

'Naxalism' Today : Continuing Revolution

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Never before in the history of Indian social movement political optimists from all walks of life reacted so sharply as they did during the naxalite upsurge of the late 1960s. Not that Indians did not witness mutinies in the past. They did. Indian history is full of heroic tales of mass violence. What made the naxalite defiance, rather armed defiance, against the system different from previous rebellions was its uniqueness in ideological break with the reformist idea of social change. Soviet Socialism and orthodoxy might once have offered shelter for radicals but not anymore. They had by then been absorbed into revisionist quagmire which far from being the anti-thesis of status quo-ism turned out to be its horrific twin—a refined reformism of the left.

The arrival of naxalism as an alternative ideological discourse in India's political atmosphere otherwise static, was so loud that red China under Mao dubbed it 'Spring Thunder' over Darjeeling. For the first time the voiceless in the society began to think they could assert themselves in their own way while the majority of middle class people despite their class limitation consciously and sometimes emotionally developed a tendency to identify their interests, rather vociferously with the have-nots against the powers that be. And in so doing they suffered immensely when the movement retreated in the face of massive state repression and virtually became directionless in the middle.

The impact of naxalite movement on Indian society otherwise plagued by too many obnoxious social and religious prejudices and glaring economic disparity as a British national Mary Taylor who came all the way from London to participate in the Indian revolution and finally got arrested in the jungle of Jadugoda, now in Jharkhand, was literally stunned to see how bank employees, notwithstanding their assured berth in social mobility, were deeply debating the possibility of agrarian revolution as a strategy to liberate vast masses of rural India from age-old social and economic oppression.

If anything the naxalite movement despite its drawbacks contributed positively in building a new consciousness among the under-privileged towards the concept of 'Right to Life'. How the movement got splintered and failed to articulate itself in the wake of mass alienation after initial success is altogether a different story and deserves critical assessment, albeit it is about four decades old now.

About 40 years later the political movement that once inspired a generation of youths, has lost much of its shine and original ideological orientation. The rise and decline of a much talked about movement during this period is not without its profound influence on the society. It has affected the contemporary social milieu positively and negatively as well. Even its bitter critics cannot deny it. It is

not that easy to kill an idea so long as it serves the cause of social change even in a limited way. Nor is it possible for the ruling establishment to pacify the aggrieved simply by offering empty rhetorics and engineering manipulations for long.

The initial phase of naxalite movement created an illusion that basic social change through violent revolution with its centre of gravity in rural India was imminent which however proved wrong in no time. The crisis, rather the crisis of identity began in the very 1970s which was declared as the decade of liberation which it was not. So did alienation from the vocal middle class that in the first place galvanised the imagination of the educated youth though Indian Revolution in the naxalite framework was essentially projected as a peasant revolution.

Despite their shortcomings and some dogmatic mistakes the naxalites for the first time brought in a prototype of a Chinese model of social revolution before the Indian masses, somewhat mechanically though, and had to suffer enormously because of blind imitation they pursued, without attaching much importance to the prevailing Indian reality. Their attempts to impose Chinese authority on India's on-going liberation struggle and communist tendencies owing allegiance to too many communist revolutionary groups became counter-productive in terms of mass following and ideological advancement.

True, the naxalite movement got international support because the Chinese communists intervened with all their propaganda might. But this was very short-lived. The Chinese withdrew their support at an opportune moment to further their national and geo-strategic interests finessing more ideological confusions than removing them. All their tall talk about proletarian internationalism and revolutionary solidarity vanished in the thin air to pave the way for crass nationalism, rather narrow bourgeois nationalism. It is now clear that the Chinese so enthusiastically supported the naxalites to create irritants in India's political circles in view of the India-China border dispute for which official communists did not go the whole hog alongwith the Chinese.

That the Chinese communists are nationalist and sectarian to the core may be a disputed matter but what cannot be disputed is their rank opportunism in not extending solidarity support to communist revolutionaries fighting for the cause of the oppressed. In some cases they sided with the reactionaries and authoritarian forces against the revolutionaries, to promote their business deals. It happened in case of Sri Lanka. While Janata Vimukti Perunam activists were butchered by the Sri Lankan army to quell the abortive uprising the Chinese government was reportedly selling cement to the Sri Lankan government without bothering about the genocide. True, their ideological position was Trotskyist but that was immaterial at the time of genocide. The late Samar Sen, founder-editor of *Frontier*, otherwise a staunch pro-Chinese progressive, was so shocked that he wrote a strong editorial on it, criticising the Chinese communists, much to the surprise of many a reader. The naxalite movement could have saved itself, at least partially, from left sectarianism and adventurism had not the Chinese intervened politically and ideologically. Once they helped the Naga insurgency against New

Delhi with the same objective of deriving extra mileage from the India-China border issue. There was no revolutionary business in it. The real business was about real estate. After all the Naga insurgency in those days was not led by any communist—or for that matter marxist outfit.

Whether ruling elites, right and left alike, admit it or not, rural India, rather backward India, affected by the naxalite campaign of social revolution, cannot be the same again, notwithstanding their failure in maintaining a consistent and unified approach to Indian revolution, long overdue. In terms of social mobility feudal infrastructures including Manu's eternal curse—casteism—and semi-feudal mode of production in some parts of the country crumbled because of the naxalite affirmative action, making the worshippers of the status quo-ism visibly perturbed. In a way the advent of commercial agriculture and agri-business was hastened after the naxalite movement succeeded in forcefully raising the issue of land reforms and agrarian revolution. With the naxalite phenomenon not subsiding despite massive state repression the ruling authorities had to refurbish their approach to the land question by initiating some cosmetic changes in land tenure system and ceiling laws. Besides Gandhian reformism in the form of comprehensive area development, bhoodan etc. official communists in Bengal launched 'Operation Barga' with a view to blunting the edge of naxalite movement. Frankly speaking, the communist left in Bengal was able to curb naxalite influence in some areas through their 'Operation Barga' action programme, expanding their vote base. For all practical purposes 'Operation Barga' has been shelved. Nor is there much scope to expand its ambit further. All are now busy to pacify the aggrieved in rural India through poverty alleviation schemes, mid-day meals in schools, pulse polio immunisation programme etc. Political parties, ruling and opposition as well, are benefiting from them, NGOs are gaining through such exercises. How far they have succeeded to thwart Naxalite appeal through such moves is open to question. But the issue of land and violence raised by different naxalite groups at the initial stage and these days, more specifically by the maoists, the CPI (Maoist) and other maoist formations, remains unsolved. Eviction continues. Not by landlords! But by industrialists and governments, all in the name of industrialisation and development. Acquisition of land by the authorities has added a new dimension to the land question though it does hardly get proper attention that it deserves on the maoist (or naxalite) agenda.

Given the naxalite resurgence, there is one puzzle that baffles orthodox marxist ideologues. Despite continuing hassle over the strategy and tactical line in the Indian context, the maoist (or naxalite) movement, the non-parliamentary segment to be precise, has managed to spread horizontally at least in a couple of years from 76 districts in nine provinces to 118 districts in 12 states. A recent report on 'naxalite violence' suggests that the law enforcing authorities have effectively lost control in nearly 20 percent of the country's 584 districts. This official estimate may have some flaws but it illustrates among other things that the administration and people who run multi-layered law and order machinery

and administrative set ups, cannot dismiss naxalism as they used to do, as regional aberration.

Right now the movement is broadly divided into two opposing camps in regard to participation in bourgeois parliament as it is in India. The pro-parliament stream seems to be stagnating because of its failure to offer anything new by way of departure from the official left. They are trying to develop the same vote bank politics while evading the basic issues for which they originally stood. The net result is negative. People even in left-ruled states feel less enthusiastic in abandoning their electoral allegiance to the established left. If parliament remains the principal source of empowerment then there is no point in searching for an alternative! Corruption alone cannot make all the difference in moulding public opinion. Whether the far left is a better parliamentary alternative is anybody's guess.

All things considered, the prospects of the far left that continues to adhere to the orthodox maoist idea of violent overthrow of the ruling system do not look that bright. They still live in the age of Yenan. The selective armed onslaught against the state apparatus which seems to be their main action programme at this stage is no answer to the unfinished Indian revolution.

Each country has its own peculiarities and compulsions as well to chalk out the path of revolution. Vietnam didn't really copy the Chinese model to oust American imperialism. Nor did non-marxist Iranian revolution against the notorious Shah and his protector America follow any classical formula. Religion played its part but broad masses were mobilised against American imperial power and its local cohorts to change the dictatorial regime. It is unlikely for India to go the Chinese or for that matter Cuban way, particularly at a time when communications networking and weaponisation is not that poor and backward as it was in the 1920s of China.

Maoist armed campaign in certain areas of the country seem to have reached a stage of stalemate, at least militarily. Right now para-military units are confronting armed guerilla squads. But that does not mean guerilla warfare will be transformed into mobile warfare anytime soon. It is a Utopia. But sometimes Utopia sells. Despite limited success in tactical manoeuvring in areas mainly inhabited by weaker sections and tribals this Maoist project is likely to get bogged down in a mess unless it is backed by a proper mass strategy. Their military success at the paramilitary level is sometimes overrated as a ploy to create public opinion in favour of regular army deployment as it has happened in J&K and North East. Also, these naxalites or maoists lack vision as to how to fight global capital in the changed context. "Foreigners have invested in more than 1000 Indian companies—a record for any country outside the United States." Not for nothing 'over 125 Fortune 500 firms now have R&D bases in India'. There is no concrete action plan on the part of the maoist left to face this situation. The problem is that the future may not play out as predicted by the naxalites (or maoists), borrowing their ideas mainly from pre-revolution China.

Organised sector workers are not with the naxalites. Nor do they try to tap the vast potential of unorganised sector labour force. Incidentally unorganised sector workers are mainly drawn from the 'backward' class people—the chief constituency of maoist insurgency, if it can be so called.

Legalism is one thing but to negate legal activities completely as revisionist seems to have created a situation in which they find it increasingly difficult to develop a broad-based united front with a lot of flexibility. 40 years on and yet they have very little impact on urban workers. If they think people under the sway of different rightist ideologies will automatically subscribe to their Yanan formula of encircling towns from villages, they can at best deceive themselves at their own peril. In a way they are still in a dilemma as to how to coordinate overt and covert activities.

Maoist Movement as it is unfolding in different states of the country is at a crossroads. Political stalemate it has been in needs an ideological breakthrough for further push without which the crisis of identity will continue for years to come. With no international communist centre in its true sense, naxalite (or maoist) movement can redefine itself only by avoiding strategic mistakes it committed in the past while stressing, more national peculiarities, not European and Chinese ones. The idea of protracted people's war and its multi-faceted ramifications is still a less explained term to the vast majority of Indians.

Insurgency can develop and sustain itself without maoism as it is going on for decades in the North east and Kashmir. The point at issue is how to translate positive impact the naxalites exert on the society, into a lasting living reality for the deprived and underprivileged.

For one thing maosits—or naxalites of different shades—cannot be ignored and dismissed as nonentities, despite their political weakness. Given the radical shift in geo-political power equation, many things are likely to change in more places in the next 10 years than in the previous 10 decades. And India is very much in the orbit of this changing world. The naxalites can influence the society in a positive way only by recognising the changing reality and adjusting their programme to confront that reality. *☞☞☞*