

To Judge, but How to Judge?

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A truth that is usually left unsaid in discussions of the acts of revolutionary groups is that the activists and leaders who indulge in allegedly anarchic acts at the cost of the people are themselves from the people, are part of the people, and they share the cost with their people.

TWO decades after the 'Spring Thunder'¹ the CPI(ML) movement is today the target of—aside from physical attacks by the state—a virulent campaign in the press and among articulate public. It is a campaign of silence as well as of words. It is a campaign of silence in that it keeps silent until what it projects as 'significant events' happen. And then it becomes a campaign of words. The significance of an event is defined in a way that suits the campaign; the only significant happenings in the history of the CPI(ML) are acts of violence—a killing by them or of them. Thus a major sphere of their activity, which is the organisation of the masses for struggle and the politicisation of the masses, is blacked out. The acts of violence—given or taken—are then decked out in bright print and a 'discourse' is built around them. Rather, a range of discourses are built around them. They stretch all the way from loaded reporting by motivated journalists to the estranged pedantry of academics and intellectuals. And naturally, not content with defining significance with malice aforethought, the campaign chooses its facts equally tendenciously.

The result is a characterisation that has by now become familiar. The CPI(ML) groups consist of mindless extremists—bandits, desperados, terrorists, are words used in recent times by influential journalists—who are driven by a ruthless determination to capture power at all costs. To this end they scheme and plan like killing machines, and are ready to sacrifice the lives and limbs of innocent masses on any scale. To settle a petty score they will commit a murder, even when they know it will result in terrible repression of the people. To save their own lives and liberty they will put innocent people in severe danger. Worse still, they are petty-minded, jealous and morally corrupt, like any group of dacoits. Their organisations split because of personal rivalries and power-mongering of the leaders, and even because of quarrels over the sharing of funds.

Everytime an act of violence puts the naxalites in the news, this image—without prejudice to its irrelevance—is put out in the press, both the daily press and the illustrated periodicals. And then the rights and wrongs of the act or its consequences

are discussed in terms of this image. The hapless minority that tries to defend them also does so in terms of the same image for they are often victims of the same selective information and hostile conceptualisation that sets the terms of the discussion.

This is not the whole picture, of course. No discourse can be so unreal. So two things are admitted. One is that the people have problems. Indeed, copious tears are shed over the problems. The 'language press', in particular, publishes gory reports on the exploitation of tribals and labourers, reports that are usually besides the point: they write of land alienation where there is no land to get alienated, and of shifting cultivation where the tribals have given up any kind of cultivation at all and have become pickers of forest produce. Anyway, since those who read the reports do not know the facts and those who know the facts mostly do not read the papers, these heart-wringing accounts serve the purpose of satisfying those who insist on knowing what 'objective conditions' have given rise to naxalism in the first place. Second, it is also admitted that the naxalites do seek justice for the poor in the manner of a Robin Hood. They are supposed to punish the evil people and set things right for the poor. They are also granted other attributes like self-denial and sacrifice, which are not held in high esteem these days anyway. With these two admissions, the paradigm is complete: oppressed and exploited people, a band of Robin Hood style saviour-bandits, and their ruthless acts of revenge and redemption. Then one discusses each incident in terms of this paradigm: one is either for or against annihilation of class enemies, for or against ransoming IAS officers, for or against killing all Rajputs, and generally speaking for or against armed saviours in olive green uniforms. Serious political observers—whether sympathetic or critical—understandably feel frustrated at being forced into this unreal discourse.

To set the terms of the discourse right, it is necessary to restore all that this paradigm has blacked out. Some of the IAS officers who were kidnapped recently in East Godavari district confessed to a feeling of surprise that the alleged desperados had a detailed knowledge of

the tribals' problems, village by village, and that they had an excellent system of communication stretching from the interior of the forest of the inhabited villages. The surprise is understandable for in the image they had been given the naxalites exist only from 'annihilation' to 'encounter'. A major falsehood of the dominant paradigm is that it refuses to accept that the people and their problems are not just the 'objective basis' of the revolutionaries but also their *subjective* basis. This omission is crucial for the polemical intent of the paradigm: the revolutionaries 'use' the people and their problems for their own ends. One is therefore asked to discuss the morality of that strategy and the morality of all the actions it entails. The subjective essence of revolutionary politics is estranged and converted into an objective basis lying outside it, and the husk that remains is thereby represented as an alien imposition, a hostile importation, that 'uses' the people, makes sacrificial goats of them for its own ends, and leaves them in lurch in moments of crisis.

The masses are both the physical subject and the historical subject of the revolution. A truth that is usually left unsaid in reporting and discussing the acts of revolutionary groups is that the activists and leaders who allegedly 'use' the people, who indulge in allegedly anarchic acts at the cost of the people, are themselves from the people, are part of the people, and they share the cost with their people. They are the children of the poor, who did not learn Mao Zedong Thought in a university campus, but in the course of their struggle for a decent life. Most of them first rebelled spontaneously against the injustice they experienced in their lives, against the obscene exploitation their kith and kin were subjected to; it was only in the course of this rebellion that they learnt that there are some people popularly known as naxalites who will help their struggles; and it is usually much later that they understand and accept the idea of a revolution and become part of it. In the photographs published in the press, the members of the underground squads are seen dressed in khaki or olive green, carrying country-made weapons with a ridiculous air of self-assurance. The publication of such photographs serves the purpose of the reporting very well: the image they convey is so alien that it summarises the whole paradigm with no need of further elaboration. And then when you hear later that one of them has been killed in an 'encounter' by the police you are struck by the mindless futility of the whole thing. If you further hear that in the search for these desperados the police have burnt down tribal villages, you even get angry, not so much with the police as

with the revolutionaries, for having put these innocent tribals to so much trouble. Unless someone tells you that some of these desperados are tribals from the very same villages and the others are as nearly so as makes no difference, you are likely to get righteous fit to burst.

But of course if we see the people as only the physical subject of the revolution we are likely to get stuck in a sentimental quagmire: the oppressed organising and fighting for their revolution cannot make mistakes. That they can make mistakes should be obvious enough. It is in the nature of things that they will probably do more things wrong than right. Moreover, the oppressed are not only the physical but also the *historical* subject of the revolution, and that revolution belongs to all of us. We therefore have the right and even the duty to criticise and question. But the framework of the questioning must arise from a fidelity to the same history, and not from any of the extraneous considerations that are determining the criticism today. It must be a framework dictated by the promises made to

history and the possibility of their realisation, which is something radically different from the paradigm that is placed before us by the dominant ideology, and which is unsuspectingly accepted by many people who should know better. The framework must in the first place be informed by experience or at least knowledge of many things which are not even conceived of by our prejudices and pedantic learning. Very few of those who presume to teach the revolutionary groups what to do and what not to do have any real knowledge of the way the oppressed classes relate to organisations, to organised movements, to protracted struggles and to repression. Nor of the correct strategy and tactics for *capturing state power*—as distinct from 'doing grassroots work among the unorganised poor—in a country of India's peculiarities. And the air of superiority we assume prevents us from acquiring knowledge—let alone experience—of these things. Perhaps, if we do, that will make no difference to the nature and quality of our judgments, but an ill-formed judgment based on a false framework is wrong even when it is right.

jectivity, was discussed.

The key issue to emerge at the symposium was that of grasping the view of the subjects under study or the subject's viewpoint. A fieldworker prepares himself or herself in a professional academic environment, with certain concepts and categories of thought before entering the field and encountering an 'other' culture. Quite frequently, the fieldworker is not familiar with the language spoken by the subjects under study. How, then, does one acquaint oneself with a different society and meaning-laden culture? Savyasaachi emphasised in his paper the process of unlearning as a necessary accompaniment to the process of learning anew during his initial encounter with the Bastar tribals. Several papers suggested the inevitability of unlearning as involvement with the subject grew. It is the subjective involvement of the fieldworker which prepares the ground for understanding other cultures. But the need for involvement also generates tensions as suggested by Malavika Karlekar in her paper. Such a tension forced her to change her field situation. Moreover, the degree and nature of subjective involvement of the fieldworker varies. It is only in rare instances that a fieldworker has 'gone native'.

What emerged from the discussion was that the involvement of a fieldworker was not a new discovery or a recent practice. Earlier a fieldworker tried to demonstrate objectivity in the field by denying his or her subjectivity through certain modes of writing and presentation. This can be seen clearly in Malinowski's conflicting views evident in the earlier formal texts and later in his personal diary. Such differences certainly call for an explanation regarding text-construction. Now an increasing number of fieldworkers attempt to lay bare their subjectivity which necessitates experimenting with new styles of writing and presentation. It requires decompartmentalisation of the fieldwork experience into 'data-collection' and 'personal experience' as pointed out by Vinod Jairath in his paper. He stated his dilemma in centrifuging theory-guided data in the construction of text from his intensely personal experiences in a Thakur-dominated, crime infested village of Hardoi district in Uttar Pradesh. Understanding based on his personal experiences was a better representation of the 'exploitative' relationships as seen by the subjects of the study and therefore required a reconstruction of the earlier text.

Several problems emerged in relation to understanding and presenting the subject's point of view. Firstly, do the subjects speak with one voice, representing a structured view of a group or a community as a whole? Secondly, should the fieldworker accept the subjects' voices as authentic

Nature and Significance of Subjectivity in Fieldwork

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Understanding the subject's point of view has emerged as an important concern in the human sciences. A report on a symposium on the nature and significance of subjectivity in fieldwork.

THE problem of subjectivity in the human sciences is an old one but it has acquired a new significance in the present context. Firstly, we have seen the increasing failure of some paradigms which have asserted their dominance in the name of objectivity and scientificity. Such paradigms had denied their own cultural-historical specificity and forced an alien view of other cultures. Consciousness of this problem has brought 'meaning' once again to the fore in sociological analysis. Understanding the subject's point of view has emerged as an important concern. Thirdly, we find a mounting challenge to the assumption of a built-in *order* in social reality which needs to be discovered. It is now asserted that it is the sociologist or social anthropologist who *constructs* a certain picture of social reality. On the other hand, deviations from 'ordered' reality are not ignored as trivia but considered seriously for understanding and explanation. And, finally, observation and listening in the field are seen as partisan and partial processes, implying involve-

ment and commitment.

These concerns have brought the problem of subjectivity from the philosopher's desk to the sociologist's fieldwork. In order to ascertain the nature and significance of subjectivity in fieldwork, a symposium was organised at the Department of Sociology, Delhi University, under its Centre of Advanced Study programme on September 11-12, 1987. Seven papers concerned with different aspects of the problem of subjectivity were presented and discussed. (A list of the authors and titles of papers is given at the end.)

The problem of subjectivity in fieldwork was discussed at two levels. First, at the experiential level, most of the papers attempted to lay bare the ways and manner in which subjectivity was encountered and presented problems and challenges in the process of conducting fieldwork and later construction of the professional text. Secondly, the theoretical question of the possibilities of a reconstruction of the observer-observed relationship, which incorporated rather than eliminated sub-