

Paper: "Popular Politics, Upsurge and the Revolt in the Sixties and Seventies of the Last Century."  
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The proposition of this paper is an interesting and intriguing one. The attempt to rethink the movements and mobilisations that took place under the banner of Left Radicalism in the Sixties and Seventies of the last century as popular movements is indeed an original proposition. The questions put forward invite a critical response to a set of events that have generated quite substantial academic and creative enquiries in the last four decades. Response to the thematic distribution of the paper:

### **Popular Roots of 1967**

#### **Radicalisation**

#### **Legacy**

#### **Political-Organisational Line**

Can be headed under several correlated themes like: formation(s) of the political subject; politics of violence; the everyday and the extraordinary aspects of 'doing' politics; and the aftermath of the Grand Sixties. I really would have liked to expand on these themes, but, given the immediate context within which we are having this conversation I shall focus on three particular points that leapt out as I finished reading the abstract. The first concerns the conceptualisation of 'popular', the second concerns the contextualization or rather periodization of Sixties and Seventies, and the final one concerns the question of memorializing the Sixties and Seventies as decades of movement/upsurge/revolt/rebellion.

While locating the sixties and seventies in their popular roots, the abstract points out that popular refers to the flexible nature of unrest on the one hand, and the decentralized character of the upsurge in creating plural subjects on the other hand. If we follow Raymond Williams, popular seems to have traversed a rather chequered trajectory. Beginning as a political and legal term, denoting popular estate or popular government, the term was couched in a sense of common or 'low'. To quote Williams, "The transition to the predominant modern meaning of 'widely favoured'

or 'well-liked' is interesting in that it contains a strong element of setting out to gain favour, with a sense of calculation that has not quite disappeared but that is evident in a reinforced phrase like **deliberately popular**." Though popular has also experienced a shift from the 19<sup>th</sup> century towards 'the point of view of the people', it still carries "two older senses: inferior kinds of work (cf. **popular literature, popular press** as distinguished from *quality press*); and work deliberately setting out to win favour (**popular journalism** as distinguished from *democratic journalism*, or **popular entertainment**); as well as the more modern sense of well-liked by many people, with which of course, in many cases, the earlier senses overlap." The aspects of flexibility, plurality, and decentralization, consequently, are mired in the overlaps, which Williams points out.

There remains a lingering suspicion whether the popular roots of the upsurge also meant efforts to curry favour from the dominant sections of the population whom the Left Radicals decided to identify as the people. Let me explore this suspicion from the point of view of gender. Einwohner, Hollander, and Olson, while Engendering Social movements have argued that movements that are not explicitly concerned with gender equality often support existing gender relations among the people whom they consider as their 'friends' to maintain their acceptance. By that logic, if 'doing' politics among the peasants meant supporting the dominant unequal gender relations to maintain popular acceptance of the Left Radicals, popular becomes a set of deliberate tactics rather than either flexible or plural. The idea of decentralization also suffers greatly if 'popular' means supporting the dominant.

My second concern addresses the process of periodising the Sixties and Seventies, especially Naxalbari, through the lens of the set of events from 1967 to 1974 in India, or the 1940s to 1960s in India on the one hand; and Europe in 1848 or 1960s on the other hand. The framework, proposed in the abstract, is I think rather myopic. If we situate the year 1971 in the political history of South Asia we will find: East Pakistan was fighting the war of liberation while Pakistan was relying on the brutality of military might to quell what it considered as a civil war. In Sri Lanka, the JVP – Janatha Vimukthi Perumana – uprising marked an insurrection against the government, led by the radical left. In Jhapa district of south-eastern Nepal – a district on the Indian border – the Nepalese communist party organised its first armed movement against the Panchayat government in Kathmandu, inspired by the Maoist ideology and the Naxalbari movement. South Asia, it seems, was at war in 1971. It is also important to keep in mind that among these uprisings, or, insurrections, or movements *Muktijudhho* was the only successful one – successful from the point of view of armed anti-state activists. The JVP uprising ended when the SLFP – Sri Lanka Freedom Party – government took massive counter-insurgency measures. Within months the students, workers, academics and monks who supported the uprising were either killed or 'disappeared'. The Jhapa uprising was crushed by the Nepal military within days. The legacy of 1971, however, remains long and long-winding for South Asia. While going into the political organizational line of 1848, as Marx viewed it; or the nature of Maoism in China from 1949 to 1974 will be enriching to periodise the Naxalite movement, it may benefit more from exploring the consolidation of what came to be known as 'Marxism' and 'Maoism' in South Asia in the Sixties and Seventies.

Finally, it is probably belabouring the point to this audience that the Sixties and Seventies perhaps remain favourite decades from the last century in terms of memorialization. Especially in India these decades have their only rival in Partition, 1947. Approaching this process of memorialization from the point of view of emotion, where the creative and academic representation can have a fruitful dialogue, or to put it in Pierre Nora's formulation, where critical-history and memory-history can interact with each other through the medium of literature has the potential to break the recursivity of deliberating over 'what went wrong' discourses. The fiftieth year of Naxalbari can also occasion thorough ethnographies of the iconisation of that moment amongst two successive generations: the post-Emergency generation and the post-Liberalisation generation. When a group of twenty-somethings shout slogans like: Ho HoHo-Chi-Minh/We shall fight, We shall win during a public rally, it remains to be explored what those rhyming words mean to them; or the manners in which the ubiquitous Che Guevara T-Shirt is worn by a student activist on the special occasion of an anti-government People's March. Youth is a liminal category, so is Student. It is probably time that we start sifting through the social age of Sixties and Seventies of the last century, the insignias of memories that are shaping the post-nineties people's movements in the current century.