

THE STATE, CAPITALISM AND (RE) BUILDING COMMUNITIES

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[The assumption in most struggles is that a welfare state is possible and that the poor have a right to benefit from it. However the state has never been good to poor people and never will be. There is some token relief given to the poor through the public-relations arm of the state, that is, the government. The function of the government is to obtain the consent of the people to be ruled by it. In recent years the government has become so corrupt that its credibility is falling. It is therefore outsourcing both the welfare and policing functions through NGOs and organisations like Salwa Judam. Today every parliamentary party has abandoned the poor and the state is going on a frenzy of 'development', at enormous cost to the poor and the environment. The pace of exploitation of nature all over the world is so high that all living beings on the earth are endangered. So there is an urgent need to act now. The programme for activists calls for disengagement with the state and capitalism, and for rebuilding of communities on the basis of a 'free association of free people'. Suggestions for both urban and rural situations are offered, as well as a brief mention of the larger issues involved.]

The relief is given by the Government. The government is the public-relations arm of the state. Its function is to get the consent of the people to be ruled by the state, through whichever political party is in power. The state itself is designed to protect 'property'- that is, the interests of the ruling class. This it does through the bureaucracy, the army, the police, the Reserve Bank and suchlike paraphernalia of the state. The consent of the people is obtained through a variety of government institutions collectively known as 'Democracy'. These include the Constitution, an 'independent' judiciary, and an executive body. Then there is an elected body called Parliament. This functions as a law-making body, a sanctioning authority to the executive and as a watchdog body (the last function is done mainly by the parliamentary opposition). The language used by all these bodies is the language of the welfare state, with the aim of obtaining the consent of the people.

This consent is first obtained by the very process of election through which people give a mandate to rule. (In a multi-party democracy the ruling party usually gets only a minority of votes!) The consent is further ensured by spending a small amount in the name of the welfare state. Of this money, the major part is spent on communications, transport, and infrastructure, which appear to benefit all. A closer scrutiny will show that all this is tilted in favour of the ruling class. For example, the railways have altogether 16 classes of tickets and the expensive classes get better benefits and are, more often than not, subsidised.

Then there are still smaller portions for health, education, rural development, poverty elimination, employment generation, rural pensions, and so on. The performance of all these is abysmally poor. It is pursued more vigorously in areas where the credibility of the state is very poor and the opposition is growing, such as the Naxalite areas. As a rule, the 'announced' amount is much bigger than the actual 'sanctioned' amount, which in turn is much bigger than the amount actually 'released' and 'spent', of which a significant amount is pocketed by the corruption circuit.

OUTSOURCING

In fact the performance of the government is so poor in this field that it is 'outsourcing' some of these functions to NGOs. The idea behind this has been that it will get good results by spending much less and that it will engage activists in 'constructive' programmes so that they do not join anti-state groups like the Naxalites. Incidentally the term Naxalite is used to label all those who are working for the poor, be they part of a Dalit group, a Gandhian group, or a Christian group.

Very soon the NGO circuit also followed the same path. Major chunks of funds spent by them went for salaries and infrastructure, and the poor again got a mere dribble. The funding pattern also changed. Advocacy began to replace direct service to the poor. Advocacy basically means to ask the state to make policies for the poor, or to ask it to implement such policies. Once again the poor did not get anything! All the funds were spent by the middle-class, English-speaking 'advocates'! Those NGOs who did not fall in line soon found their funds drying up. Some changed, some left, some joined radical groups like NAPM, and some even suffered breakdowns.

The credibility of the state is falling so much that even the 'hard' or the 'hawk' arm of the state-the police-is also outsourcing. A phenomenon like 'Salwa Judam' is an example. Similar attempts have been made in Bihar and in Andhra Pradesh.

The NGOs should realise that they are the 'dove' arm and 'Salwa Judam' is the 'hawk' arm of this "Public-Private Partnership" (PPP) exercise of the state to shore up its falling credibility. Both the 'law and order' as well as the 'socio-economic' problem of the 'Naxalite menace' are being sought to be resolved by this PPP or outsourcing exercise.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

This low level of credibility of the state has evolved over a period of time. In the fifties, in the euphoria of the early years of independence, there were many who had taken part in the independence struggle, lived among the poor, and led a voluntary simple life. When they came into the government, they did implement some pro-people policies. The Communists initially rejected the 'false' independence with the slogan 'Yeh azadijhuti hai, desh ki janata nangi bhukhi hai' ('This independence is false, the people of the country are naked and hungry'), and launched the Telengana armed struggle. However within a few years they too joined the parliamentary process and even formed the state government in Kerala in the late fifties.

After Nehru's death and the two-year drought, which followed it (and the consequent recession), the euphoria evaporated. The Naxalites, the Dalit Panthers, the NGO phenomenon, and the Congress (I) were born. Post-emergency, Indira Gandhi's 20-point programme saw a brief revival of populist welfare promises. These were completely abandoned by the nineties during P V Narsimha Rao's regime. However the process had begun much earlier, as evidenced during the Bhopal gas disaster in 1984. The biggest-ever industrial accident in the world did not bring a single parliamentary party on the side of the workers and citizens of Bhopal. Even the Left (except the SUCI) abandoned the poor and the working class! Since then, not a single people's movement- be it the

NBA, Plachimada, or displacement in Jharkhand and Orissa-evoked a positive response from the parliamentary parties.

THE SITUATION TODAY

Today all the parliamentary parties have abandoned the poor and are following the 'development' agenda. The Singur and Nandigram events dramatically reveal this pattern.

However there are a large number of movements of the poor led by a range of what one can call activists for the poor. Who are they? They are not one homogeneous group. They include Naxalites, NAPM, and a large number of groups spread all over the country. They include socialist groups, Dalit groups, Christian groups, Muslim groups, women's groups, and so on. Very often two or more of them work together.

They share one thing in common: none of the parliamentary parties support them. Their activities and ideas have a wide range. The biggest organised group is of course the Naxalites or the Maoists. They have a well-articulated ideology, an effective organisation, and thousands of trained cadres in armed struggle. They are spread over a contiguous region spanning over ten states.

A majority of the non-Naxalite groups are involved in the protest movements of displaced people due to development projects. These projects include large dams, firing ranges, polluting industries, SEZs, and so on. As a rule their struggles are 'democratic' and demand redressal from the state. The response of the state (including that of the judiciary) is to tell them to 'get lost'! In some of these movements, particularly in Eastern India, they are resisting the very implementation of certain projects and not just demanding a good rehabilitation package. Such protests invariably invoke the repressive arm of the state. In some of these cases the Naxalite and non-Naxalites groups have come closer to each other.

The limitations of these movements are many. They have many differences among them, and therefore the unity in action, whenever it happens, does not reach its full potential. Another major factor is that none of them have a clearly stated and credible vision of the future society they are trying to build. There is an urgent need for all these groups to start a dialogue and evolve a common vision.

THE URGENCY OF THE SITUATION

India seems to be going through a mad frenzy of 'development'. What it means is that the rich are consuming or burning the limited resources at a rate, which is several orders of magnitude higher than the colonial era. It seems that there is a collective unconscious which feels doomsday is round the corner, that the bubble of development is going to burst one day and one should therefore make hay while the sun shines!

And they are not wrong! With petroleum products production-peaking due within a few years (an estimated date is 2010); the economies are indeed moving towards a recession, compared to which the 1929 Great Depression pales. Without this cheap and abundant energy source, modern civilisation/capitalism will collapse!

But the response to it need not be and should not be this frenzy. For there will still be life-both human and non-human. It's more than urgent to rebuild a society around smaller levels of social organisation and simpler sustainable

technologies built around renewable resources and consuming far less energy. Those who care and who are concerned about future generations should act wisely now. This applies both to individuals and to those who are in people's movements.

If people do not act, this mad pace of development will lead the country to runaway global warming, when no one can do anything to save life on planet earth. So the time to act is NOW!

Even empirically the welfare state is crumbling all over the world. Only a few days ago the Indian state has cut down the amount of food in public distribution system by 80 per cent!

Capitalism breeds capitalist individualism and breaks down communities. What is capitalist individualism? It is the belief that one is free if one has money in one's pocket to spend as one likes. However this very money is obtained through jobs, which implies wage slavery. So at one level this freedom is mythical. At another level, historically it meant getting out of the oppressive bondage of a caste system or a patriarchal family. So it did mean freedom. Thus the growth of capitalist individualism and the breaking down of the communities are one and the same process. The democratic state also aids the process of breaking down communities through promises of a welfare state and through killing traditions of self-management of local issues.

The real freedom is to get out of wage slavery and feudal bondage. On the other hand the human species is a social species. How to combine the urge to freedom with the need to be part of a community? It cannot be done by going to the past and building the community on the basis of caste, as Gandhi tried to do. This can be done by disengaging with capital and the state and rebuilding the community on the basis of a free association of free people. What does it mean in practice and where and how does one begin?

Disengaging with the state and capital is a process that should run parallel with rebuilding the community. In fact one should begin with the process of rebuilding the community. How?

The basis is freedom and respecting other person's freedom. Respecting, loving and caring for the other is the basic principle on which a free association can be built. So people should get to know each other directly, be they poor or rich, of higher caste/class or of another. Learning to accommodate diversity will be the basis of building community.

Food, water, and shelter security is basic for human existence. Add to this health and education. One should attempt to ensure these securities to members of the community in a collective way while fully respecting each individual's freedom.

Disengaging with the state and capital is a process. One cannot hope to achieve it at one go. People should stop demanding anything from the state.

On the other hand there are services provided by the state that people use, such as the post office, transport, health and education. In this one should use a humane approach. People should relate with the personnel in a friendly way and solve the problem locally. Some of the personnel will be their neighbours and they should treat them as part of their community and not as 'them' or the 'other'.

Wherever possible, particularly in health care and education, community local self-management should be initiated.

There are two aspects of society's relation with capital: wage slavery and consuming goods produced by capital. One may not be able to cease being wage slave overnight, but one can certainly attempt to reduce the time given to it. Wage slavery and consumerism are related in a number of ways.

There is a lot of irrational consumption due to advertisements and consequent peer-group pressure. This is particularly onerous in the case of children. Both health and education are so much dominated by capitalism that they have become the biggest sources of irrational consumption and exploitation of the working people. Then there are goods produced by big business. Often they are cheaper and better packed, but contain useless or harmful goods.

In rebuilding communities, reducing irrational consumerism in a collective fashion will be a major activity. Local high-quality production through co-operatives and identifying high-quality and useful products in the market and obtaining these for the community could be some of the activities. Similarly, local self-managed health services and education facilities can also be attempted in a gradual fashion. Then there are municipal services such as water supply, drainage, roads, street lighting, waste management, and so on. It is possible to initiate self-management activities in many of these areas.

URBAN INITIATIVES

In urban community rebuilding, the important issues are children, waste disposal, urban services, and health care.

In urban areas children have lost their childhood, particularly in metropolitan situations. They are engulfed in the vicious circle of school, tuition, and consumerism promoted by TV channels and peer-group pressures. Organising children's groups, play and library at a local level is a very important activity. As far as possible, children should be encouraged to go to local schools so as to cut precious travel time. One should actively participate in the management of local schools, be they private, government, or run by local associations.

The urban situation implies separation of people from the land. The nutrients are transported away from the crops and farms where they originated, and accumulate as waste product in the cities, depleting the soil. Urban waste disposal methods thus cut at the very root of the nitrogen cycle by not allowing the biodegradable waste (the nutrients of the soil) to go back to the soil. Hence, separation of biodegradable waste at the source, and composting at an individual or community level is an absolute must. Related issues are rainwater harvesting and urban vegetable gardens. This will reduce transport costs, provide fresh food, and consume the compost produced locally. This takes care of nearly 70 percent of the waste. The remaining waste, metal, glass, plastics, etc. can go to recycling more easily and in greater quantities because it is already separated.

Waste disposal, water, electricity, public transport, and maintenance of roads are some of the major municipal services. The first need is to conserve and economise water and electricity use. In some cases, like waste disposal and water harvesting, this can be completely done at local community level. In the remaining cases, community initiative and control can considerably reduce the problem.

Urban lifestyles, pollution, and chemical addiction (narcotics, tobacco, and alcohol) have created severe health problems. Privatisation of health care, particularly corporatisation, has made it the biggest direct exploiter of the people. Paediatric and geriatric health care are particularly prone to exploitation as they involve the emotions of people. There is an urgent need to initiate community-based people's health care groups whose aims can be:

1. To move towards informed health care
2. To promote healthy lifestyles and preventive health care
3. To provide professional care service through a trained family physician.

RURAL ISSUES

The main result of invasion of capitalism pushed by the state in rural areas is the increased cash needs of the villagers for health, education and transport. This has led to commercial and chemical agriculture. This in turn has meant cash inputs for irrigation, chemical fertilisers, and pesticides. Initially this did increase production and led to further increase in rural consumerism. Soon, however, the cash income due to agriculture became less than the expenditure on inputs and other items. It led to debt traps and the worst-off had to commit suicide.

Popular response should be to tackle all these issues in a holistic manner. Many NGOs are involved in these, but a significant amount of their time and resources are wasted in engaging with funders and the state. In some cases they even carry the agenda of capitalism in new forms. For example, advocacy programmes in health care and education demand state-run programmes, and they promote organic farming for export of pesticide-free fruits and other products.

People should aim at local control, nurture, and care of natural resources. They should seek food, water, and health security on a local self-sufficient and self-managed basis. The aim of agriculture is primarily sustenance of life. Cash crops are only an aid to this for obtaining essentials like salt. As such they can only be about 15 percent of the output. All inputs to agriculture should come from land itself.

LARGER ISSUES

Both in urban and rural areas people will continually face the invasion of capital with the help of the state and sometime with the help of NGOs. These can range from the opening of a wine shop to starting polluting industries and SEZs. The general response can be: 'Not in our area'. But the specific response depends upon the size and the power of the intrusion and people's strength. The larger the intrusion, the greater will be their need to co-operate with larger people's movement around these issues. This will also be a process through which the community can join the efforts for a larger vision for society as a whole. □□