

NAXALITES AND NAPM

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*[Naxalites and NAPM (national alliance of peoples movements) activists cover the largest number of poor people in their struggle in India. There are other groups of activists and individuals too. The common thread among them is that they share a constituency of tribals, dalits and other poor people, be they victims of development displacement or of exploitation and oppression. Another common factor is that all parliamentary parties avoid or oppose them and none supports them. The big difference among them is that the Naxalites have a people's army and are ready to use counter-violence as a method of struggle, whereas the others use relatively peaceful methods of protest, such as marches, stay-ins, courts, civil rights movements and so on. While they are all struggling **against** the enemy on specific issues they do not have any programme to fight **for**. Thus all of them lack a vision for future, a vision of the kind of society they want. There is practically no dialogue among them except some limited contacts at a local level. It is felt that there is strong need for a dialogue among them and that it could begin around the issue of a vision for future. To ensure a smooth conduct of such a dialogue, the Quaker method is suggested, which implies that all are agreed to seek the 'truth', that everyone has access to an aspect of it and that mutual respect, equality and freedom to express will help arrive at it as closely as possible.]*

Obviously naxalites and NAPM (National Alliance of Peoples' Movements) activists are not the only activists working for the poor people. However they comprise the largest such coalitions.

Naxalites, who started as a breakaway Maoist group of the communist movement in 1967, today have grown, in the form of CPI (Maoist), into a formidable people's army of 12,000 armed cadres, spread over 170 districts, comprising a population of nearly 100 million and covering nearly 25% of land area in the country. They mainly deal with issues of exploitation (wages and union rights of miners, agricultural labour, forced labour, land to tiller, wages of forest workers) and social oppression (insults, forced labour, dress code, use of separate tea cups in hotels, insults to poor women including rape and so on). They also deal with armed attacks of police, landlord's armies and state-sponsored anti-naxalite organisations.

NAPM grew around Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) and today encompasses various such movements all over India. They organise mainly the victims of so-called Development, the displaced persons from development projects, who have lost their sources of livelihood-land and forest- and have become destitute or on the verge of becoming so. Before NBA, there were other important movements like *Chipko* and *Koel Karo*.

Among other groups, *Vahini*, an offshoot of the JP Movement, has its own network of such movements. It is called National Co-ordination of Democratic Forces, composed of 21 organisations in 13 states of north and central India. *Vahini* is mainly organising development oustees. More recently they have been active against the Jharkhand government selling mining leases to the steel giants. Christian groups have been active locally, mainly with tribals, collaborating with other tribal groups. Dalit groups, (including dalit Muslim groups) by and large work in isolation, with their own communities, suspecting all others as tainted by Brahminism. They have also produced significant literature. Specific women's groups and large number of fringe groups and individuals in many anti-authoritarian religious groups also have been acting meaningfully with the poor people.

There are very few NGOs left who do 'constructive programmes'. Most of them are funder-driven and are doing advocacy work. However some good work has been done around environment and livelihood issues and organic farming for the poor. Some Gandhians and subsistence anarchists have also done good work with poor with

voluntary simplicity. While their achievements are not significant they are contributing to a possible vision of the future, which is based on low consumption of earth's resources.

The common thing among all the above is that they have the same constituency, that of the poor which constitutes about 30% of India's population. The other important thing is that none of the parliamentary parties support them and many actively oppose them. The State and these parties are openly opposed to poor people's movement since the mid-1980s, specifically starting from the Bhopal Gas episode where none of these parties came to help the citizens of Bhopal. They all support 'development policies' that amount to genocide of a section of the poor, immense suffering to rest of them and lead to ecological disaster.

DIFFERENCES

1. Naxalite groups are prepared to use counter-violence, have an aim of overthrowing the State, are illegal in many parts of the country and live among the poor people as "fish in water".
2. NAPM and others do not use counter-violence as a rule, have a critique of development, and work with development oustees. Their lifestyle is middle class, with 'church mission compound' or 'campus' culture i.e. keeping a distance from the poor people. However many of them practise voluntary simplicity.

LACK OF VISION

All these organisations are fighting against something (NAPM—against development devastation, Naxalites—against exploitation and oppression, against capitalism and imperialism), but they are not fighting for something. They do not have a vision of what a future society should look like. This lack of a positive cause is a principal weakness of the movement. It leads to a lack of moral energy, on the one hand, and, on the other, lack of support of 'sympathisers', people who share their vision but are unable to participate. This also leads to a lack of support from middle class people, media and even from sections of critical upper class, all of which is crucial for making any movement broad-based success.

Compare this to earlier times in the twentieth century. For India, during the first half of the century there was the independence movement with various visions of free India. Then in the late 1960s with fall of the Congress monolith, various parliamentary and non-parliamentary alternatives emerged that gave rise to several social movements. Today all the parliamentary parties appear corrupt, nakedly opposed to the poor people, totally selling out to imperialist forces in the form of liberalisation, privatisation, globalisation and defense deals with the USA. On the other hand, China taking the road to capitalism in the 1980s and fall of the Soviet Union in the 1990s has robbed the left of its vision of the future. Thus while the Maoists are gaining due to the fact that they are serving the poor in their dire situation, a lack of vision is not allowing a general enthusiasm for a revolutionary alternative to grow. A small exception to this scene is Gandhian and anarchist groups who believe and practise for a future based on low-tech option.

The lack of hope in future is not limited to just these groups. The entire society is suffering from this malaise. The ruling class tells people that There Is No Alternative (TINA). Actually what they are saying that There Is No Hope For You (TINHFU).

So it is not just the poor that are facing exploitation, oppression, displacement, destitution and genocide. The entire trade union movement is on the retreat for nearly two decades. Millions of people have lost jobs. Schooling, medical and transport expenses have shot up so much that much of the middle class is in debt. The rural middle classes too are in debt due to rising costs of agricultural inputs, schooling, health care and transport, on one hand and, on the other, low yields and falling prices. Some rural farmers in desperation are committing suicide. There is a general sense of giving up, a collective unconscious of no hope!

The activists too are burying their heads in the sand and are refusing to face the reality - a reality of acute crisis of capitalism and ecology. All are fighting losing battles and rejoicing in victories of little skirmishes; stopping some dam, a weapon site or getting some guilty people exposed and punished.

For the fact is that time is running out. World capitalism is going through an acute crisis and is therefore getting desperate and aggressive. It is engaging in suicidal wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and getting ready to wage war in Syria and Iran. It is promoting aggressive consumerism. In the last century it has exploited the earth's resources at such a high rate that people have now reached an ecological crisis where natural regeneration cannot replace what is being consumed. The planet earth also appears to be very near to a point where a runaway ecological crisis can occur when no corrective action will be possible. Added to this is the fact that the world population has risen six times in the last century, which by itself is capable of triggering an ecological catastrophe. In as much as there is no visible and significant corrective trend, many people believe that, people have already reached a point of no return.

NEED FOR A DIALOGUE

Given the urgency of the situation, it is high *time*, that social activists look beyond the immediate and plan for a viable future that fits the ideas they strive for. Given the fact that all these groups are working with the people and the people in turn support them it is reasonable to assume that all of them have some ideals, which are in the interest of the people. It, therefore, makes sense if they have a dialogue to arrive at a more comprehensive vision of the future that can inspire all the activists and sympathisers.

One may ask why a dialogue among these groups is more important than any other since the whole society is in crisis? One answer is that it is the greatest sufferers; the victims who often provide the energy for change. However, the more important reason is that in the present crisis these are the people who are dying first and they have the maximum skills for survival in a post-doomsday scenario.

For a dialogue to occur between different groups, some criteria should emerge. These could be:

1. Readiness to listen to others, respectfully, assuming that everyone has something from which people can learn and modify their position.
2. Readiness to look critically at their own past, pose questions raised by others and those emerging from past/present practice and try to answer them.

For instance the Naxalites have to pose:

1. Ecological concerns, saving forests and water resources along with the struggle for the exploited.

2. Is modern industry compatible with ecological concerns? Are tobacco, alcohol, large dams, and nuclear weapons compatible with ideas of socialism, peace and ecology?
3. Relationship between technology, division of labour, power and the state the problems that plagued the Soviet and the Chinese experience. What do people learn from them?
4. Role of violence in people's struggle. How to overcome its negative impact within organisations and people. The question of ends and means.
5. Stand on communalism.

Similarly NAPM has to pose questions and answer them:

1. Attitude towards the State. Why do they run to the State institutes when the State and its institutes consistently oppose them?
2. Contradictions among their constituencies. The farmers around Mandleshwar, themselves have caused an ecological havoc, much before the dam came. They oppose the dam because it will submerge their lands on which they were practising such irrational agricultural methods.
3. Pacifism and the state. Can any State be peace loving?
4. Alienation between activists and people.

Christian groups have to face similar questions as NAPM and for Roman Catholics, authoritarianism of Vatican, abortion etc. are added questions.

Dalits have to pose the question of treating all other groups as Brahminical.

These are only examples of some of the questions and it is not an exhaustive list. For the dialogue to be meaningful, social activists should be prepared to be as thorough as possible and go as deep as possible.

THE QUAKER METHOD

The Quaker Method of conducting meetings has proved very useful in political movements in recent times. Quakers' real name is *Society of Friends*. They are an antiauthoritarian Christian religious group. They do not advertise themselves or practise conversion. 'Quaker by Convincement'! In fact there are Quakers who are agnostics. Quakers can be considered as belonging to pacifist anarchist tendencies, which include the ideas of Tolstoy and Gandhi.

Quakers believe that there is divinity in every individual. This principle translated in secular terms amounts to the idea that everyone has access to some aspect of the Truth. In meetings and dialogues, it is assumed that all are searching for truth, that one should listen to others carefully and examine his own truth. The objective is not to arrive compromise, consensus or agreement, but to realise truth collectively as much as possible.

This method is not unique to Quakers. Quakers themselves observed similar methods with American (Red) Indians. Nearer home there are reports of tribals in Ghadchiorli discussing issues threadbare and reaching a decision only when everyone was clear about it and agreed to it. In recent times in anti-globalisation demonstrations all over the world groups believing in non-violence and groups believing in 'unconventional tactics' including violence learned to work together successfully. At the Seattle protest against WTO, the varied groups involved used this method to act in unison.

Even if activists learn each other, and understand their point of view and cooperate at the field level, it will be a big step forward. ✍

