

## "Towards Politics of Solidarity"

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During March 18-20, the Left Forum met at Pace University under the banner "Towards Politics of Solidarity", which the organizers claimed was the moral act underpinning working class victories. Each March, the Forum gathers academicians and political workers to address a particular theme. According to the organizers, "[t]he potential for transformative struggles [today] depends on new chains of solidarity" and hence the Forum aims to "contribute to the intellectual underpinnings of new and tighter forms of world-wide solidarity upon which all successful emancipatory struggles of the future will depend". There were a number of panels pertaining to South Asia, including Sanhati's panels on Left Movements in Contemporary India. Sanhati panelists at the Forum included Gautam Navlakha, Deepankar Basu, Siddhartha Mitra, Anindya Dey, and Nandini Dhar.

Deepankar Basu, Assistant Professor of Economics at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, introduced Mr Navlakha and presented an overview of macroeconomic conditions in India. He observed that, contrary to conventional wisdom, India entered a high-growth trajectory during the period of the Fifth Plan (1974-79). The rate of growth in real gross domestic product per capita during the period of the Tenth Plan (2002-07) was 6.2%. Dr Basu inquired about the distributional aspects of this economic growth and specifically questioned whether this neoliberal economic growth led to poverty reduction and improvements in the conditions of the working class. In this vein, he noted that there has been a significant reduction in the rate of growth of employment in the organized sector along with expansion of the informal sector. Low wages and poor working conditions characterize the latter.

Such neo-liberal and capitalist growth processes are fundamentally based on stagnation and exclusion, Dr Basu argued. Commenting on the agrarian sector, he noted that most plots of land are quite small (i.e., less than one acre in size) and approximately 60% of the rural population is effectively landless. Furthermore, the shift in state policy during the neo-liberal period has induced a rise in the cost of production, the result being that the agrarian sector is less viable. On account of the precarious nature of informal employment, the rural population clings to their small plots of land and technological change is impeded. The human implications of this macro-economic structure are quite undesirable, noted Dr Basu, by reference to measures of consumption poverty. During 2004-5, over 70% of the population remained poor and economically vulnerable.

Dr Basu proceeded to introduce Mr Navlakha, who commented on the policies of the CPI (Maoist). Mr Navlakha is a member of the People's Union of Democratic Rights, an independent voice defending civil liberties and democratic rights in India. Earlier in the week, Mr Navlakha addressed distinguished scholars at an event hosted by the University of Pennsylvania's South Asia Studies Department. Sumanta Banerjee had also been invited to the University of Pennsylvania, however, the US State Department rejected his application for a visa.

Mr Navlakha observed that the CPI (Maoist) entered the Danda-karanya region in about 1980, which at that time was deprived of left movements. He observed that the Party pursued various confidence-building measures such as teaching people to boil water in order to counteract water-borne gastro-intestinal diseases, which reduced infant mortality rates drastically. The CPI(Maoist) also conducted a survey of the region and thereby learned that contractors exploited the adivasis, for example in the case of bamboo production.

Bamboo was an important input for the local paper mills. Despite its economic significance to the local community, the price had remained unchanged since 1947. Hence, a decision was taken to organize around the issue of minor forest produce, leading to an increase in the price, and a corresponding improvement in the economic condition of the local community. Such confidence-building measures were crucial in building a relationship between Party and community, according to Mr Navlakha.

Although the CPI (Maoist) did not initially interfere with the internal matters of the adivasi community, they decided to closely examine the social structure of the community in the 1990s. A small section of the community, it was discovered, controlled large tracts of land. The lower echelons of the community worked on the land of the chiefs in accordance with a form of semi-feudal obligation prior to being allowed to till their own fields; a large section of the community was forced to till land of very low quality. Accordingly, a program of land redistribution was implemented. During this process, however, it was realised that redistribution as such was insufficient. Irrigation was imperative, and there existed potential for water harvesting in the area. A modest rural banking system was started, and assistance was provided for the purchase of seeds, equipment, etc. The community also started to cooperate in times of sowing and harvesting while creating a system of work teams. Mr Navlakha noted that the question of gender relations was addressed despite the appeals of certain anthropologists that there be no interference with the social relations within the adivasi community. Rejecting the view that adivasi social relations ought to be preserved in a forested museum, an effort was launched to alleviate the burden of patriarchy and gender exploitation. Whereas women were not previously allowed to speak in meetings, for example, this practice was increasingly discouraged.

On the issue of repression and mass movements, Mr Navlakha noted that there is a strong correlation between the emergence of mass movements and repression by the Indian state. This outcome is partly determined by the fact that the colonial state was merely transferred to Indian ruling elites and colonial era practices remain intact. Indeed, during the period 1947-2011 the Indian state has pursued war against its people in all years, without exception (e.g. Telangana, Kashmir, and Punjab). Despite 15 parliaments and general elections, the population remains impoverished and the system does not wish to address the plight of those in whose name it rules.

Mr Navlakha concluded that the CPI (Maoist), despite their difficulties, are not dacoits—a popular view in certain circles. Not a single Memorandum of Understanding has been signed in regions where they are a significant force. He nevertheless expressed doubt that a left political formation can become a significant national party today, noting that India is a vast and diverse country such that in some areas capitalism thrives while in others semi-feudal conditions obtain. He accordingly expressed pleasure that India offers a variety of left political choices to the people. □□□ [courtesy : sanhati.com]