

THE POWER QUESTION

Peoples' Movements, Peoples' Power and the Left

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Although India has a long history of peoples' movements, the paradox is that most of these movements could not be translated into peoples' power. Rather, more often than not, emerging classes and political parties were successful in appropriating these movements and turned these into their support bases for legitimizing their power primarily through elections. Thus to prevent being appropriated popular movements, especially the left and radical, need to address the question of power. Of course, power is not for its own sake but for establishing the peoples' demands, their rights or simply for justice.

Popular movements have been of diverse kinds—from left-led class based movements to neo-Gandhian struggles, such as those led by Jaiprakash Narayan or Medha Patkar or caste based movements for social justice; or they could be right-wing religious mobilizations led by the VHP or BJP or national struggles for autonomy or self-determination or even revolutionary struggles. The Left's attitude towards most popular movements has been very cautious, unless they find the right mix of class and ideology they keep a distance. Thus except for the left-led popular movements in Bengal or Kerala the official Left could not come to terms with some of the major mass movements in post colonial India. Even the left-led ones are supported provided they tow the party line and are led by their own party. Thus, Maoist inspired movements are treated as enemies by the parliamentary left and vice versa. In the post-Nehru era there have been six major kinds of mass movements not led by the Left, with which the Left failed to make any connect. By the Left, more precisely various communist parties for today there is a sizeable left outside the fold of any of the communist parties and many of them support these movements actively, but they are still not comfortable with questions of ideology, class basis and the goals of these movements. They are JP's movement, movements for statehood or self determination, caste based movements for social justice, ecology based movements—the most prominent being the Narmada Bachao Andolan, the so-called new social movements like feminism or civil society activism and the more recent popular movements against displacement and land grabbing by global capital.

The Left is mostly imprisoned in its orthodoxy and as a result it is unable to link with these new stirrings, leave alone establish their hegemony and leadership. As a result increasingly political parties are appropriating these movements and the best example of such appropriation is the JP movement and the Jharkhand struggle or even the dalit and backward caste struggles and their fate under Lalu Yadav or Mayawati. The counter example is Bengal where the Left led a series of militant movements since the 1930s, which culminated in the mid 1960s, and finally the CPM led left front reaped its benefit by getting popular support to be in power for more than three and a half decades. Though Bengal has the history of one of the most militant and long drawn left led movement it could not be translated into peoples' power. Thus when the Left Front government increasingly surrendered and colluded with capitalism there was not much protest. The absence of popular protest was mainly due to the iron grip of the CPM and its frontal organizations on nearly every aspect of peoples' lives. Popular protest today is also a revolt against this iron rule of the party, which has been termed *dalatantra*. In English one might coin the word *partiarthy* to describe this phenomenon. It is only in the last few years, following attempts to grab peasant land that a strong popular movement emerged almost blowing the death knell of this government. But again this popular anger and protest is unable to transform itself into effective peoples' power at the local level, as a result it is once again open to appropriation by opposition parties and is being translated into its electoral victories.

The Narmada Bachao Andolan and the National Alliance of Peoples' Movements of course, did not translate their movements into votes and parliamentary power; but neither could they imagine and organize peoples' power at the grassroots. Thus such a powerful mass movement slowly dissipated, especially after losing the legal battle at the Supreme Court.

The Maoists have shown the best example of building peoples' power, but again it is very much a power under the tutelage of the party and under conditions of war. As a result, once they lose the war popular power too crumbles down. The experience of USSR and China have clearly shown that even after making a revolution unless the people build their autonomous organs and processes of power they would come to be ruled by a new bureaucracy entrenched in the communist party. It is the absence of peoples' power, which allows the Chinese communist party to build capitalism with hardly any public protest.

There is a fairly long, but intermittent and short lived history of peoples' power; it has taken the form of the Paris Commune, Councils and Soviets. These forms of peoples' power take two major forms, one under conditions of democracy and the other as organs of revolutionary power at war with the old state. Under conditions of democracy popular power in the long run could emerge as a counter to the existing state or as a kind of dual power - it is part of the counter hegemonic struggle of the people. The most important claim to legitimacy of this form of power is that it is democratic in every sense of the term. The difficulty of building popular power under conditions of war is that it generally curbs democracy on grounds of an emergent situation.

The crucial question in India is : are people operating under conditions of democracy (however flawed) or is India under authoritarian rule and armed struggle is the only option? There are of course parts of India where democracy has temporarily broken down, as in Kashmir or parts of Northeast India or in the Maoist corridor in middle India. But for most parts of India and for most of the time there is a considerable democratic space, which allows mass movements, public debates, criticism and relatively free elections and change of governments. That does not mean that the state is not repressive; it is and violently so. But the state is not identical with democracy; rather democracy is the counterforce to the violence of the state. If under conditions of democracy a popular struggle resorts to armed struggle, it not only invites the violence of the state but also helps legitimize it.

Though India has a long history of popular struggles, most of the time they were never converted to forms of popular power. What is urgently needed is to work out a strategy of combining mass movements with building peoples' power. The Chhatisgarh Mukti Morcha or the PCPA in its initial moments tried but could not sustain itself. Like the Soviets or the councils or the communes the *panchayats* in India could be re-imagined as organs of democratic peoples' power. Elections to panchayats do not need the kind of money and media power which parliamentary politics requires. Instead of concentrating in Delhi or the state capitals peoples' movements must fan out to the districts, blocks and villages and demand all power to the people and the panchayats. Existing panchayats have come under the tutelage of political parties. As was pointed out earlier power means nothing for its own sake so people need to work out a broad vision of justice and a concrete programme for its realization in each district and in each panchayat. Thus peoples' power at the grassroots can be built.