Revisiting the Left Movement in South Asia – Examining Sustainable Political, Economic and Social Development in the Region

As we move towards the 2015 deadline for the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), many decry the limited achievements, both in the Second and Third Worlds, as well as in the developed world. The historian, following contemporary debate, wonders at how whole swathes of history appear as if erased from memory. Does the data available today – taken in isolation – allow us to fully understand the issues around sustainable development and how it may bring about stable, safe and prosperous societies? Or would an examination of the past help to better understand the path we have taken since the fall of the Soviet bloc?*

For long, globalisation was a key term employed widely by both our politicians and journalists. The populations of what one still terms the West had – at least – to preserve the prosperity they enjoyed. As for the Second and Third Worlds, they would take the road to modernity, synonymous of riches and material comforts. The pressing issue of poverty would be resolved thanks to lasting growth. Building on a rather flimsy intellectual foundation, our political leaders asserted in parallel their concern about the environment of a planet degraded by human activity.

The capitalist model claimed victory: it revelled in the collapse of opposing ideologies, especially that of communism in the aftermath of the fall of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the bloc whose durability the former had assured – on occasion by military force. Discordant voices struggled to get themselves heard. This remains the case for the communist Left, marked by an apparently lasting discredit. After all, Communist parties - whether within or outside of the Communist bloc – had supported a range of ideological, political and – dare one say – repressive policies of the Soviet and Chinese ‘big brothers’.

Following the recent financial crises, a debate about durable economic development with a humane aspect is all the more relevant. Is it time for a rediscovery of the ideals that the Left advocated – and continues to advocate today even if their application has so far brought dubious results? Whatever the case, looking at the recent history of the Indian sub-continent, it is for (in West to East order) Pakistani, Indian and Bangladeshi historians and political scientists, as well as those foreign to this geographical zone, to examine a tradition that was common to them – that of the Left in its totality.

Apart from the period that preceded partition of British India, members of the panel will look at what the Left has brought to national political life in the three countries that have since made up the sub-continent, from their creation onwards. The researchers who will speak will keep in mind the 2015 deadline for the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), examining at the level of South Asia the scope and limits of the MDGs. They will also have the opportunity to reflect on the construction of a united South Asia, notably through the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), taking into account the issue of sustainable political, economic and social development.

Panel Organiser:

Dr. Nathalène Reynolds, Associate, Pakistan Security Research Unit (PSRU), Durham University; Visiting Fellow, Sustainable Development Policy Institute, Islamabad. Email: nathalene_reynolds@yahoo.fr

* To pre-empt criticism, the panel organiser takes the opportunity to stress that this will not be the place to advocate for a superannuated model, rightly or wrongly termed ‘communist’.