

What is Radical Politics in India Today?

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Introduction

The trajectory of world development is replete with instances of uneven development, inequity and failure of social justice. These are deeply embedded in the strategies and functions of a global capitalism. However, what instills hope is the recurrence of social and political movements in different parts of the world, at different levels, challenging these forces. Many such struggles, questioning the dehumanising effects of global capitalism characterised by dispossession, dislocation and disenfranchisement, have developed into larger movements impacting lives and aspirations of millions. Success of these movements, which of course take many diverse forms, has reinforced people's faith in the power of collective protest opening up spaces of hope for an ever increasing multitude of dispossessed, hailing from different parts of the world. In recent times, with an escalation of coercive practices of the State in several countries in collusion with

the global capitalist forces, the crucial question that harps on is whether the core of future radical politics is to be found with these movements.

A point raised by David Harvey¹ on contemporary social movements is pertinent here. Many such movements, he argues, although are not always organised following socialist political ideas, no doubt challenge the global power and anti-people policies of the State. In countries of the Global South, where their significance is more obvious, they are found to be brutally controlled (instances in India, Bangladesh, South-East Asian countries are galore) in the name of curbing insurgent, anti-State activities. Civil liberty movements, farmers' movements, guerrilla armed struggle, irrespective of form, individuals or groups associated, stand vulnerable to be branded 'unlawful' and denied democratic rights². In terms of structure and organisation, the movements thus can be highly knotty. Two interesting features in recent times are found to have characterised them. On the one hand, they are significantly shifting the terrain of resistance from the arena of mainstream Left politics. On the other hand, they are increasingly instrumental in transforming entrenched power relations at various levels, because they engage

¹ D. Harvey (2003) *The New Imperialism*, New York: Oxford University Press.

² G. Navlakha (2008) 'Savage War of Development', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 43(16), pp 16-18.

with alternate ways of doing development at multiple scales. When organised by groups other than the Left, the movements may lose the focus of class relations and class struggles, but remaining embedded (in most of the time) in the struggles of daily life, they prove to be extremely relevant to the reconstruction of the everyday relational space between the state and society. However, as the forces against which many such struggles are aimed, are united by a strong capitalist ideology, there is an extreme urgency to link these struggles at intra and inter country levels through a radical / socialist political philosophy to challenge the menace of global capital at a wider plain. To don such roles, the new social movements³, need to have interplay of radical theory and praxis, lest both their 'content' and 'form' might suffer. For instance, they may remain bounded within narrow local domains, hardly taking up issues that demand structural change, or be co-opted by anti-progressive, conservative forces, not meaning to challenge the roots of the maladies. Although consciously many such movements have tried to resist fragmentation and remain coordinated in purpose and context, the uncertainty of isolation always remains. Quite logically a point needs to be raised here about the mainstream Left. In several countries⁴ including India as they have kept themselves focused to organised working class oriented movements, in spite

³ D. Harvey (2003) *The New Imperialism*, New York: Oxford University Press.

⁴ D. Harvey (2003) *The New Imperialism*, New York: Oxford University Press.

of being exceedingly significant in many ways, their agenda has not been inclusive enough in considering issues that are thrown up by various forms of capitalist accumulation affecting a large section of the poor and disadvantaged outside the organised sector. This has led to a paradox in the construction of relational spaces of appropriation and contestation⁵ at various scales.

In this paper I will briefly discuss the nature and impact of contemporary movements in India that are challenging the prevailing development paradigm and examine their implications in developing the future spaces of radical politics. A careful analysis shows that many of these movements are spearheaded against global capital but not against the State while many other are spearheaded only against the State without pointing at the nexus. Needless to say, few movements are guided by socialist ideas.

⁵ S. Banerjee-Guha (2008) 'Space Relations of Global Capital and Significance of New Economic Enclaves: SEZs in India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 43 (47), pp 51-61, Mumbai.

Overview of Movements in India in Contemporary Times

Amidst growing euphoria of 'global village' and 'world is one' ideas a severe alienation has been working at the depth of the Indian society in recent times. Government in the country, whether at the central or state level, is essentially working for the market that happens to have been considerably influencing the parliamentary political process at various levels. The process of capitalist development, orchestrated primarily by global / corporate capital is creating wealth at one pole in an extremely concentrated manner while dragging the masses - in both formal and informal sectors - to immiserisation and extinction, at the other extreme. Choice of livelihood no longer rests on life themes, nature's alternatives, regionally rooted histories or even regional resource patterns; it is rather manipulated by market imperatives of a global hierarchical system having a formidable link between the global and the local. The nature of interdependence arising out of it essentially reflects the political economy of market and the related power of capital.

Since 1991, the time when India adopted New Economic Policy (NEP), the development format of the country has become formidable in accelerating the process of 'growth', facilitating large-scale entry of global capital in almost all sectors along with downsizing of labour, outsourcing of industrial and other

economic activities and modernising of cities through gentrification with a simultaneous pauperisation of both rural and urban poor⁶. Till the very recent worldwide depression by which India too is affected, the Indian economic scenario has been a paradox of accumulation and simultaneous dispossession (⁷ and ⁸). While the role of State is redefined from a provider of jobs and infrastructure to a vociferous facilitator of private capital, an increasingly irreversible production structure in favour of the rich is found to consolidate along with a general situation of jobless growth. In recent years while the country's growth roars ahead at 8 per cent, growth in regular employment is found to have exceeded not even one percent.

An understanding of the diverse processes of development and displacement within the above framework is extremely significant for comprehending the nature

⁶ S. Banerjee-Guha (2008) 'Space Relations of Global Capital and Significance of New Economic Enclaves: SEZs in India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 43 (47), pp 51-61, Mumbai.

⁷ A. Bhaduri (2008): 'Predatory Growth', *Economic and political Weekly*, 43 (16), pp 10-13, Mumbai.

⁸ S. Banerjee-Guha (2009): 'Contradictions of Enclave Development in Contemporary Times: Special Economic Zones in India', *Human Geography*, 2 (1), pp 1-16, Massachusetts.

of contemporary social movements in India and providing a framework to locate them. Post 1991, there has been an increase of movements, having diverse forms and issues, questioning the various expressions of the prevailing development paradigm. These are: increasing commodification and monopolisation of natural resources, their unsustainable use and unequal distribution⁹, degradation of environment and loss of indigenous livelihoods, patenting of indigenous plants and herbs by corporate groups, centralisation of decision making and disempowerment of communities caused by the contemporary development process and related projects, privatisation of public services, denial of rights to unorganised workers, women and other weaker sections of the society, erosion of indigenous culture, and more recently, almost at a pan-Indian scale, land acquisition by State for constructing global economic enclaves. Most of these movements are not organised by the mainstream Left. Rather, issues like environmental degradation or gender discrimination do not really receive any special attention from them. Sangvai¹⁰ argues that since 1980s, the character of social movements in India has changed, getting more broad-based and people-

⁹ S. Sangvai (2007) 'The New People's Movement in India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 42 (50), pp 111-117.

¹⁰ S. Sangvai (2007) 'The New People's Movement in India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 42 (50), pp 111-117.

centred. Many such movements, overtly or covertly, have challenged the new paradigm of modernity and development in a novel manner, by not countering the state or capitalist power but by suggesting alternatives based on indigenous knowledge and practice. By this, they have invented new sites of struggle, challenged the hegemony and its diverse forms and linked up political with social. Among all contemporary movements, however, resistance struggles against 'official land grab' for making Special Economic Zones have assumed a critical significance in recent times.

The movements are organised by diverse groups: small peasants and landless agricultural labourers in rural areas, unorganised wage labourers in cities, advasis (tribals), socially disadvantaged groups like scheduled castes (Dalits), numerous sections of urban poor, small entrepreneurs, unemployed youth, women's groups and many other disadvantaged sections. Issues focusing on alternatives have been varied too. To name a few: (i) Chattisgarh Mukti Morcha's struggle and rebuilding movement in Madhya Pradesh, (ii) Girni Kamgar Sangahrsha Samiti's movement to save the livelihood and housing rights of textile mill workers in Mumbai, (iii) National Fish worker Forum's struggle for the rights of over eight million fish workers against big Indian and transnational trawler owners, and fishing in other water bodies, (iv) Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan's (MKSS) movement in Rajasthan to safeguard the right to information for food and livelihood security, (v)

Chipko movement by the women to save community forest in Uttarakhand, (vi) tribal environmental movements in Kerala against Silent Valley and in Jharkhand and Chattisgarh against Koel Karo projects respectively, (vii) the long 23 years struggle launched by the Narmada Bachao Andolan against big dam related displacement and environmental destruction, (viii) Farmers' struggle under the banner of Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha against free trade sponsored by World Trade Organisation, (ix) The united struggle by local communities, trade unions and various organisations in different parts of the country under the banner of National Alliance of People's Movement (NAPM), (x) The struggle by local villagers against Coca Cola Plant in Plachimada in Kerala where 15 million litres of ground water is extracted every day by the company, and (xi) the recent struggles against land acquisition and corporate led economic activities.

Contemporary Movements against Land Acquisition

The major target areas for land acquisition in India have been areas where agriculture and related activities had considerable / partial success in establishing a plausible economic landscape or peasant movements had partial success in dealing with capitalist exploitation or areas inhabited by indigenous populations where the land is usually rich in mineral, flora, and fauna. In a large number of

cases the local people representing numerous agriculture related and other occupations have spontaneously come out to protest against the official 'land grab'. A mention of a few such struggles in recent times (during 2006-08) may not be inappropriate: (a) farmers' protest in Faridabad district of Haryana against land acquisition for building Industrial Model Town, (b) farmers' protest in Tamilnadu against acquisition for SIPCOT Industrial Estate, (c) villagers' protest in Andhra Pradesh against acquisition of 5000 acres for constructing industrial corridor, (d) samithi protest against acquisition of 12000 acres in Karnataka by Karnataka Industrial Areas Development Board, (e) farmers' protest in Mohali in Punjab against land acquisition for extending Mohali Urban Eastate, (f) Barmer farmers' protest in Rajasthan against acquisition of 8000 hectares for Jindal Power plant, (g) tribal protest in Jharkhand against acquisition of 20,000 acres by Arcelor Mittal for an industrial plant, (h) villagers' protest against acquisition of about 3000 acres of forest land in Orissa for Posco Steel Plant.

Farmers whose land is being acquired are generally found in the forefront of anti-displacement struggles along with share-croppers, marginal farmers and agricultural labourers whose livelihood is at jeopardy. Many of them have no legal ownership of land, but are squarely dependent on the same for their survival. The absence of their official ownership has been an excuse on the part of the state to disregard their claim for land as well as rehabilitation. In the struggle against

Posco Steel Plant in Orissa, 60 per cent of the agitators belong to this category. Across the country, this assorted group of agricultural workers have joined hands with fishermen, small-scale agro-based industrial workers to resist land acquisition.

The recent movements against land acquisition in West Bengal, especially in Singur and Nandigram have drawn international attention for mainly two reasons. First, the success that the movements achieved and second, the State's role in relation to the struggles. For the last thirty one years, West Bengal is continuously being ruled by a 'Left front' government – a unique feature in the country - dominated by the Communist Party of India (Marxist), in short CPI(M), that has consistently won state elections since 1977. State atrocity in Singur and Nandigram on the protestors of land acquisition has also been one of the most brutal in post independence India.

Of the two locales, Singur in Hugly district got earmarked for the 'Nano' car factory of the Tatas and Nandigram in East Medinipur district for making a chemical hub and a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) by an Indonesian promoter group. In 2006, following the peremptory acquisition of 1000 acres of mostly arable land in Singur and a subsequent State announcement for acquisition of 10,000 acres of fertile (mostly double and multi-cropped) agricultural land in Nandigram, fierce

struggles broke out in both the areas led by villagers, irrespective of religion, caste or creed. In Singur, the land acquired for the factory was mostly multi-cropped, where productivity increased due to introduction of various measures of water supply after 1970. The land use statistics on the basis of which the state government argued about the one crop nature of this land was actually of pre 1970s. Agro-based and allied handicraft industrial activities were additional activities of Singur and together they made the economy of the region quite comfortable. Absentee landlords who constituted a minority had readily agreed to part with their land but a large section of small and marginal farmers, unregistered share croppers (whose number goes to a few thousands) and agricultural labourers who were the actual tillers of the land, did not. Neither there was any discussion with them on the industrial design of the government at Panchayat level nor they were informed by the CPI (M), the party of which a large majority of them had been members since long. The landless agricultural workers got totally marginalised in the government's compensation framework too. The initial resistance organised under the banner of 'Save Land Committee' against the government sponsored 'land grab', was a spontaneous protest of the dispossessed that subsequently got the support of various political groups, democratic organisations and most significantly of the major opposition party of the state. Several Fact Finding Committee reports state that land was forcefully acquired in Singur despite a large section of the farmers' official refusal to part with their land.

Moreover, Having gained huge concessions in land price and infrastructure from the state government, the Tatas started building the factory¹¹ and later the car production work while the struggle of the villagers continued. In Nandigram, 10,000 acres of fertile agricultural land got earmarked for a chemical hub and 4500 acres more for ship manufacturing, repair and port activities. On account of land acquisition, four villages were to be completely destroyed along with hundreds of schools and other institutions. Following the government notice of land identification in early 2007, local people got united and subsequently barricaded Nandigram to stop the Police from entering the area. The subsequent state atrocity in January, March and finally in November, 2007 became exceedingly severe leading to large scale massacre. The barbaric incidents aroused massive protest in the state and in other parts of the country of progressive intellectuals, artists, writers, radical political groups, students' organisations and also the main official opposition party of West Bengal¹². The government had to finally declare the chemical hub proposal cancelled. It gave a tremendous boost to the resistance groups in Singur, who, by then, were being led by the main

¹¹ Amritalok (2007) Uchhed bonam Unnayan, Amritalok, No. 109, Amritalok Sahitya Parishad, Kolkata (in Bengali).

¹² Amritalok (2007) Uchhed bonam Unnayan, Amritalok, No. 109, Amritalok Sahitya Parishad, Kolkata (in Bengali).

opposition party in the state but also actively supported by radical political groups, civil rights organisations, national level NGOs and a broad based civil society. In early October 2008, the entire project was declared cancelled and the Tatas withdrew from Singur to locate the factory site in Gujarat in western India. These two cases have been upheld as victory of people's power in India in current times. From an analytical perspective, they signify something more. Firstly, the movements have indicated towards a possibility of a symbiotic link between the 'political society' and 'civil society'. Secondly, they have focused on the significance of a reconstructed space of everyday life experience of people in encountering the state, in other words, the changing state-society relationship¹³ that became evident by the engaging role of the political parties and state institutions during the struggle. One year after in late 2008 the month long tribal struggle that got consolidated in a number of western districts of West Bengal against persistent police atrocities and non-committal role of the State came out as another example. Finally, the increasing distance between the organised Left groups and the poor of the unorganised sector surfaced as a significant phenomenon.

¹³ S. Corbridge (2005) *Seeing the State*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Summing Up

The lived experience of people in several parts of India in recent times has got entwined with a process of dispossession-based development leading to fierce resistance movements in different parts of the country taking various forms. The same needs to be understood from a historical perspective with respect to (a) the trajectory of the prevailing development paradigm, (b) the status of indigenous populations, religious minorities and other marginalised groups in the said development process and, finally (c) the status of workers engaged in primary activity (land and other) in the current debate of industry versus agriculture, popularly labelled as modern versus backward.

Essentially the debate has set to form almost a divide in the country. Private capital led rapid industrialisation is equated with 'development', while those opposed to such 'development' are labelled 'anti-development' and even 'unlawful' in case of certain groups, accrued of disloyalty and treason¹⁴. The situation gets complex as the mainstream Left groups in general, and in states ruled by them, in particular, not only uphold the prevailing development paradigm but also

¹⁴ G. Navlakha (2008) 'Savage War of Development', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 43(16), pp 16-18.

implement it with extreme vigour by citing a globally hegemonic discourse¹⁵ that restricts any serious or alternative viewpoints. It has created a paradoxical situation as a large section of the people are getting bemused about the role and objective of the Left philosophy in uplifting the cause of the poor and the disadvantaged. The case of West Bengal, as mentioned, appears to have contributed considerably towards this paradox as in this Left Front ruled state there has been a systematic intensification of State-sponsored atrocity on the protestors against land acquisition since 2006 that culminated in a huge massacre and killing in Nandigram in late 2008. As a response to it, the state-wise mobilisation of public opinion and protest by different shades of political parties, democratic forces, civil rights groups, sections of intellectuals, academicians, students, artistes, theatre and film personalities – in short, an amalgamation of broad based democratic forces, was also unique. Challenging the latter, the negotiating strategy that was taken up by the neo-liberal state, of creating multi-level contradictory spaces of appeasement and coercion on the one hand, and launching of ‘movement from the above’ on the other, became crucial in the understanding of the porosity of the State apparatus.

¹⁵ S. Banerjee-Guha (2008) ‘Space Relations of Global Capital and Significance of New Economic Enclaves: SEZs in India’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 43 (47), pp 51-61, Mumbai.

Creation of new spaces of politics of claims by such movements at various levels is leading towards a possibility of developing a unified framework that may network similar such spaces and identify a framework for future radical politics aiming to challenge capital and neoliberal state together. Whether these struggles that consistently draw strength from their embeddedness in daily life praxis are made into political movements with a recognition of the macro-politics and the fundamental political role of accumulation and dispossession as a part of a larger capitalist strategy is an important question. As the masses will seek a restoration of their unique form of class power ¹⁶, popular struggles for social justice and economic betterment are breaking out in different parts of the country that may be sporadic, organised by non-party independent groups, democratic/ social organisations, radical left, Maoist revolutionary groups and others. The mainstream Left, following its present logic may be found to remain distanced from such struggles as well from the discourses on people's right to life and livelihood as a part of a broad democratic framework. Comprehension of the above phenomenon is important for developing an understanding of the nature of radical politics in India in the contemporary times and for the coming days.

¹⁶ D. Harvey (2005) *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Facilitation of such understanding is a part of a wider project, undertaken by 'The Spaces of Democracy and the Democracy of Space' network that is expanding into regions such as India, Bangladesh, Pakistan Sri Lanka, Argentina and Mexico. As the Organiser of the South Asia node of the Network, I think it is important that we seriously explore the nature of radical politics that is being created and recreated in these regions. At present, the network is dominated by western perspectives, but is keen to develop conversations with people working outside of the West, concerning the character of contemporary radical politics in different countries. In this chapter, I have focused on a few significant issues in India, regarding the characteristics of social movements, role of the State, praxis of the Left groups and the status of people in the contemporary development process. The time has come to explore how and in which context these issues play out in other non-Western countries.

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