

NAXALBARI :

BETWEEN YESTERDAY AND TOMORROW

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The Naxalbari movement that began as a heroic upsurge, although abortive, back in May 1967, now seems to be dominated by citybred adolescents. Some think that the rot set in when the centre of the struggle shifted from the countryside to Calcutta, that the revolutionary organisation which it sought to create has been rapidly swallowed by the routine of Bengali middle-class political life.

Yet, if we return to the source of the Naxalbari movement, we may find that the spring is still ready to spout. The problems that gave birth to the movement are not only a living reality but are fast maturing into crisis and may throw up a series of similar uprisings in the near future.

The United Front Government may congratulate the people of West Bengal on their rejection of the Naxalite call for the boycott of elections, but it has yet to find an answer to the fundamental question brought to the fore by the Naxalbari uprising and also by its own experience during its nine-month regime in 1967. The question is : how far can parliamentary reforms bring West Bengal nearer to the radical solution for which the country's basic problems have been crying out ?

To begin with, Naxalbari movement threw a fierce light on a cobwebbed, discreetly shadowed corner of India's socio-economic life—the world of the landless labourers and sharecroppers fast being reduced to one of the landless. The mass of these

people, looked down upon by leftist parties, dismissed till recently as serfs beyond redemption from the influence of the landed gentry, remained at a distance from the main current of political struggles.

According to a Government of India survey, out of 16·3 million agricultural labour households in 1956-57, 9·4 million did not possess a strip of land for supplementary occupation. About 4·35 million were attached labourers contractually tied up with prosperous peasants.

In spite of the appalling exploitation, little has been done among agricultural labourers by the communist parties compared with their trade union activities in the trade union fields. The Kisan Sabhas remain dominated by the middle peasantry. The organization of the agricultural labourers is almost non-existent.

It goes to the credit of those among the communists, now known as "extremists", that they had the foresight to realize that any revolution in India would have to be spearheaded by the rural proletariat who, more than the industrial urban workers, fit into the role assigned by Marx for the revolutionary proletariat of 19th century Europe—"the workers have nothing to lose but their chains."

In under-developed countries like India, the rural proletariat consisting of the landless and sharecroppers are the worst exploited. The industrial proletariat, particularly in the public sector today, suffers less as a result of the manipulative capacity of the trade unions to wring some palliatives for them from the management or the State. In 1950-51, an agricultural labourer family's annual per capita income in West Bengal was Rs 160 against Rs 268 of an industrial labourer's family (Dr. B. Ramamurti—*Agricultural Labour*).

Quite understandably, the industrial workers are not so much concerned with the acquisition of political power as with gaining a fair share of economic wealth. On the other hand, a change in the lot of the agricultural worker is bound up with the basic question of changing the entire rural economic set up

which is at present sustaining the growth of economic wealth in the urban pockets.

It may be argued that the U.F. Government, on assuming power in 1967, proposed to alleviate the sufferings of the land-hungry cultivators, but that the impatience of the Naxalbari "extremists" compromised those plans.

But let us here pause to ask what the U.F. Government could have done or can even now do, to solve the problem in the existing administrative frame-work? Its aims would not go beyond what E. M. S. Namboodiripad said about land reforms on the eve of the second general elections. He hoped that the installation of an alternative Government in Kerala would be followed by "legislative measures providing for prevention of evictions, rent reduction, fixation of ceilings, distribution of surplus and waste lands, etc.—measures which are so modest in their character that they do not go beyond what has been agreed to in the Land Reform Panel of the Planning Commission" (*Agrarian Reform—a study of the Congress and Communist approaches, 1956*).

How are these to be implemented in West Bengal? The condition under which agrarian legislation, including ceiling laws, are enforced, are not only determined by the omnipotence of the bureaucracy, but the opposition of vested interests, the jotedars and rich peasantry who at every stage take the help of some law or other to block or delay the implementation of legislation unfavourable to them. The classic case is that of the fate of the Zamindari Abolition Bill enacted by the Bihar Assembly in 1948. How successful the zamindars of Bihar were in obstructing its enforcement is related by the American scholar, Mr Daniel Thorner, who, visiting Bihar in 1956, found: 'Eight years after the Bihar Legislature voted its acceptance of the principle of zamindari abolition, the majority of the zamindars of Bihar were in legal possession of their land (D. Thorner—*The Agrarian Prospect in India*).

While the decision to enforce agrarian legislations through popular committees as envisaged by the U. F. Government

might eliminate to some extent the distorting control of the bureaucracy, what can effectively cripple the recalcitrant group of rural vested interests, who can always fall back in case of any emergency on the sacrosanct legal system, riddled with lacunae and moth-eaten by time? As for the law on ceiling, it needs reconsideration. The present law presupposes a ceiling on existing holdings that would preserve the small and middle landholders and rich peasants. Since more than 60 per cent of the land-holdings in India are under 5 acres, the fixation of the ceiling at 25 acres in West Bengal might lead to further concentration of the land in the hands of landlords and the rich peasantry through the bankruptcy of small peasants forced to sell their lands.

The U. F. Government, therefore, would be required to carry out a law inherited from its predecessor—a landlord-bourgeois ruling clique. The purpose of the law was to convert the landlords and rich peasants into land-owning farmers of the capitalist type .

In spite of a ceiling granting adequate breathing space to the rich peasantry, the latter lost no chance to cheat the government of the surplus land it owed to the West Bengal State under the Estates Acquisition Act. According to a study undertaken at the instance of the Research Programmes Committee of the Planning Commission, about 105,000 acres might be estimated to have been transferred mala fide during 1952-54 for evading ceiling restriction. (*Land Reforms in West Bengal* by S. K. Basu & S. K. Bhattacharya)

As a result, till 1965, the State government was able to secure 7.76 lakh acres as surplus, out of which 4.35 lakh acres were leased out on a year to year basis to the peasantry. This would hardly be enough to satisfy the West Bengal peasants' land hunger.

Even after they become owners of tiny, un-economic holding, the condition of the peasantry will not improve perceptibly, because the old feudal structure of the rural society will remain the same, marked by the age-old exploitation by

traders, moneylenders and monopoly capital in the form of unequal exchange between town and country.

The measures of the U.F. Government, therefore, however benevolent they might be, will not change the basis of the social structure of the Bengali village, which alone can guarantee the success of any land reform.

It is in this perspective that the Naxalbari uprising assumes importance. It was not a movement for the occupation of land as made out to be by some of its friendly critics, but went beyond the limited aim of land redistribution by giving the call for the seizure of power. The plan, according to its leader, Mr Kanu Sanyal, was to smash once for all the village feudal society and create peasant bases to run the administration. No wonder, one of the main aims of the movement's 10-point programme was to cancel the hypothecary debt, lying like an incubus upon the landless labourer and daily growing upon him. (Kanu Sanyal's Report on the Peasant Movement in Terai, November 1968)

This task the U. F. Government would have found difficult to accomplish, clogged as it was by constitutional and legal inhibitions. Since it accepted the premises of the bourgeois State-order, constitutional limits, parliamentary procedure, etc.—to wrest power, it now finds itself difficult to bypass them.

In this context, the next important question raised by the Naxalites deserves notice—the problem of working with an administration which is a legacy from the past, which assures a very perfect conservation of anti-people, out-moded ideas. With its enormous bureaucratic and police organization, with the host of officials, this appalling parasitic machine enmeshes the body of Indian society like a net and chokes all its pores.

During the nine months of its stay in office in 1967, the U.F. Government found itself being swamped into the morass of the present administrative system. This time it may atone for its past mistakes of not removing notorious officials by overhauling the administration, particularly the disreputable police force. But its powers are limited by the Constitution,

drawn up under the duress of the British imperialists. We have seen already how the position of the Governor was used by the Centre to subvert the United Front Government.

Thus a pathetic paradox becomes inevitable in the actions of the U.F. Government. It has to swear allegiance to the holy Constitution at every breath to gain permission from the Centre to rule West Bengal. At the same time, it has to demand amendments to the provisions of the Constitution to bring about radical changes in favour of the people.

As a result, we are entertained at intervals with hair-splitting debates about the powers of the Speaker and the Governor and exchanges of idle phrases interpreting the contradictions of the Constitution—all quite far away from the problem of starvation.

The other stumbling block is the legal system. The stock-pile of archaic law is still exploited by the ruling class in defence of anti-people measures. An anti-democratic judgment becomes sacrosanct once it is delivered. It is immune to public protests. How can the U.F. Government hope to provide the minimum relief to the people, without first smashing up this holy order ?

The Naxalbari movement has also rescued from the abyss of oblivion and negligence another aspect of our socio-economic life—the fate of the tribal population—and has drawn attention to their revolutionary potentialities.

In the 1951 census, the Scheduled tribal landless labourers formed 6.3% of the total landless population. The figure rose to 10.6% in 1961, indicating their growing impoverishment. The primitive custom of bonded labour is still a practice among them.

As pointed out earlier, the question of organizing the landless has been neglected so long. The tribals who form a major part of them naturally shared the same neglect.

Yet, from the political point of view, the tribals have a militant tradition. It is significant that peasant rebellions in the eastern zone of India have always been spearheaded by the

tribals, right from the early days of the British rule.

The Kols rebelled in 1831-32 against the distribution of their lands among the rich Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs in Chotanagpur. The famous Santhal rebellion took place in 1855. The Sardari agitation began in Ranchi against compulsory labour in 1887. Under the leadership of Birsa, the Mundas rose against the Hindu landlords and Christian missionaries of Ranchi in 1895.

Coming to recent times, during the Tebhaga movement in Bengal in the forties, the Hajangs of North Mymensingh contributed a great deal to the success of the struggle.

The analysis made by Mr Kanu Sanyal and others of Naxalbari's revolutionary potential was therefore not so wide of mark. But then what went wrong? According to Kanu Sanyal, some of the reasons for the failure of the uprising were "the want of a powerful party organization, failure to have a firm mass base and absolute ignorance of military science." (The Report on the Peasant Movement in Terai)

It is clear that the rebels minimized the repressive power of the State. There was no preparation to face a ruthless military force. The Naxalbari rebels did not even have a chance of facing the army. Police action, and that too a half-hearted one, thanks to the then U.F. Government, was enough to make them collapse.

The same mixture of naivete and ingenuousness marked the operations in Wynaad in Kerala. If they were not a calculated effort by agents-provocateur to sow disillusionment among future revolutionaries, they betrayed a certain amount of romanticism by their dream of conquering State power by bows, arrows and spears.

The isolation from the rest of the people of the country was also another factor that hastened their defeat. As the absence of response to the Naxalite slogan of boycotting the elections was to prove later, the people are willing to support the communists with their votes, but are not yet prepared to take to arms in their defence.

But still one has to start somewhere and the leaders of the Naxalbari uprising deserve praise on that score. Their followers in Calcutta are perhaps only parodying their heroism. These splinter groups owe their popularity not to the fact that they are more consistently revolutionary, but to the fact that the situation is not. Besides, how do they explain away the fact that the Naxalites showed very little activity during the hated PDF-Congress regime or Governor's rule in West Bengal, but as soon as the U.F. assumed power they have come back to the arena? Why are they reluctant to launch militant actions, with the exception of Srikakulam in Andhra Pradesh, in States run by Congress governments? Their slogan of boycott of election and choice of U.F.-run States for staging uprisings may be ideologically motivated, but do they not objectively help the bourgeois-landlord ruling clique at the Centre?

But despite all this, Naxalbari will remain an important landmark in the annals of Indian revolution which is still journeying through purgatory. For one thing, it has served as a catalytic agent by compelling the complacent communist parties, and the U.F. Government of West Bengal in particular, to recognize the basic conflict in the country and to shed the illusion of solving it through peaceful transition to socialism. It is yet to be seen, however, whether they have courage to follow up this realization by action.

The two communist parties in West Bengal are in an overwhelming majority in the Government. The "red spectre" continually conjured up by the bourgeois-landlord clique has finally appeared in West Bengal. But it has appeared not in blood-tattered dress, across the barricades, but in the uniform of 'order', in spotlessly white dhoti and kurta, in the plush chamber of the Legislature. Therein lies the rub.

Will the communists in the Government continue to be reluctant to upset the Indian apple cart and prefer the comfortable parliamentary road, or will they try to accentuate the polarization?

The polarization has already set in. It was reflected in West Bengal in the disintegration of the PSP, elimination of Swatantra Party and the Jana Sangh and in the pattern of voting in the rural areas. It will take a sharper form in the coming inevitable clash with the Centre. The Indian army, hitherto unaffected by any internal political upsurge (whatever political alignment it may have, will be Jana Sangh-oriented, because of the concentration of people from the Hindi belt in its ranks), will prove an obedient tool in the hands of the Centre to crush any movement in West Bengal.

The forces of reaction within the State also should not be minimized. A combination of the rural vested interests, industrialists and the bureaucracy, backed by the Centre, could be a formidable threat to any Leftist State government. The Right reactionary forces are not idle and judging by the growth of the RSS, it is evident that they are thinking in terms of a future armed confrontation.

In these circumstances, the necessity of preparing the masses for direct confrontations with the vested powers needs no emphasis. In the absence of any such organized preparation, the hungry and the impatient may break into blind, incoherent revolts, bereft of conscious purpose, or premature disorganized Naxalbaris, get crushed and explode again—thus initiating a long drawn out process of destruction of the present social system.

The future of any communist movement in West Bengal therefore will have to be marked by a subtle combination of parliamentary activities, of legal and underground machinery and of course, by building up mass bases in the countryside particularly.

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