

Patnaik is an Honourable Man

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[Following piece is in response to the article by Prabhat Patnaik circulating over on the Net]

Prabhat Patnaik has referred to all critics of the CPM as “anti-Left intellectuals”, and has also specifically referred to the letter signed by some of us (including me), I think it would not be wrong to assume that the entire article is also addressed, among thousands of others, to me (though I may be pardoned for assuming that a nacheez like me should even exist on his radar!). Since all those who had signed the statement may have their own responses to PP—and some might not legitimately wish to stoop to the level this once-saintly figure has—I must speak for myself here.

Sometime ago, former West Bengal finance minister and marxist economist Ashok Mitra had written a piece on the happenings in Nandigram. It appeared in *Ananda Bazar Patrika* and was subsequently translated into English and widely circulated. In that piece, Mitra had suggested “prominent economist and party comrade of the stature of Prabhat Patnaik is hounded” by the party leadership in Alimuddin Street. In a way, we sort of knew it; rather, we hoped it would be true. An intellectual like Prof Patnaik cannot possibly be a cog in the stalinist machine, even though he may have stepped in to sign dubious statements not so long ago. We had assumed that given the political history of stalinist Marxism with intellectuals who were maligned, denigrated, humiliated and finally put before the firing squad, Patnaik had made his ‘existential choice’ *a la* Georg Lukacs. Lukacs, one of the most brilliant philosophical minds, decided to remain in the ranks (the ‘camp of the people’, in Patnaik’s words) and become the voice of stalinism for decades thereafter. Need we recall the whole list of such people—intellectuals—who were thus repeatedly destroyed? And do we need to tell you that so far only fascism or Nazism has been able to compete with the communist record.

We naively expected this even after we knew that years ago, Patnaik and his CESP friends had celebrated the infamous August 1991 coup d’`etat in the then USSR that briefly deposed Mikhail Gorbachev. Patnaik’s recent article, doing the rounds on e-mail and list-serves is of a piece with that forgotten Patnaik. For, he describes all critics of the CPM, including the signatories of the letter as “in any case strongly anti-organized Left, especially anti-Communist (and in particular anti-CPM), belonging as they do to the erstwhile ‘socialist’ groups, to NGOs, to the ranks of Naxalite sympathizers, to the community of ‘Free Thinkers’, and to various shades of ‘populism’”.

Despite his sympathies for Patnaik (‘who is being hounded’), Ashok Mitra too has forfeited his friendship and respect. For has not Mitra too committed blasphemy by doing what PP has accused all of us of? Listen to Mitra before we proceed. He says: “Till death I would remain guilty to my conscience if I keep mum about the happenings of the last two weeks in West Bengal over Nandigram. One gets torn by pain too. Those against whom I am speaking have

been my comrades at some time. The party whose leadership they are adorning has been the centre of my dreams and works for last sixty years.”

My purpose here is not to contest the factual claims made by Prof Patnaik. Rather, I would like to examine some of his more revealing statements and theoretical propositions.

PP starts his article with a certain touching innocence: “why have these people turned against us?”, he asks. After all, he tells his party readers, “they may have been anticommunist, anti-CPM, Naxalites, NGO-ites,” “but they did make common cause with us till recently.” “Why is it suddenly so different now?” This is truly touching because it shows the make-believe world that Communists live in, where they cannot understand the elementary fact of change. It suddenly reminded me of another ‘sad’ incident narrated by Slavoj Zizek. It goes like this: In Romania, the magical spell of ‘communism’ was broken quite dramatically, says Zizek. After the demonstrations in Timisoara against the government, in order to prove that he still enjoyed popular support Ceausescu convened a mass rally in Bucharest. “The crowd started to shout at Ceausescu, who then raised his hands in a tragicomic and bewildered display of impotent paternal love, as if wanting to embrace them all.” Little did he believe that this was the beginning of his end.

To this day, there are people who believe that the collapse of socialism was an imperialist conspiracy and look back longingly at the 1991 coup as a last ray of hope that vanished, thanks to the CIA!

Interestingly, one of the characteristics of the stalinist method is deployed by Patnaik to brilliant effect. It should be underlined here : After asking why is it that ‘even’ somewhat sensible people (if they made common cause with you at some point, they must be at least partly sensible) have turned against us, you do not ask what ordinary mortals might. You do not ask, “did we do something wrong?” After all what have we done to lose the trust of our own supporters? There are communist, indeed former CPM supporters also among those who are today criticizing us. That is foreign to the stalinist mind. On the contrary, you ask : what is it with them that they have turned against us? Something must be cooking? Have they been bribed by Satan? Has Imperialism been upto some tricks? Surely some Conspiracy must be underway....

But just to set the record straight for PP and his followers. Yes, we did make common cause with your party. We made every attempt in every possible way to stay together and work on issues of common concern. At every stage people had to deal with the antics of your partisan activists who believed that they had the contract or better, the Divine Right of being the Vanguard of History, who therefore believed that for this reason nothing should happen except under their leadership.

There was this huge joint demonstration in Bangalore a couple of years ago, where participants discovered to their horror, on reaching the maidan, that the stage had been set up and captured by the CPM. The venue was decorated with CPM flags and the entire control was in their hands. We have innumerable such instances from every part of the country. Or take the antiwar demonstrations in Delhi. Some of the largest joint rallies were held after the US attack on Afghanistan. But then, the CPM suddenly woke up and by the time of the attack

on Iraq, your party decided to 'take over'. It did. The fledgling joint movement was split. Finally there were rallies 'under your leadership' where your party people treated us, hapless participants, to the outpourings of a Joginder Sharma (don't ask us who he is!) and such others. The result was that in subsequent years, when there were coordinated global demonstrations against the War on Iraq, people gradually dropped out and there were only small CPM demos in Indian cities—the party machinery could never mobilize more than a few hundreds except in Kerala and West Bengal.

The list is really long and begins right at the time of the most vicious manifestation of the Hindutva threat: the day after the demolition of the Babri Masjid. Hundreds of people had assembled at the Vithalbhai Patel House lawns. Ask your people what happened that day—that shameful day. Even on that day, the CPM refused to hold a joint programme on an equal basis. Senior citizens like Rajni Kothari were not allowed to speak. In full public view, the then state secretary of the CPM told the police, pointing to another small group of CPI(ML) Liberation activists, that "they are not part of our demonstration." The police proceeded to cordon them off. A few hundred of us came back and were forced to hold another meeting. That was when the People's Movement for Secularism (PMS) was born.

Some day, all this history will have to be written and it will stink, professor Patnaik. And just to set the record further straight, all this (except for the PMS story) was WHILE THE BJP-NDA WAS STILL IN POWER. Some day, the history of organizations and coalitions like the CNDP will be written and the sordid story of how the World Social Forum process came to be captured by the CPM to the point of making it meaningless, will be uncovered.

Dear Prof Patnaik, you are quite fond of claiming a radical and 'political' mantle for yourself, but if you had spent just one day trying to organize the joint struggles that you nostalgically look back at, you would realize how out of tune you sound to everybody but your vanguard leaders.

So, let us take the theoretical propositions and charges, one by one.

PP explains his—and his people's bewilderment—by making an assertion: The coming out of these "anti-Left" intellectuals "openly against the Left" can only be explained with reference to the process of destruction of politics that the phenomenon of globalization has unleashed. There is no argument. Only further assertions to the effect that: "The anti-Left intellectuals say: politics is filthy; rise above politics; detach the struggle against 'development' from politics." Who precisely said this, Professor Patnaik? And where? Any references? The constant refrain here is 'Politics' that is repeated like a mantra along with "Left" and counterposed to "anti-politics" and "anti-Left". So what is this politics? If you try to sift through the definitional web of assertions, you will be able to isolate two ideas:

(1) The Left is something given; some people are born with into it. Else, they have to be certified by the Church or some favoured appointees. THEY do not have to prove anything. Others are by definition, anti-Left.

(2) This idea is related to the idea that POLITICS is about two camps: 'the camp of the people' and the camp of the 'enemies of the people' (those hostile etc). Now since the Left is, by definition, in the camp of the people (remember the

contract?), anybody else can only be against the 'people', and the Left and therefore, antipolitical.

Quite apart from the fact that Prof Patnaik, that mesmerizing ideologue-theoretician of yore, does not seem to have read anything about any movement since the Cuban revolution, his views on politics actually make one squirm. Did he remember, by the way, that the Cuban revolution was made against the hated Batista regime that was supported by the Communist Party? Is he aware that the new left wing formations that have arisen all across the South American continent, movements that his party does not cease to invoke in its support, are all movements that arisen on the debris of old-style communist politics? From the Zapatistas to the Movement for Socialism of Evo Morales, the Workers' Party of Brazil, or the Bolivarian revolution of Chavez - all of them, despite their limitations, have managed to make any kind of headway by breaking with that old politics.

We could actually go on, both from the history of Marxism and from the more recent history of anti-globalization struggles to show how the idea of 'politics' being enunciated by Prof Patnaik is at least three decades old. This is not the place for a discussion of those movements but we invite Prof Patnaik—or any of his other fellow travellers to an open debate on this in any neutral ground of his choosing.

In any case, apropos of this idea of a world divided into two camps, my point, for the time being, is simply this: By your definition, esteemed professor, neither feminism, nor the Dalit movement nor the sexuality and ecological struggles qualify for either the category 'political' or 'radical'. (By the way, what is their 'principal contradiction', and why should they care about yours?).

Now, I can almost hear shocked marxists exclaim, "of course! Class is the Real Thing, the Principal Contradiction". So for these marxists, let me just remind them that in the meantime, your own class is rapidly rejecting you—if there was any doubt, in the first place, that is. The CITU has come down even below the AITUC in terms of working class membership - a steady decline over the years. On the other hand, the Left has lost the first ever secret ballot in the railway unions. The people, indeed the 'working class' too, rejects 'Politics'! They need your political catechism Prof Patnaik, sorely. Or else, it is time you should think whose vanguard you want to be.

One more word about the 'two camps' notion of politics: Was NATO right in bombarding Serbia and Milosevic? Especially considering that a veritable process of ethnic cleansing of Kosovar Muslims had been going on under his leadership? We all participated in antiwar demonstrations against the NATO but would your two-camp notion of politics say that all those Leftists who saw Milosevic as the most immediate danger, were anti-political, anti-Left? And what about those who were being eliminated? They were being silly in welcoming the NATO bombs? Anti-political "messianic moralism"? They should have written "friendly petitions" to Milosevic, or "open letters"? Why were they becoming accomplices of imperialism? And what about the Kurdish people killed in a virtual genocide by the anti-imperialist Saddam Hussain? Does an opposition to the US attack on Iraq mean that all criticism and even strident criticism of such 'anti-imperialism' be suppressed?

Finally, Prof PP says, “this attack inspired by messianic moralism has been launched when the latter [the Left] is in the forefront of an extremely crucial but difficult struggle against the attempt of imperialism to make India its strategic ally.” Well, if you really wish to break the possibility, take a leaf out of the book of Brazil or South Africa and take a unilateral position in favour of abandoning the nuclear programme, which is indefensible in every possible way. Everything else is hot air. □□□