

Remarks on the Food Movement paper by Sibaji Pratim Basu

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Before I start let me thank the MCRG and the Jadavpur Womens' Studies, Ranabir-da, Samita-di and Anwasha for asking me to discuss the paper by Sibaji Pratim Basu at this very timely workshop on popular movements. Popular movements, as we can see, are gathering steam in a number of regions across the country, and some of them are showing signs of alliances and alignments. This is the right time to review the different popular movements in the recent past, which can allow an interesting conversation between early postcolonial years and the contemporary moment. What have these movements learnt from their chequered histories? What are the common denominators among them? Perhaps most importantly, what were their limitations in the past and how far do they seem to have overcome these in the present? I find Sibaji Pratim Basu's rich essay in some sense posing all these questions to itself, and I find his larger argument about the food movement as a Deleuzian rhizomatic social movement using modes of contentious politics described by Charles Tilly as a theoretical answer he tries to provide to these questions. These questions are not always posed explicitly and they function at the level of the perspectives, concerns and presuppositions. And these are what I will try to bring to fore and discuss within my limited scope. I will also talk about a promising line of thinking the paper suggests but does not fully develop as well as a few possible interpretations which the paper does not take up but may find of some use.

I find the real strength of the paper in its rich and thickly detailed historical narrative of the everyday level of the food movements of 1959 and 1966. We find a colourful and complexly layered but easily flowing narrative, moving from the assembly debates to communist mobilization to working class localities to civil society moves to ultimately localized situations of civil war if only lasting for a few days, leading to a large number of deaths and eventually electoral regime change. It is one thing to be aware of the food movement and another thing to comprehend it as the missing link between the Tebhaga agitation and Naxalbari – the most immediate source of radical momentum which CPM made into its electoral hegemony in Bengal. This is what the paper made me realize most clearly and I am grateful to the author for that.

The rich detail of the movement which the paper presents, at times in cinematic images, throw up an interesting range of possible logical associations to be



made, which are not fully exploited by the paper. Let me give three examples, which open up the connections and significance of the movement well beyond its localization.

The first example is that of the logic of government actions. Although we come across Prafulla Sen and A.P. Jain and the B.C. Ray regime's successive moves, we do not make the connection of the food minister AP Jain's proximity to the trader's lobby and his consistent efforts to subvert the Planning Commission's measures to rationalize food distribution across India. Accounts of five year plans are replete with stories of how Jain foiled the functioning of FCI and food-stock strategies, as well as zoning and price control. What they tell us is that the food crisis and its scarcity was felt countrywide, which ultimately and ironically started unravelling the very credibility of Nehru's development planning.

The second example is the connections to be made from the empirical detail and perhaps what is missing there. As usual, women are invisible from the records of the movement, which involved mass and violent action ironically around the question of food. Given that a large number of Leftist women had already ran *langars* in the wake of famine in the forties, their total invisibility is deeply troubling. In fact, it seems the violent outbreaks in 59 and 66 were directly answering the question most starkly posed by 42: why no violence despite starvation? – memorialized by Manik Banerjee, discussed by Shubhoranjan in another paper, as *Chhiniye Khayni Kano?* The food movements of 59 and 66 were not only looting the food, but attacking police stations and dying by gunshots rather than from starvation, unlike the 40s. What changed? Let us look at who these people were: the list of dead from police firing on 18<sup>th</sup> February 1966, as Sibaji tells us, includes, Ali Hafiz, Kalu Mandal, Haridas Biswas, Gopal Mandal, Tulsi Goldar, Bipradas, etc. These individuals clearly come from very different caste and community backgrounds as opposed to the recognized leadership of the movement. We do not know who among them were leaders on the ground in the working class areas like Howrah or refugee colonies like Dhubulia. Is it really surprising that the movement often drifted out of the urban leadership's control? Is there a larger structural reason behind the violence?

The third example is that of the terms of discourse used in print and government records to frame the movement. The descriptions move from a supportive mood for civil disobedience and anger at state failure to growing anxiety and alarm about a state of anarchy. It is striking how frequently the assessment of things



heading towards anarchy surfaces, across different planes and different actors – state, civil society, the regime, and even communist leadership: there is a shared fear of the lumpens, of the “rowdies taking over”, and “hooliganism” ruling the day. From the descriptions which resemble localized civil wars, of the type that swept parts of Europe around the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century, it is apparent that this is the point where the movement reaches its maximum intensity, threatening the order in a way that can be directly experienced. And if we look carefully, I think we can detect a pattern of this moment also marking a point of departure when the established political adversaries decide to come together to restore the order, and possibly manage and channel the energy into electoral outcomes. Whatever horizontal connections stood active till this point, this is where a verticality of politics comes to be re-established, and the state manages to regain control over the movement. Again, it is not surprising that Naxalbari would want to plug into this transformative energy.

The point I was making is however the conceptual limit that the terms like ‘lumpen’ and ‘anarchy’ pose to our imagination of radicalism in social movements. This limitation is more often an effect of the state’s given terms of discourse rather than what is taking place on the ground, which could be unleashing forces that make the middle class character of the Left’s leadership deeply uncomfortable. I feel we should no longer abide by the same sense of discomfort and dig deeper into who were leading these intensive moments of disruption and what constituted the peak of what Tilly calls contentious politics.

I will conclude with two further but brief points. I found the author’s detection of a pattern of events starting with food riots and leading to regime change extremely insightful and highly significant. It has the possibility of offering a set of distinctive symptoms to detect regime crisis and electoral change at a wider level in the subcontinent. I request the author to develop this further. Lastly, I am not very sure if the framework of rhizomatic social movement is all that productive in thinking about the food movement – what more do we learn about the movement after we call it ‘rhizomatic’? What are in this case the “circumstances relative to the arts and the sciences”? Also, what does the “rhizomatic” mode do to the Tilly-an notion of a WUNC type of social movement? The use of ‘rhizomatic’ will at once raise these questions which are perhaps not so necessary for the investigation at hand. Nevertheless, it has been an absolute delight to read the paper and I sincerely thank the author for that.