

Revolutionary Movement and “Spirit of Generalisation”

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[There are no miracles in nature or history, but every abrupt turn in history, and this applies to every revolution, presents such a wealth of content, unfolds such unexpected and specific combinations of forms of struggle and alignment of forces of the contestants, that to the lay mind there is much that must appear miraculous”. – V I Lenin]

CAN THERE BE A MAOIST movement or for that matter, a Marxist movement? Radicals have been using the phrase “Communist Movement” for a long time, but what does it signify? What is the utility of these phrases in the context of today’s people’s and working class struggles? These terms at best can help people identify particular ideological streams in that struggle. But to present them as “movements” themselves demonstrate a “sectist” tendency to extol or deprecate particular ideological currents within the larger people’s movement, separating them from class practices in which they are grounded.

There can be a Maoist current that represents a particular tenor emerging from a particular location within the working class politics. So are many other kinds of isms and the so-called “movements”—they represent diverse levels of consciousness (which include its absence too) within the working class movement.

Until and unless these “ideological” currents get located in larger class processes or struggle, their critique will falter into futile exegetics of particular historical events or documents related to them. For example, much has been talked about Maoism in terms of what Maoists have done, or what Mao said, or what happened to the Maoist “movements” in China, Cambodia and Peru. In this critique, what is missed out is the very ground that they hold—the working masses who identified with these practices and who gave new meaning to Mao’s words. By locating Maoisms in class struggle, one provides scope for their critique too—of their programmes and their particular practices.

Karl Marx, during the First International, talked about “the spirit of generalisation and revolutionary passion” that constituted revolutionary subjectivity which could actualise the possibilities inherent in the objective conditions. He visualised the role of a party or organisation, which was for Marx at that time the International Workingmen’s Association itself, in incubating this spirit. As Henri Lefebvre once said, the task of the revolutionary political party is to recognise the spontaneity and revolutionary instinct of the working masses and unite them with the theoretical knowledge of larger processes elaborated by intellectuals organically grounded in the working class praxis.⁽¹⁾ The spirit of generalisation is based on self-emancipatory practices of the working class (at all levels). It is nothing more, nor less, than recognising and vocalising the evolving revolutionary class logic through and within diverse practices grounded in various spatio-temporal locations.

The problem occurs when instead of parties being founded and refounded in this conscious process of generalisation, their institutional logic overpowers and stunts this spirit—i.e., the forms that the working class movement takes at particular space-times are frozen and “extrapolated”. Thus in place of generalisation, over-generalisation of a particular class practice takes place, leading to sectism.

However, the critique of this over-generalisation cannot be done by externalising and then rubbishing these particular class practices as simply ideological problems or deviations. In fact, this so-called ‘critical’ current too is nothing but a representation of sectarianism. By naming movements in terms of ideologies articulated in particular locations of class struggle, rather than visualising those ideologies as simply symptomatic of those locations, one homogenises and externalises those locations, thus once again distorting the spirit of generalisation. Interestingly, unlike what various brands of Marxists do nowadays (leave aside the upcoming breed of civil society intermediaries, forget them “for they know not what they do”), Marx’s assessment of the Paris Commune as a revolutionary working class upsurge was not based on the counting of number of Marxists in that struggle. Lenin notes that before the Paris uprising, Marx warned the French workers that “insurrection would be an act of desperate folly”, but when it was unavoidable,

“Did he use it ...to “take a dig” at his enemies, the Proudhonists and Blanquists who were leading the Commune? Did he begin to scold like a school mistress, and say: “I told you so, I warned you; this is what comes of your romanticism, your revolutionary ravings?” Did he preach to the Communards... the sermon of the smug philistine: “You should not have taken up arms?” No... And he has words of the highest praise for the “heroic” Paris workers led by the Proudhonists and Blanquists.”

The ideological externalisation of various political experiences of the working class is one of the most detrimental tendencies in its movement that thwarts the possibility of the emergence of revolutionary subjectivity in India today. It is not that this externalisation is done only by the critics, but more so by the admirers of the tendencies that dominate particular political experiences. Both do that by reducing the experiences particularity to either locational or ideological exclusivity. By relegating solidarity efforts to symbolic association with and external troubleshooting for the struggle going on ‘elsewhere’, the sympathisers too shirk the responsibility of politicising their own everyday life, and thus of generalising the movement.

At a critical juncture like today’s, despite a dramatic rise in local unrests throughout India, the ruling classes and the Indian state seem to be overconfident and increasingly becoming unilateral and authoritarian. It is only by constantly stereotyping the unrest, that they can delegitimise and pre-empt the efforts of revolutionary generalisation, for which the sectarian externalising / competitive tendencies within the movement itself have provided readymade vocabularies and agencies.

Now, the sense of being dispossessed is rampant among the rural poor, those who are ready to take up arms. Whatever be their identity, they come mostly under the class of

allotment-holding workers, a term that Kautsky and Lenin used to characterise the majority of the so-called “peasantry” – land in whose possession is just for reproduction of their own labour-power. Hence, rural struggles today, including against land acquisition and those led by the Maoists, are not merely against threats to their livelihood but to life itself—to the very sphere of their reproduction.

Today, rural and urban workers are increasingly getting organised, becoming conscious and militant. Under neoliberalism, their footlooseness (beyond the urban/rural divide and other identitarian boundaries) is progressively making them realise the socialised nature of their labour, while encountering capital as social power in every facet of their lives.

These are the “objective conditions” in which various “forms of struggle” are evolving. What is needed today is the urge to move beyond existentialist boundaries, of local and particular experiences, relocating them as diverse moments in the same struggle against capital. There must be a conscious realisation of “the spirit of generalisation” that can recognise the underlying unity between these forms and moments, and strategise on its revolutionary potential.

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Reference:

(1) Henri Lefebvre (1969), *The Explosion: Marxism and the French Upheaval*, Monthly Review Press (Reprinted by Aakar Books, 2009), p.38-39

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