

Towards an Indian Agenda for the Indian Left

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If the socialist movement is to have a future in India-under whichever label, in whatever form-it needs to make a second beginning by rethinking its theoretical foundations.

THIS note is addressed to all those who identify with one or another form of the Indian left today: the communist parties, 'naxalites', various 'socialist' groups or others of independent left/socialist inclination. It raises a question of common and currently pressing concern: what is to be done? What direction should socialist politics take in today's India? The note is not so much an answer to this question as a preliminary statement of some general observations relevant to such an answer. Beginning with a very brief assessment and diagnosis of what ails the Indian left today, it goes on to spell out something of a new agenda for the politics of socialism in India. The purpose is to begin a non-polemical and meaningful debate on what may be some fundamental questions relevant to the present political and ideological dilemma of the Indian left.

The first wave of the socialist movement in India (this includes the entire Indian 'left'—communists, naxalites, democratic socialists, etc) seems to have nearly exhausted its transformative force. Politically, it stands marginalised and contained as a minor entity forced to live in enclaves, rejected by the very people in whose name it existed. Ideologically, it has a wider presence; but this presence is more apparent than real. Mainstream politics has successfully appropriated the ideology and vocabulary of Indian socialism for its own ends, so much so that this mainstream appears a more legitimate heir to this ideology than the left. Prospects of the kind of socialist politics India has hitherto seen appear to be extremely limited today. Even under the best of imaginable conditions—better leadership, more dedicated workers, good political fortune, etc—it seems unlikely to be able to reverse its present political marginalisation and ideological appropriation.

This is not to say that the movement has been a failure altogether. Apart from directly securing less unjust conditions of life in some areas, the movement has had a much larger range of indirect effects, both intended and unintended. It legitimised a pro-people, anti-oppression and anti-exploitation culture and to that extent has fundamentally altered the terms of political discourse in India. Different constituents of this movement have acted at different times as foci of various other emancipatory ideas and actions in Indian public life—civil rights, women's emancipation, defence of minorities or other marginalised sections of soci-

ety, promotion of literacy, popular culture and literature and soon. It contributed more than one generation of activists to various spheres of Indian public life.

Yet the fact remains that there is a gross mismatch between what the movement set out to do and what it has actually achieved. The movement never came anywhere close to the social transformation it aimed at; to claim anything like success for the movement is, therefore, to insult the ambitions of its founders and to give up those ambitions for the present and future.

In fact, its prospects are further shrinking rapidly. For one thing, Indian politics has for some time been and is likely to be played mainly on a terrain which has proved very slippery for conventional left politics—the terrain defined by questions of social and political identities (caste, tribe, religion, region, nationality and so on). Even the other question, that of the current crisis of Indian economy, is not cast in terms favourable to the politics of socialism; socialism is more likely to be seen as a part and cause of the problem than a source of its possible solution. It is unlikely that the left would gain much even from the adverse fallout of the present economic policies. The most serious and immediate threat, however, comes from the recent collapse of the USSR and all other western socialist regimes. Though it may not affect Indian politics directly or immediately, it might lead to a sharp and enduring erosion of ideological support for the politics of socialism. At stake, therefore, is not just further growth and strengthening of the movement but its very existence.

The present slate of socialist politics is, on balance, a consequence of the very nature of Indian socialism. Historical accidents, extraneous factors, organisational failures, tactical mistakes or all of these put together are far from adequate in accounting for the massive failure of the Indian left. To put it simply, the failure followed from the very manner in which the socialist enterprise has been conceived in India. It could not be otherwise for there is a serious sense in which no political movement can go wrong or fail if its ideology (including assessment of reality and strategy, that is) is correct, or, conversely, no political failure is unmerited. In this sense, the Indian socialist movement deserved the fate it has met.

It is customary to explain the failure of the Indian left with reference to the global re-

treat of the socialist forces and reasons thereof. And it is quite true. Global dynamics of capitalism, the failure of socialist ideology to anticipate or counter it, the logic of democratic politics and a similar failure of socialism to respond to it and the impact of culture industry, etc, are responsible for the failure of socialist movements all over the world and India is no exception. But a diagnosis that stops here is rather unhelpful. It does not tell us why some socialist movements could defy all this and attain some success and why India was not one of them. Why did Indian socialist politics share only the failures of the international socialist forces? And why, even after seven decades of its existence, did the movement's fate hang with that of others? The global explanation, in other words, is at best partial (and even the part that is true needs to be worked out independently in the Indian situation); to take it as a complete explanation is to not only misunderstand the movement's past, present and future possibilities but also to share the very mindset which has led the movement to its present state.

ROTHINICING THEORETICAL BASE

If the socialist movement is to have a future in India-under whichever label, in whatever form-it needs to make a second beginning by rethinking its theoretical foundations. This rethinking is a three-fold task involving all the three levels of socialist ideology—analysis, goal and strategy. Accordingly, socialists need to learn to re-interpret Indian society, rethink what it means to be a socialist in India and to redefine politics itself in the Indian context.

The Indian left has ritually talked of understanding Indian society in its specificity; the point, however, is to actually do so and to accord this project an urgency and priority in the analytical efforts. The first step in this direction could be to refuse to be dictated by any meta-narrative of world history (Marx's, Toynbee's or Lohia's). More specifically, it could mean giving up all theories which expect India to re-enact (in whatever form—pure, mixed, adapted, distorted, delayed or preponed) the historical trajectory of modern European societies. This is not to deny that a large number of elements constitutive of contemporary India are European in origin, but to insist that the task of theorising even those elements should be situated in the specificity of the Indian situation. Instead of approaching India as an exception to a (European) norm, it might be a better strategy to shift the starting point of analysis to India. Nor is it to claim a uniquely privileged position for India in world history; the underlying idea here is merely to respect the historicity of every society.

Socialist reinterpretation of India can begin by rethinking the existing constructions of Indian society. While socialists have refused to accept the economic part of the conventional picture of Indian society and have added a lot of their own to it, they have

tended to take the rest of the received picture for granted, if not reinforced it in the process. That is where more attention is needed now. Much of what passes for social scientific 'knowledge' on India has a large dose of essentialist stereotyping typical of any attempt by the powerful to understand the powerless. This is especially true of much of socialist understanding of 'traditional' India, of caste, religion, popular culture, rural society and so on. Recent academic critiques of the 'orientalist' elements in these constructs need greater attention from those serious about politics of socialism than has been the case.

In positive terms the starting point could be a systematic reconstruction of the map of ideas in India, of beliefs about society held by ordinary Indians, for these beliefs are in a way constitutive of what Indian society is. Cultural anthropology, suitably modified to eliminate its colonial bias, could be the source of many radical insights here. In this context some of the recent academic attention to the study of subaltern discourse, especially to patterns of community consciousness, in it, needs to be welcomed and pursued further. This is not to suggest that a radical social science should be confined exclusively to 'native' concepts and categories, for a good deal of the logic of operation of large-scale structures and institutions is simply beyond such categories and actor's own understanding. The idea behind insisting on taking these concepts seriously is simply to fix the right end where any inquiry must begin. And to mark a sharp difference from the contempt and disregard with which leftists have usually treated popular beliefs, traditions, world-views and culture, when not calling it names ('false consciousness', 'superstitions', 'backward mentality', 'obscurantism' and so on). It must be recognised that calling popular consciousness names is making a virtue of a fatal weakness in the existing socialist understanding of Indian society.

The ideals of socialism should also be rethought in the Indian context. Historically the ideal of socialism has been associated with modernity. No wonder much of socialist ideals and demands reflect the dreams and self-images of modernity, its metaphor of progress, its imaginary scale of 'forward' and 'backward', and its intuitive suspicion of everything traditional. This socialist inability to relate critically to modernity is a major handicap for those thinking about the goals of a socialist society, at least in the Indian context. What is needed, however, is not a plunge into one of the currently fashionable and romantic anti-modernist Utopias but the cultivation of a frame of mind where the choice between modernity and its alternatives is not seen as an either/or choice or something one makes up one's mind about before beginning to think. This involves a long process of hard-headed yet morally sensitive thinking on different aspects of modernity/anti modernity divide: technology, environment, economy, politics and culture.

There is another, deeper, respect in which

the Indian context should inform the ideals and goals of socialist politics in India. This involves the fundamental question; what does it mean to be radical in India? Conventionally the socialists have drawn upon the modern image of an abstract radicalism and have presented themselves as carriers of certain universal ideals and values which defy all spatial and temporal context. Such a view has blocked any creative thinking among socialists of different places and times. The process of rethinking can begin here with a new image, that of situated radicalism, a radicalism that can relate to and enter into a dialogue with the existing moral traditions of the time and place concerned. Such a socialism may look rather strange to those accustomed to thinking of socialism as an international movement where different socialist parties share everything except a few details of programme and specific tactics; indeed some versions of a situated radicalism may not qualify or even care for the label 'socialism' as known to us. But that might well be the best way of defending the deep values that have come to us under the label 'socialism'.

Accordingly, the ideals of Indian socialism should be able to speak to the deeply held moral beliefs of ordinary Indians. This needs to be clarified. Many leftists have often accepted the tactical need to use the traditional moral vocabulary in order to make socialism more acceptable and appealing to the masses. A socialist dialogue with Indian traditions means much more than that. It must involve a readiness to suspend one's basic values, to question and rework them in the light of the traditional beliefs. It does not mean, however, that the socialist should simply endorse or replicate the moral beliefs of an ordinary Indian which, at least at its surface, are anything but socialist. A genuine dialogue can involve deeper and yet deeper layers of popular consciousness and make creative use of the multiplicity of traditions in India to rework both the existing moral beliefs of the people and the socialist theory itself. But there is no way socialists can simply by-pass the existing moral traditions or regard them incidental to their enterprise as they have done so far.

Socialism has conventionally been presented and perceived as egalitarianism; as such the demand for economic equality for all individuals or classes has been uppermost on the agenda of the politics of Indian socialism. There is a need to rethink all the three components of this demand, namely, what to demand (equality), for which sphere of life (economy) and for whom (individual/class). The conventional socialist primacy to economic and the material sphere of life should enter into dialogue with the classical and folk moral traditions in India, which do not give these spheres a place of pride. Prospects of improved material conditions of one's own life is not an ideal capable of appealing to the deepest ethical impulse of the people. Instead, socialism can hold out a broader promise of human well-being and social justice. In this context it is important

to pay greater attention to the questions of defence of traditional community forms of life, culture, education and environment. The second component, equality, should also be broadened; socialist demands must not be confined to equality or distributive justice. There seems to be a need to attend to people's felt urge for a life of dignity, honour and preservation of traditional identities on the one hand and the social values of harmony and order on the other. In general the socialists need to admit through the front door questions of morality including that of individual conduct. The question of the social unit relevant to the socialist ideals (individual/class) needs to be answered with reference to the ontological map of the Indian society and the units people recognise to be 'real'. It would follow, then, that the claims of some concrete group identities (e.g. family, sex, caste, tribe, region, cultural community, etc.) need to be taken more seriously than at present.

New INSTITUTIONAL DESIGN

Socialists must spell out a more plausible picture of the institutional design which can realise the above mentioned ideals than they have hitherto cared to offer. While one set of socialists have continued to believe innocently in the magic of all powerful state, nationalisation and central planning, others have fallen back on an alternative set of mythologies: decentralisation, small-scale techniques, self-sufficiency and so on. Both of these replace the task of serious designing of institutions by fond hopes and noble intentions. No wonder they convince only those who are already converts. Very few would question the charms of the socialist dreams, what people usually suspect is its feasibility or readability in the given conditions. Socialists must convince themselves rigorously on this score before they set out to make converts. The following areas need greater and more careful attention: the role of public sector, the extent of nationalisation, the role of market, the policy on international economic relations, the problem of combining decentralisation with efficiency, the question of feasibility of self-sufficiency in technology, the nationality question, the nature of federal political arrangements, the appropriate educational and the cultural policy, the future of caste system and the empowerment of women.

Indian socialism, like socialism all over the world, has hitherto remained political in a narrow sense. Whether parliamentary or non-parliamentary, its preferred methods of bringing about the desired socialist transformation have depended in the last instance on capturing or influencing the conventional channels of power and their epicentre, the state. Much of socialist action (electoral, agitational or violent activities or their preparation) has revolved around this kind of politics. As such much of the socialist politics has been confined to the formal sphere of state law and bureaucracy which covers only a thin layer of Indian public life. It is true that most other non-socialist political formations also share this limitation, but

unlike them socialist action cannot even begin meaningfully without overcoming this limitation. The future of socialism in India depends, therefore, on drawing out hitherto 'non-political' sectors (sections of society, geographical regions, types of interests and forms of activities) of Indian/society into a mode of action which subsumes 'politics' and is political in a wider, richer sense. This requires that the socialists establish a deep relationship with the traditional public domain (religious and other forms of community activity) and transform the vocabulary, programme, symbols and modes of action of movement accordingly.

The socialist programme of action should, accordingly, be rethought in terms of its direction and priorities. The criterion here should not be its faithfulness to the familiar cannons of socialism but its ability to reflect the actually felt needs and aspirations of the people. In the contemporary Indian context, then, the foremost question is that of the coming crisis on the nationality question (rise of communalism, competing claims of various regional/ethnic identities to power and material goods, rise of aggressive and narrow nationalism as a threat to smaller identities and the question of national honour and identity *vis-a-vis* the neo-colonial pressures). The other question relates to the domestic and the external economic policy, but even this must not be seen and fought on a purely economic plane; there is a case here for bringing in the rich ideal of nationalism. Socialists need to realise that a political movement for radical redistribution of property and income has little prospects in contemporary India. Indian socialism must become a movement for a political order respectful of diverse identities and interests, for economic restructuring to have a more productive economy and, above all, for social and cultural enlivening of Indian civilisation.

There is a need to rethink two ideas crucial to the conventional socialist thinking on political agency, namely, the idea of a special revolutionary class and that of indispensability of party. The belief that a section of society-proletariat, peasantry, the poor or the youth-is uniquely privileged agent of socialist revolution is merely an assuring political superstition. There is never one section of society whose interests completely match-both objectively and subjectively—the goals of the socialist movement. Even if this were so, the appeal of the movement must not be confined to or directed mainly at these sections. For a politics based on appeal to material self-interests (best exemplified by trade unions) cannot have depth or longevity. The socialist movement needs to appeal across different sections of society, place itself beyond the domain of instrumental politics of interest, beyond what is conventionally seen as politics. It means that there is some room to rethink the socialist preoccupation with trade union activity (in the broader sense including such activity in the unorganised sector) and examine whether trade unionism can feed, in the long run, a truly

radical politics.

The question of appropriate organisational form can also be thought afresh in the light of a larger conception of politics. While it is indispensable to organise efforts towards socialism, a political party is not the only nor perhaps the best organisational form. Ideally the socialist movement should become a movement in the larger, comprehensive sense of the term, subsuming various aspects of life, including politics. Such a movement may be co-ordinated by way of a network of independent and interconnected organisations without placing them under any hierarchy or a line of command. The movement has to have a political expression—it could be a party—and that has to be organised less loosely. For it has to meet two demands of contemporary Indian politics which pull in the opposite direction: one, the need to appeal to locally organised communities, and two, the necessity to operate at a scale as big as the Indian polity. A large, but flexible, 'umbrella' organisation like the Congress before independence looks like a good example of what the politics of socialist movement in India requires today.

There is now a greater need for the unity of socialist forces than ever before, for there is no political formation that can meet the current challenge to the politics of Indian left single-handedly. But this task of left unity needs to be understood in a wider and different sense than it usually is. The unity requires, first of all, that different left political formations (especially the communists, the naxalites and the socialists) give up their respective monopolistic doctrinal claims and also their mutual hostility and contempt. Only those groups should come together which can do so. Secondly, the conventional boundaries of the 'left' and the 'right' in Indian politics need to be redrawn. A 'situated radicalism' as defined here promises to be perhaps a better criterion for deciding who is 'left'. Accordingly, the Congress version of socialism, which just happened to be pro-public sector and pro-USSR, would no longer appear to be an ally of the Indian left; instead, radical elements from hitherto non-political formations like the Sarvodaya movement and from some of the traditional/religious but non-communal groups and movements should be welcomed into the socialist fold. Finally, it should not be an uneasy and artificial 'unity' where very different left parties and groups as they exist today are forced under a common label. Patterns of unity other than complete merger can be explored. There seems to be a good case to begin with a federal organisation which simply co-ordinates the activities of various parties and groups with separate identities.

The mode of political action currently followed by the Indian left (strike, dharna, bandh, fast, demonstration and so on) has steadily lost its symbolic value and effectiveness. This problem is not confined to the socialists alone; all other formations in Indian politics share this vacuum as a result of over-use of some political methods coined several decades ago during the national

movement. Aimed at the government or other centres of power, the current mode of political action is meant for external gaze (designed to produce effects of awe and fear); it fails to create any significant meaning for the participant themselves, let alone achieve any communication with the non-participants except as a show of strength or, more often, of nuisance value. The challenge of innovation in political methods (an area completely neglected by students and theoreticians of Indian politics) is, therefore, more pressing than before. A response to this challenge can begin by noting and developing upon the existing everyday forms of resistance in subaltern life. Secondly, it can learn from the methods used by some non-left (or even anti-left) popular movements in post-independence India, e.g., struggle for Jharkhand or the Assam movement. Finally, here again the traditional public domain and various forms of community activities can also become an invaluable source for the socialist search for new symbols and modes of action in India.

Such a rethinking of the analysis, goals and the strategy of the movement as proposed here may appear to take us in an altogether new direction; indeed it may be asked if there is any point in calling it socialist anymore. That, however, would be an over-reading. There is surely a break with the past in these proposals—and that is the whole point—but not as sharp as may appear. The ideological changes outlined above have been implicit both in the actions of some of the best practitioners of the Indian socialist movement and in some recent academic writings; all that is attempted here is in the nature of giving these writings and actions an explicit theoretical recognition and spelling out their implications for action in today's India. This link with the past is in itself a good reason to continue to stick to the label socialism. For socialism is much more than a set of political positions, policies, programmes and conclusions; basically it is the name for a radical, emancipatory project which may take different forms in different contexts. To expect various socialisms to have an identical content across time and space is to reduce its identity to a mechanical repetition. A movement like socialism which calls upon people to redefine their identities and relate in a radical and creative manner to their past cannot go on to relate to its own past in an opposite manner. Radicalism must begin at home.

[An earlier version of this paper was circulated among activists and academicians and then presented at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla in June 1991. I wish to thank late Diptendra Banerjee, Javed Alam, Harbans Mukhia, Surjeet Mukherjee, Satish Saberwal, Ashok Seksaria, fellows at the HAS and friends and students at the department of political science, Punjab University, Chandigarh for a detailed and merciless criticism of the earlier version. The paper was inspired by Kishen Pattnaik and Sachchidanand Sinha and by a reading of John Dunn's *Politics of Socialism*.]



TRI-STAR SOYA PRODUCTS LIMITED.

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Extract from the speech delivered by Shri M.P. Mansinghka, Chairman at the 13th Annual General Meeting of the Company held on 24th September, 1993 at Bombay.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all to the Company's 13th Annual General Meeting. The Annual Report for 1992-93 has been mailed to you earlier and I am sure you must have read it with interest.

Before I make a brief reference to the Company's performance during the year and how the management perceives the future prospects I would like to share with you my thoughts on the emerging oilseeds scenario. The Company's performance depends not only on the adequacy of managerial inputs but also on the operational environment over which the management has little control. A proper evaluation of the company's performance, therefore, calls for a careful assessment of all the relevant aspects of the oilseeds scenario.

EMERGING SCENARIO

Never before has the oilseeds sector of the economy been known to have performed so well as it did during 1992-93 (Nov-Oct). The production of nine cultivated oilseeds set a new record at 200 and odd lakh tonnes, representing an increase of about 9.2 per cent over the previous season's figure of 182.8 lakh tonnes. On current reckoning, the likely shortfall in groundnut production owing to the partial failure of the crop in Gujarat is expected to be more than made up by

the increase in production of other oilseeds, especially soybean which could turn out to be over 40 lakh tonnes as against 30.5 lakh tonnes last season. The total kharif output could be expected to be at least as good, if

the previous year—up 60 per cent in rupee terms and 36.7 per cent in dollar terms. What is more, 96.4 per cent of the export earnings came from the General Currency Area. Soybean exports increased over the year by 68



Shri M.P. Mansinghka, Chairman

not better, as during 1992-93. Good subsoil moisture holds out the prospect of good rabi sowings. Assuming satisfactory progress of rabi crops, one could hopefully look forward to further increase of 8 to 10 per cent in oilseeds production during 1993-94.

RECORD EXPORTS

Far more impressive than the increase in production during 1992-93 is the oilseeds sector's valuable contribution to the nation's foreign exchange pool. Exports of deoiled meal, oilseeds and fats during 1992-93 (April-March) fetched a record Rs. 1650 crore against Rs. 1031 crore in

per cent (from Rs. 656.54 crore to Rs. 1103.28 crore) and accounted for 66.9 per cent of the total export earnings during 1992-93.

REASSURING PROSPECTS

Despite larger turnover (Rs. 75.83 crore against Rs. 72.14 crore in 1991-92) following higher capacity utilisation—67 per cent against 59 per cent in the previous year—and increase in exports (Rs. 41.03 crore against Rs. 27.91 crore), the company's net profit declined from Rs. 3.2 crore to Rs. 2.29 crore. The decline in profit is attributable entirely to the high cost of inputs on the

one hand and decline in the prices of soybean oil on the other.

I would like to assure the members that the management is striving hard to improve the company's working and that, barring unforeseen circumstances, they can confidently look forward to better results for the current year (1993-94). This optimism is based not only on reassuring prospects of a record soybean crop and improved availability of other oilseeds but also on our efficient processing facilities. The management is also taking a series of measures aimed at expanding and diversifying the range of company's activities and strengthening the organisational framework to ensure more efficient operations which are likely to en-

soybean meal through technological upgradation. Because of the improved quality the price realisation is appreciably higher.

In order to achieve the economies of scale your company has undertaken expansion of the existing soya processing capacity from 500 TPD to 1000 TPD. This programme will be implemented in two phases. The increased capacity under the first phase is scheduled to go into production by mid-October 1993. This expansion programme is estimated to cost Rs. 8 crore.

Looking to the increased demand for texturised soya proteins and fairly good acceptability in normal diet by all classes of consumers, your company is setting up a most modern

resources and partly by fresh equity and long-term borrowings.

It will be of interest for you to know that your company will shortly be entering the consumer market for the sale of texturised soya protein, soya flour, vanaspati and refined oil in consumer packs. This will enable the company to realise better prices for its produce.

The quality of your company's soymeal is rated high in the international market. Besides, the company's active association with a large international trading house having a strong marketing infrastructure will help boost its export performance.

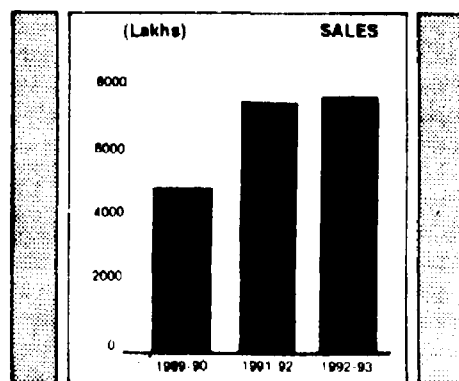
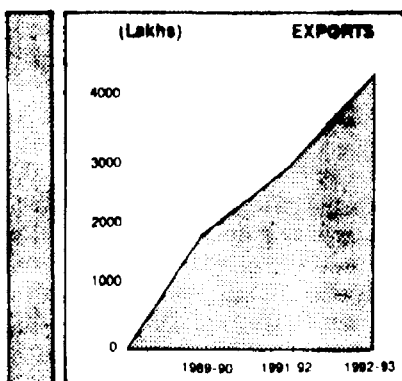
All in all, the various expansion/diversification plans which are under implementation and the strengthening of the production and marketing facilities should go a long way in taking the company on the path of rapid progress.

Before I conclude, I would like to place on record my sincere thanks to all our shareholders for the trust and confidence reposed in the management and the financial institutions and bankers for their whole-hearted assistance in helping achieve good results. I am also grateful to the central and state governments for their co-operation. I would also like to extend my sincere thanks to my colleagues on the Board for their valuable advice, all the workers and members of the staff and officers of your company for their continued diligence and dedication.

Thank you very much.

Note: This does not purport to be a report of the proceedings of the Annual General Meeting.

Sobhagya/93



hance the company's profits and profitability.

The projected turnover for the current year is estimated around Rs. 120 crores (including exports of Rs. 67 crores)—an increase of 60%. In subsequent year the turnover is expected to cross Rs. 175 crores—an increase of further 46% when the first phase of expansion/diversification programme will become fully operative.

EXPANSION/DIVERSIFICATION

Your company has switched over from the production of normal quality soybean meal to HIPRO quality

texturised soya protein manufacturing plant. This project, estimated to cost Rs. 8 crore, will be implemented in two phases. Facilities under the first phase will become operational by January 1994.

Simultaneously the company has also initiated steps for setting up vanaspati manufacturing facility with a capacity of 18000 TPA. This project also will be implemented in two phases involving a total outlay of Rs. 9 crore. The first phase is slated to be completed by April 1994.

The aforesaid projects are proposed to be financed partly through internal