without contributing to the national kitty.

SCIENTIST: What should be the basis of sharing - productivity or procreativity?

POLITICIAN, FARMER & LABOUR LEADER: That is a bourgeoisie capitalist question! The capitalists and the landlords in collusion with colonialists and the world bank amass wealth by exploiting the labour, the farmer and the backward classes of the community. It is a blatant brahminical conspiracy.

BRF-ML: Hold your breath! Don't raise your blood pressure by obsolete sloganeering. Let us suppose, that in a group of ten, two members contribute eighty per cent to the production and the other eight only twenty per cent. How would you persuade the two to share the produce equally?

LABOUR LEADER & FARMER: Is not that a hypothetical question? You are arbitrarily evaluating the contribution of each sector to the GDP, or each factor to the produce, from your standpoint.

ECONOMIST: If the two leave production will fall by eighty per cent; where as the absence of the eight can cause only twenty per cent fall in production.

LABOUR LEADER: Do you mean that labour contributes only to twenty per cent of the value of the production though it constitutes eighty per cent of the work force? If so why is management not able to run the factory when labour strikes work?

ECONOMIST: It is not a comparison between labour and capital in one country alone. It is a comparison between labour in different countries, and also between performance of capital. Comparatively productivity of Indian labour and capital is only twenty per cent of developed countries, though it goes up phenomenally once they go abroad.

BRF-ML: Does it have something to do with our work culture?

LABOUR LEADER: There is nothing wrong with our work culture. Our labour works hard, sweats out in extremely harsh work conditions, but still gets only laughably low wages.

FARMER: So too our farmers! They also work like beasts of burden, from morning till evening, through out the year. And what do they get? The city people take away all their grain, vegetables, milk and cotton, and give them matches, tooth paste, soap and cinema in return at unfavourable exchange rates.

ECONOMIST: What does that mean? Though Indian labour and farmer work hard, their productivity is abysmally low.

LABOUR LEADER: It is not that productivity is low. The capitalist manipulates the accounts and show low production and profits. They generate black money and put it away in foreign banks. It is a case of capitalist greed and dishonesty. It is also due to political corruption, with huge deposits of kick back money tucked away in the vaults of Swiss banks. All loot from the tax payers' money. If we bring back all that money not only all our debts - national and

foreign - could be liquidated but also our people will have enough to live in comfort.

POLITICIAN: It is the previous ruling party which has amassed wealth and stalked in foreign banks.

ENVIRONMENTALIST: But, now you are in power, why don't you expose them and bring back the stolen wealth?

POLITICIAN: Sorry! My parliamentary arithmetic does not allow that. Nor do the foreign banks cooperate. Frankly speaking I don't think that there is so much Indian loot there in Swiss banks.

ENVIRONMENTALIST: Then why didn't you say that before? During the election rallies you were categorical about kick backs kicking away in foreign banks!

POLITICIAN: Because people wanted to hear salacious stories! More over I had no access to secret papers! And to tell you the truth I knew nothing about international banking practices.

ECONOMIST: Why dont you tell that truth to the labour and people of this country at large.

POLITICIAN: Labour knows it. In fact some labour leaders themselves have foreign bank deposits and some are my colleagues in the present cabinet.

BRF-ML: If we cannot remove poverty by bringing back loot from Swiss banks , what else can we do to remove poverty?

POLITICIAN: By raiding the premises of the rich - their puja rooms and farm houses; by increasing supply of money; by borrowing; by massive poverty alleviation programs; and by reserving eighty five per cent of the government jobs for the backward classes!

ECONOMIST: How much do you think will raids yield?

POLITICIAN: I guess, about fifty to sixty crores of rupees.

ECONOMIST: By way of printing notes?

POLITICIAN: About two thousand to three thousand crores of rupees.

ECONOMIST: And, how much will borrowing bring?

POLITICIAN: May be to the tune of eight thousand to ten thousand crores of rupees.

ECONOMIST: How many jobs can be provided to the poor by reservation?

POLITICIAN: Four thousand to five thousand jobs per annum.

LABOUR LEADER: But we have four hundred crores unemployed in our country!

ECONOMIST: Does currency note create wealth?

THE REST: Not at all! But ...

ECONOMIST: Do raids bring enough money?

POLITICIAN: Only a paltry sum!

ECONOMIST: Will not spending on poverty alleviation by borrowing in debt the future generation, and drain away productive resources to nonproductive populist schemes? I remember a saying " Don't give them fish, but teach them to catch fish."

POLITICIAN: Poverty alleviation is an HRD investment, an investment for the future.

ECONOMIST: But do we have the infrastructure for the effective implementation of poverty alleviation programs?

POLITICIAN: At least a few poor people are benefited by the antipoverty programs! A few of them have even become rich.

BRF-ML: Friends, do we have any other option than increasing the efficiency of capital and labour for poverty alleviation?

THE REST: For that we all should work together, sharing a common vision.

BRF-ML: Then what is it that holds us from working together with a set of values and shared vision?

INDUSTRIALIST: Labour doesn't want to work.

LABOUR LEADER: Capital exploits - In fact labour and capital are natural enemies.

POLITICIAN: We don't get stable governments. People throw out governments like they wipe out sweat from their foreheads.

SCIENTIST: India is too other worldly and lacks the scientific temper.

BRF-ML: Let us come back to the basic question - can we all agree on a single vision, a clear goal?

THE REST: Yes, removal of poverty!

BRF-ML: Can you put it positively?

ECONOMIST: Creation of wealth!

THE REST: Yes, but who will create wealth?

ENVIRONMENTALIST: Is not wealth the cause of all evil?

INDUSTRIALIST: If wealth is evil, why do we all enjoy it? - a fat salary, house, car, colour television, washing machine, cooking range, micro-oven, garments, jewelry, annual vacation etc. etc.

POLITICIAN: But majority of our people live in poverty. They cannot even dream of those gadgets.

ECONOMIST (To the politician): Are you poor?

POLITICIAN: By God's grace I removed my poverty long back. I have been a five time MP, you know!

ENVIRONMENTALIST: But we will not be able to ensure all those comforts to all our people without endangering the environment irretrievably.

BRF-ML: So a few will have to abstain from material comforts and take to vow of voluntary poverty!

LABOUR LEADER: That is spiritual nonsense. Religion is the opium of the masses. We believe in material prosperity - removing poverty and enjoying affluence through socialism, and the efficient harnessing of the powers of science and technology.

BRF-ML: Will any one of us abstain from material comforts and voluntarily live in a self sufficient rural community without the comforts of science and technology, and the trappings of consumer culture?

(THE REST -- long silence ... sighs ... grunts ... swallowing lumps of saliva ...)

ENVIRONMENTALIST: But then the tribals, animals, trees, insects, reptiles, ... biodiversity ... soil ... water ... airblah blah blah ...

BRF-ML: Does that mean prosperity is nothing but an increase in the per capita consumption of goods and services?

ENVIRONMENTALIST: That is a vulgar way of putting it , though in effect that is the truth!

BRF-ML: Is it clear to the politician, to the labour leader and to the farmer that prosperity means increasing consumption?

ENVIRONMENTALIST: But the quantity consumed does not increase the quality of life!

ECONOMIST: But without a certain quantity does quality have any meaning?

FARMER: Even Swami Vivekananda had said that God appears to a hungry man in the form of food.

LABOUR LEADER: Marx had also said that quality is substrated on quantity - economic relations determine all other relations, beliefs and thought systems.

INDUSTRIALIST: Our own 'Panchatantra' says that all qualities are based on wealth - sarve gunah kanchanamasrayanti.

SCIENTIST: It is the wonders of science and technology which uplifted humankind from millennia long drudgery, and unleashed his creative potential. All creative achievements - quantum leaps - came along the industrial revolution.

ENVIRONMENTALIST: But what about environment?

BRF-ML: Should the poor countries take upon themselves the entire burden of the environment?

THE REST: That is unfair. Environment calls for global action.

ENVIRONMENTALIST: Does that mean till such global consensus emerges we continue polluting our life system - the biosphere? Should we not learn from past mistakes of others?

ECONOMIST: There are technologies which are non-polluting and eco-friendly.

INDUSTRIALIST: But they are costly technologies, and Indian industry will not be able to afford them.

BRF-ML: It is in such areas that our collective bargaining power vis a vis the developed countries should be exercised. Biodiversity, rain forests and the sun are our assets. Technology and capital are theirs'. Just as they factor non-economic issues like human rights and child labour into trade negotiations, we should ask for eco-friendly technology for our contribution to the environmental wealth of the world. They must be able to finance eco-friendly technology transfer with the money they save from cutting down on wasteful and environmentally hazardous military spending.

ENVIRONMENTALIST: I agree hundred per cent with that idea.

POLITICIAN, FARMER & LABOUR LEADER: We should pass a resolution in the UN, organise dharnas, sittings, and a host of such protest marches to teach

the imperialists and western capitalists a bitter lesson.

BRF-ML: It is not a question of 'we' teaching 'them' a lesson. Instead it is a question of 'all of us' sitting together and learning bitter lessons collectively. We have to forge global decision making mechanisms and institutions to ensure our collective survival.

ECONOMIST: What does that mean? We all should come together, work hard, to produce quality and eco-friendly goods at lower prices, creating collective wealth.

POLITICIAN: But that was precisely what we were doing the last fifty years -- IIT-s, IIM-s, Universities, R&D centers, PSU-s with a whopping investment of two lakhs sixty thousand crores of rupees. Still why do people remain poor?

LABOUR LEADER: That was because you chose a chameleon kind of path, neither capitalist nor socialist, and you fell between the two stools. Look at USSR - the world communist giant, a super power!

FARMER: But they are Godless!

ECONOMIST: Which world are you living in? USSR is history, a dinosaur! It is no more on the map of the world, or in the UN.

LABOUR LEADER: You are echoing a capitalist lie. Then why are they courting China? At least People's Republic of China is a paragon of communist values.

BRF-ML: Friends, that means we are all living in our own private worlds! There is no communist country worth the name on the face of the globe. Today we are living in a world of free market democracies, global alliances and transnationals.

ECONOMIST: Do you all agree with the proposition that wealth creation should have precedence over wealth distribution? And that job creation should precede job distribution and reservation? And that all these are possible when the productivity of the Indian economy, of its R&D, capital, infrastructure and labour leapfrog?

THE REST: You said it! Yes, yes, but ... no, no, yes ...

BRF-ML: And that the wealth creation activity is most efficiently organised in a free market economy!

(THE REST: long pause ...)

LABOUR LEADER: Marx vs Market!

FARMER: God vs Market!

POLITICIAN: Election vs Market!

ENVIRONMENTALIST: Pollution vs Market!

SCIENTIST: Research vs Market!

ECONOMIST: Scarce resource vs Market!

THE REST: But market does not produce wealth!

BRF-ML: Market is the space where decisions are taken and choices are made regarding wealth creating activities.

POLITICIAN (in surprise): Not by the parliament? Not by the cabinet? Not by the planning commission? Not by the majority? Not by the poor people of this long suffering country?

ECONOMIST: Economic decisions are best left to individuals themselves. Market organises nth number of individual decisions by the so called invisible hand into the most productive utilisation of scarce resources.

POLITICIAN: But the ignorant villager is least equipped to take decisions. What does he know? Has he studied the constitution of India?

LABOUR LEADER: True, what does the illiterate worker know? Has he studied the labour laws?

FARMER: God knows everything! Why should we know? Everything is written in our Karma. Things happen to us accordingly. After all, is not the world a grand illusion? What do you and I know about the mysterious ways of God?

INDUSTRIALIST: If the market decides, then we need a level playing field. You cannot put lion and lamb together and say that let them decide among themselves. At least we need protection from foreign wolves of competition.

ECONOMIST: But how will you learn the ropes of global market unless you compete?

BRF-ML: It is like saying that you will not jump into water until you know swimming!

ENVIRONMENTALIST: Beware farmers! Foreign companies will patent seeds, neem, tamarind products and you will not be able to use any of them without paying hefty royalties to them. You will, as a result, lose your hard earned freedom.

ECONOMIST: But patency is for a particular product or process developed by them and not for raw materials found in nature.

SCIENTIST: But the foreigners are so clever and fast that they will soon exploit all product possibilities, and we in India will be left with nothing to discover and to patent.

BRF-ML: But how will you motivate your scientists and entrepreneurs to design new products if there are no laws protecting intellectual property rights ?

SCIENTIST: Without any WTO agreement on IPR, we will be free to cheat and copy, at which we are lesser than none in the world! After all China is doing it; Japan came all the way via that route.

BRF-ML: But aren't we the third largest scientific community in the world? Aren't our scientists, technologists, and software engineers making waves in the West? Why are we afraid of western competition?

ECONOMIST: Patenting products and processes, and right over intellectual assets are part of the market package to prosperity.

SCIENTIST: If we are challenged, we will be able to rise to the occasion. Indians are second to none as far as intellectual asset creation is concerned.

BRF-ML: Can we summarise, that the challenge before us is creation of wealth through the market mechanism which is global in character and is highly volatile and susceptible to international forces?

POLITICIAN: Better we tell all these to our people!

FARMER: I work hard and I am not worried!

LABOUR LEADER: Capital is definitely our friend!

INDUSTRIALIST: Competition weeds out only the inefficient!

ENVIRONMENTALIST: I dont mind progress, markets and globalisation; but I personally would like to be a watch dog for the environment.

BRF-ML: Friends, TRUST, INDUSTRIOUSNESS & CARE alone can forge efficient individuals and effective teams working purposefully for CREATING WEALTH.

Swami Bodhananda is Chairman, Sambodh Foundation, India; The Sambodh Society Inc. USA; and Bodhananda Research Foundation for Management & Leadership Studies. He is the Inspiration and Guiding Force for all Sambodh institutions.