Popular Politics, Popular Upsurge, and the Revolt in the Sixties and Seventies of the Last Century

(Abstract)

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Popular Roots of 1967

1. This note prepared on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Naxalbari movement does not aim to present a comprehensive political analysis of the left wing radical movement known as the Naxalite movement in India and particularly in West Bengal. The paper is about the nature of the movement as it drew its strength from popular protests and popular politics of the time, and became unique as a popular revolt. Hence this paper does not discuss specifically the Naxalite ideology or their doctrine (especially as an independent phenomenon) unless the context calls for such reference.

2. What happened in West Bengal from the mid-sixties of the last century, particularly from 1967, is inconceivable without taking into account what happened in the preceding years and the decade. Briefly speaking, there were increasing street revolts, spread of protests to small towns and villages particularly from 1965, industrial unrest, food movements, youth and student upsurge, civil liberties movement against suppressive policies like the DIR in the wake of the border war of 1962, and a massive radicalisation of popular mood against the ruling Congress government. Thus what happened in 1967 may not be considered as "spring thunder", if that means a sudden event, though the fury of the response of society to events of 1966-67 took many by surprise. The events were also clarifying by nature, they clarified the points of contention, they forced political forces to define their respective stands, who stood where, who were "friends, and who were enemies", and which way the path of movement lay. In this sense, of course, 1967 was "spring thunder".

3. For a study of the popular protests and popular revolt in the latter half of the sixties, the popular context is important, because it indicated the flexible nature of the unrest, which spread quickly through the state. There were many actors, many organisations, and many modes. Participation of small peasantry in the villages, slum dwellers and lower middle class in the towns, and students and youth in colleges, schools and universities, were features of popular participation. As preceding researches show, it was not a unique and singular show by any party. Indeed this plurality was crucial for the unrest to spread and engulf entire West Bengal.

4. In another way, the popular context characterised the nature of the revolt. The upsurge was not centrally directed, it occasioned the emergence of plural subjects, and its flexibility and creativity in modes of articulation had much to do with the context of popular movements in the preceding one and half decade. In fact, to anticipate the history a little, the untimely centralisation of the radical forces after the peasant struggle in Naxalbari, and undue haste in ideological framing of the movement and formalising it on the lines of an established doctrine of party organisation (such as the formation of the CPI-ML) bore the death knell of the upsurge.

Radicalisation

5. The radicalisation in the second half of the decade of sixties was also extremely republican and egalitarian in an odd way. It erased all distinctions, hierarchies, and inequalities from the map of revolution. There was no caste, no gender, no occupational distinctions; all were Red Guards in the service of Revolution. Workers were to go villages, peasants were to be educated in the ideals of political education, jails had to be transformed into universities, students had to declass, and all these were to happen not in an isolated or exceptional way, but generally, en masse, as movement - in the form of a movement. The nation was to have no nationalism; it called for the Chairman of China to be "our Chairman". As if the distinctions that could not be eradicated from society, could be made to vanish away from the landscape of revolution. Radical subjectivity was the main mark of the movement of the time. In some sense we can say that the movement of the sixties gave birth to the political subject.

6. In the course of the upsurge issues of property relations were raised directly. The land question became the most important issue in the radicalisation of the movement. Likewise in factories workers led councils and solidarity platforms became a dynamic idea. Autonomy of the mass movements became the guiding principle.

7. Questions asked on the streets in the Sixties were those that in ordinary political history require decades, at times centuries of thinking, to emerge as questions, namely, what does it mean to act in the name of freedom, what does it mean to act politically, what does it require to act for social transformation? The extremely contentious politics of the time forced the people, in particular the street fighters, to ask the rulers: Who are you to rule? What are our roles then? Who is the ruler and who is the subject? In short, the issue of the political subject emerged directly under specific conditions cutting many philosophical-ideological knots. Political necessities led to new thinking, political subject hood became a

practical question of society. This was a great transition, whose significance unfortunately is still not fully understood by social theorists and political thinkers in India. These questions did not present theories (except in extremely distorted way in party doctrines and programme of the Revolutionaries, which mostly echoed Chinese experience of revolution). These questions presented not theories but non-conformist "thinking", not philosophy but rebellious "thought", and not ideologies but "subjugated ideas".

8. The movement was quickly dubbed as fanatic. It is important to understand today how the emergence of the political subject was seen by established society as the fanatic's appearance, unruly, violent, and unpredictable. Who is a fanatic? Who calls the subject a fanatic? What precisely is this fanaticism? This again speaks of a situation characteristic of a popular upsurge, and that calls for deeper study and engagement. At least we can say this much: The political subject *exceeds* the standards set by the regime for permissible violence, and displays determination in the pursuit of a goal - hence its unruliness, its *fanaticism*. Fanaticism is the readiness to go to war *discontinuing* the prevailing mode of politics; it is the voice of the underground sects, it breaks the myth that politics is the product of E/enlightenment; it is unruly because it is still beyond the given formula of the time on the war/politics copula. Political subject exceeds rules of politics. In this way, the unruly subject in India not only repeatedly exceeded the overwhelming legal realities, but demonstrated by its life experience that the emergence of the political subject is fundamentally a matter of *non-correspondence* with the dominant thinking of the time. In short, if politics has to set its face at times against given legal rules and codes, and given political mode, how will it act? The inquiry is thus in one sense about the autonomy of politics: What can be the enabling or debilitating conditions affecting the autonomy of politics, of the subject that claims and gains political agency?

9. As with several other political climactic periods, the period of the Naxalite movement had a plural composition, even though it left in the minds of people and on society a singular impression of extremism, unbridled radical attitude, and youth upsurge. While these impressions were not pure myths, and even if these were myths they had elements of reality in them, the movements had the participation of peasants, students, youth, sections of lower middle classes, and workers. In this sense the popular movements of the decades of fifties and early sixties culminated in the radical upsurge of late 1960s and early 1970s. However it will be important to see how these sectional participations played out in the upsurge as a whole, how specific class participations varied, and how the workers movements, particularly the Great Railway Strike of 1974, was the moment of climax. After

that came the imposition of the Emergency bringing the curtains down on the decade of the upsurge, though in Bihar and Andhra Pradesh the radicalisation of the movement continued, and the movement spread there. Thus, what kind of generality was produced, and with what limits built in the general upsurge?

Legacy

10. This takes us to the issue of legacy – political, organisational, and ideological. Whenever we invoke the memory of the sixties of the last century, we may ask: Can we compare this with other epochs of radical upsurges – in India in the 1940s, elsewhere in Europe in the 1960s, or more classically in the European revolutions in the 1840s? We have to explore some of these questions in order to understand more comprehensively the historical significance of the upsurge of the Sixties. How did Marx for instance view the European revolutions in 1848? With the defeat of the upsurge, imposition of the National Emergency in 1975, and mainstream politics swinging back to parliamentary mode, did the following epoch usher in an age of passive revolution? What general lessons does this carry for a chronicle of popular movements and popular politics?

11. From the point of legacy, we can ask one more question: If the years of the mid-sixties carried the imprint of a crisis, was it also not a crisis of the radical form, crisis of the transcendent nature of popular protests that were to culminate in an upsurge? The crisis of organisation, decimation of cadres and leaders, the vanishing or the indefinable point of retreat, the decline of plurality, doctrinaire despotism, and multiple splits – all these raise the question: Was this the fate of the movement? Why and how was the source of popular protests and revolt exhausted in the process of radicalisation and organisational transformation? Why did the fountain dry up? Yet, while we may ask these questions now, there is no escape from the fact that the entire movement notwithstanding its diversity was finally framed (or shackled if you like) in the organisational form of a party, which while carrying the mantle of the revolt, did everything required to destroy the spontaneity, multiplicity, and diversity of the movement and the participants. What dialectical irony lay in this?

12. While radical theory tells us of the dialectics of constituent power and the constituted power (thus the power of movement as the symbol of the former and the power of the party of the ML as the symbol of the latter), one of the great questions, counter-factual much as it may appear, will be concerning the political-organisational strategy of the time. The upsurge of the sixties and early seventies had many paradoxes: spread of the movement in the country

and limited epicentres, autonomy of the movement and the desire of the leaders to centralise, dominance of urban youth activism and the centrality of the peasant question, spontaneous participation of various organisations, associations, and forums in the movement and withdrawal from all existing institutions (such as elections, trade unions, etc.) in order to be pure revolutionaries, brutal pacification methods of the state and the primitive modes of the rebels, international fervour of the time and the extremely local engagement of the revolutionaries, reliance on China for ideological-theoretical guidance and the overwhelming national specificities of India that had given birth to the movement, and finally the lower class basis of participation in the movement and the middle class doctrinaire leadership. What political organisational strategy in place of the one that had focused so much on Mao's ideas (commonly known in those days as Mao Tse Tung's Thoughts or today as Maoism) could have coped with these paradoxes and taken popular struggles as the basis of going forward for social transformation? What kind of federalisation of radical politics was the call of the hour? Perhaps a new history of Indian radicalism will one day provide us with a possible answer.

Political-Organisational Line

13. Readers will notice that while at the outset this note promised to eschew questions of Naxalite political line, political strategy, etc., and stick to the theme of popular context, yet it has ended with facing precisely those issues. The line between popular protest and radical-revolutionary movement is porous. The years of 1966-74 proved that historically it is difficult to keep the two categories – the popular and the revolutionary – separate, though we may and perhaps need to make analytic distinction. One important question therefore may be raised: How important or influential were the inner party struggles in the Indian Communist Party (think of the CPI split in 1964 or the Burdwan Plenum of the CPI-M in 1968) in the developing popular upsurge of the time? At one level we may say that intellectual struggles reflect in a particular way the ongoing class struggles. Yet, if this statement is not to become a banal declaration, we have to enquire the historical connections between the inner party political debates and the ongoing popular movements of the time, the ongoing struggles against the Congress government at the Centre and the states at that time, the particular nature of the peasant movements and the workers' movement, and their relation with the political formulations of the party, and more fundamentally the question: what was the relation between the popular upsurge at that time and the particular political formulations by the CPI-ML (for instance, India was semi-colonial and semi-feudal, the city has to be

surrounded by the countryside, peasant revolution's centrality in a revolutionary strategy, etc., etc.) that aspired to lead the people? If we compare this epoch with that of 1946-50, we can see striking similarities. Then too people were in revolt, and then too, the revolutionaries wanted a universal line/model that could help Indian transformation. And as we know the revolutionaries had failed, with the popular upsurge finally stymied by the parliamentary framework of rule. This time Chinese experiences and Mao's teachings were to provide the universal framework. And this time too, the revolutionaries failed with the popular upsurge finally stymied by the parliamentary framework of rule. What is this bind of universality that has repeatedly inspired only to fail the cause of social transformation?

14. Perhaps we need to review the history of popular politics, popular upsurge, and the revolt in the sixties and seventies of the last century in the way Marx repeatedly went back to the history of 1848 or the way Lenin repeatedly drew the link between the developing unrest of the Russian society of his time and the work of the Bolsheviks. This calls for a greater dialectical understanding of the relation between autonomy of popular movement and popular unrest and the political-organisational strategy of the party of the upsurge.