

A Report on the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung (South Asia) and Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group Research Workshop on *Popular Movements in Bihar and Bengal* (September 7, 2017)

Panel I: Contentious Politics and Popular Movement: Enigma of Karpoori Thakur.

Presented by: Manish K. Jha

Regarding popular movements in Bihar, the focus is on the backward classes movement led by Karpoori Thakur, a close aide of Jayprakash Narayan. Popularly known as ‘jana-nayak’ (peoples’ leader), Thakur had been chief minister of Bihar twice (between 1970-1971 and 1977-1979). The Karpoori Thakur government introduced reservation in government jobs for the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in 1978. A year later, B P Mandal submitted his recommendations on OBCs and affirmative action to the central government under Morarji Desai. This twin move brought in its wake seismic changes in the politics of Bihar as well as India. The objective of this research project is to study the implications of these moves on the popular politics and mass movement of Bihar. The project investigates the entire process of defining caste, the debates around the parameters and political maneuver of inclusion and exclusion. The question of social justice also emerged in the background of the contingent defeat of the left movement in general and the Naxalite Movement in particular. This meant that the issue of *izzat* (dignity) and land for the dalits were also relegated into the background. The research project investigates if the rise of politics of social justice in Bihar meant a suppression of radical and revolutionary politics and premature end to dalit politics. Also, how the government played a decisive role in the suppression of these alternative politics. (Manish Jha and Mithilesh Kumar give further details about the *Backward Classes Movements led by Karpuri Thakur* in their respective papers)

The discussant for the panel, Priyanka Upadhyaya, suggested that the paper would benefit from a better sense of the continuum instead of limiting itself to the politics of the Backward Castes. Commenting on the presence of a leader like Ram Manohar Lohia and his influence on the socialist politics, he enquired into the nature of such politics. Further, with reference to the factor of “Anti-Congressionism”, he brings to attention the need to put Karpoori Thakur in hindsight and perceive the shifting discourse of present times and BJP’s use of the fragmented nature of caste politics. He also opined that incorporating a detailed analysis of Karpoori’s “English Hataao Andolan”, his relationship with *Bhoomihars* and other castes would be effective for the paper. The discussant, while commenting on Karpoori’s stages of political life, specifically probes into his last years when his popularity was waning.

In response to the last point, Manish K. Jha explained that his interest was specifically in the last phase of Thakur’s life, i.e. after 1980 when he started losing ground due to the shifting loyalties of castes like *Kurmis* and *Yadavs* who wanted a representative from their own community. It is in this stage that he started dealing with issues of *Dalits*, Buddhism and such other factors.

Questions, Comments and Observations

The first observation came from Ranabir Samaddar. With regard to the selection of personality/ies in case of Bihar and issues/events for Bengal, he observed that could it be possible that in Bihar, there is a strong drive towards “governmentalisation” and reaching positions of power quickly than in Bengal and thus, a tendency of focussing on charismatic personalities? In reply, Manish K. Jha opined that he would need to acquire greater knowledge about Bengal politics to be able to comment on this point of observation.

The second observation was in lieu of the “English Hataao Andolan” mentioned in the paper. The observer enquires into the ways in which, or if at all, the linguistic issue played a role in the politics of the region popularly known as the “Hindi Heartland”? How did this factor in with a rise in socialist politics? On this point, Jha opined that the Hindi Heartland’s problem lies in their notion of a nationalism that is exclusive and not inclusive. This problematic vision, he elaborates, is the reason of the failure of Bhojpuri, Maithili movements and other sub-nationalist issues.

The third observation was more general in nature. It was regarding the present political scenario of a rise in anti-BJP feelings and how is it affecting the overall political scenario in the subcontinent.

Panel II: Making of a populist government: A study of Karpoori Thakur’s regime.

Presented by: Mithilesh Kumar

Manoj Kumar Jha, the discussant of this paper, suggested that it is important to go beyond Karpoori Thakur’s personality and towards his politics in order to discuss his role. He also poses the question of the choice of the word “populist” instead of “popular”. He opined, in lieu of personal, anecdotal insights that Karpoori Thakur’s role in politics should be treated in the realm of popular. He also pointed out the need to locate Karpoori in between the conflicting trajectories of Ram Manohar Lohia and Jayprakash Narayan. Furthermore, with respect to Karpoori’s politics, he explained that it is imperative to consider the conflicts that occur within the same party and organisation. Karpoori’s “sub-categorisation”, as Jha explained was based on hard facts and evidence and was therefore, not merely a populist tactic. The politics of “Anti-Congressionism”, “English Hataao Andolan” etc., Jha opines, should be seen in the context of time and ethos of that time. Lastly, he mentions that the greatest contribution that Karpoori Thakur made was probably to make Social Democracy a lived reality more than an imagined one.

Questions, Comments and Observations

Prabhu Mahapatra enquired into the tension that he perceived in the paper, between the concepts of “popular” and “populism”. He wondered as to whether the Backward Castes Movement was represented in advance by the Socialist Party. The second question was in reference to an Engels’ quote and he urged the presenter to re-view this quote in light of politics reconstituting the economic factor.

Manish Kumar Jha, in response to the first question, pointed out the existence of Triveni Sangh Movement in Bihar that brought the three castes of *Kurmi*, *Yadav* and *Koeri* together for the first time and posed a threat for the Congress. Though the leaders were co-opted, he explained that it showed the aspirational aspect that Karpoori Thakur utilised later.

Ranabir Samaddar observed that the difference between the two terms, “popular” and “populist” may not be a sacrosanct one. He opined that in reconstituting the popular, it is populism that comes into being as without populism, there cannot be any people as such; the populism is the ideological leaning of the material reality of the people. Positing such theoretical questions, he then asked can Karpoori Thakur be read without the governmental procedures that characterise his politics. He specifically challenged the value-judgement that one associate with these terms (popular as a positive one and populism is seen as negative) and urges the paper to explore these questions.

In response to the first question, Mithilesh pointed out the methodological issues that one faces in case of political uncertainty and thus, is dependent on the political parties and other actors’ behaviour in order to analyse and research. On the issue of existing tension between “popular” and “populism”, he stated that in the latter concept, the question of power becomes essential; the paper, he says, is an attempt to see Karpoori as a person trying very consciously to capture governmental power and thus, a “populist”.

Panel III: Occupy College Street: Notes from the Sixties.

Presented by: Ranabir Samaddar

Naxalbari Movement that shaped the West Bengal politics of late ‘60s and 70s is the focus of study. Since 1967, peasants’ struggles in Naxalbari, Debra, Gopiballabhpur and other areas in West Bengal started to take shape inspired by the ideal of the peasant revolution in China. It also included the wave of students’ movement which, inspired by the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (GPCR) of China, launched anti (prevailing) education system and movement against icons of the established culture. A section of these students also went to villages to organise/strengthen peasants’ struggle in different pockets of the state. These mobilizations were countered by the state machinery with brutal police operations including arrests under special laws, torture, and killing. What is once again worth studying in this case is the overwhelming response from people of different social, political and cultural backgrounds to these mobilizations ranging from silent support and sympathy to active participation in militant struggle. Undoubtedly, through these movements a notion of people came into being. And hence, the question to be asked is: What constitutes the *people* in popular movements. This had been one of the major research questions in all the papers written in the first year of the project and this will also shape the research on Naxalbari movement in the second year. (Ranabir Samaddar’s work in entitled ***Occupy College Street: Notes from the Sixties***, contends with, elaborates upon and analyses the insurgent movements in the decade of the sixties of the last century in Kolkata, wherein the tactic of ‘occupation’ was employed for purposes of mobilisation.)

The discussant for this panel was Prabhu Mahapatra raised the question of methodology. He observed that there is an immediate transition from form to content in the paper and he enquires as to how this transition is mediated. To this, Professor Samaddar replied that in his

view, this division of form and content is banal to the extent that they both occur simultaneously; no analysis of the form can take place without commenting on the content. The process of mediation, he further opined, negates the immediacy of such movements and usurps the transformative moments of form into content and vice-versa.

Questions, Comments and Observations

The first observation was made by Atig Ghosh whose study of Left front Government in Birbhum from 1947-67 has found that the earlier period of CPI/CPI(M) regime had a base in the middle class/caste peasant group. In the wake of Naxalbari revolution, it shifted to a lower class/caste, agricultural labour group. The second observation that he made was in relation to role of women in the revolutionary movement. He states that unlike Kolkata, women had a very different role to play in the districts. In participation, there was a division of revolutionary labour and women played the role of “carriers” of arms, letters etc. Professor Professor Samaddar responded by saying that women’s participation in the movement was seen as natural and thus, belonging to the realm of utopia that underlies such movements. As far as participation of other class/caste people, such as slum-dwellers were concerned, it was not a deliberate act of gaining members or supporters.

Iman Mitra commented that with regard to form and content, any boundary-making exercise must also consider the concretised history of space. Can this be viewed as rereading/ revisiting such history? Prabhu Mahapatra here observed that the term “concrete” does not just signify form; rather it implies a relationship between form and content. Professor Samaddar, with reference to phenomenology, stressed on a deeper understanding of the word concrete where a superficial description is done away with and questioning of form is a way to understand the specific.

Panel IV: The Cultural-Creative Dimension of the Naxalite Movement.

Presented by: Subharanjan Dasgupta

Naxalbari Movement inspired multifaceted creativity; from propagandist poetry to reflective verse; from novels or prose narratives hailing the movement to stories and novels severely criticizing the theoretical ballast and its related activism; from revelatory plays transcreating the most decisive moments of the movement on the stage to cut and dried one act plays serving as slices of the experiential truth; from gripping films like Hajar Churasir Ma and Herbert to full-throated songs which exhilarated hundreds. While in the first year debates around Marxian aesthetics in ‘50s and ‘60s have been studied, in the second year special emphasis will be given to the world of literature, films and art that were inspired or were produced as criticism to the Naxalite Movement. Particular importance will be provided to the theatre activities of the time as this was one site where Naxalbari emerged as a major theme. Utpal Dutta’s *Teer*, Anal Gupta’s *Rakter Rang* or Amal Roy’s *Aat Jora Khola Chokh* are but few examples of the theatres of the time. (Subharanjan Dasgupta explores the subject in his current work entitled, *The Cultural-Creative Dimension of the Naxalite Movement*)

Anil Acharya, the discussant, began the discussion with observations regarding the choice of texts and authors and its implications. He noted that the paper could have talked about works that gave a new dimension, instead of the common themes of revolution and changing of the

society; works that reconstructed mythological stories. He further observed that the paper could have benefitted from the discussion of the role played by Little Magazine in the propagation of revolutionary ideas. He also pointed out that the movement had shades and fractures which are glossed over by the constant glorification of present times. He brought to attention the importance of discussing and reflecting on this multifaceted nature of the movement. He also brought attention to the significant role played by visual medium of arts such as Cinema; he cited the example of Mrinal Sen.

Questions, Comments and Observations

Prabhu Mahapatra observed that there is a tendency of homogenising all movements and ignoring the existence of contradictions, doubts and fractures between and within the movement. He enquired into these internal contradictions of the Naxalite movement of the 70s in order to facilitate a better understanding of it. Subharanjan, in response, brought attention to the host of emotions that were at play while the works were being written. He then proceeded to discuss about two branches of poetry that were being written at the time: one mainstream and the other which was not mainstream.

Anil Acharya, once again threw light on the multidimensional aspect of the when he talked about translation exercises such as Telugu literature in Bengali which was happening for the first time and was responsible for a nationwide reach of the movement.

There were other suggestions for names that could have been incorporated such as Nabarun Bhattacharya, Asim Ray and such other writers and poets. Their work, as was discussed, developed a new polemic about the Left politics of the times.

Panel V: Left Mobilisation in Three Districts of West Bengal, 1947-1977 Nadia, Midnapore, Birbhum

Presented By: Anwasha Sengupta and Atig Ghosh

Calcutta was the major site of the refugee movement or tram and teachers' movement. But with food movement and Naxalite movement, suburbs and districts of West Bengal became major epicentres of protest. There were other intense and popular mass movements outside Calcutta as well in '50s, '60s and 70s. Labour movement in Burnpur steel factory (near Asansol in Burdwan district) in 1950s, peasant agitation in Durgapur against their displacement for establishing the steel plant, strikes and labour protest in jute belts of Hooghly and Howrah, refugee agitation in Nadia or demands raised in various parts of Bengal for merger of Bengali speaking areas of Bihar with West Bengal require closer focus in order to understand the nature and extent of popular politics beyond the metropolis. What constituted 'people' in these protests, did it go beyond the groups of labourers/peasants/refugees to draw a wider section of the society, which movement drew attention of the city elite and what remained invisible to them, was the student groups, left sympathizers and city intellectuals equally quick in responding to these movements? (Anwasha Sengupta and Atig Ghosh focus on the aspect of popular protests in the districts of West Bengal in their paper entitled, *Popular Movements in the Districts of Bengal, Birbhum, Nadia and Midnapore, 1950s-1970s*)

Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya commenced the discussion with comments on the significance of pitching locality at the focal point of the papers. He then raised some important questions in the course of the discussion. Firstly, he probed into the notion of familiarity and its effects on the revolutionary movement. In specific, he enquired into the ideological pinning of the movement and how it plays against this notion of familiarity and also, familial relationships at times; he also raises the question of class and generation in this context. Next, he made enquiries into the city-town/village binary and urged the paper to probe deeper into this centre-periphery relationship which has always had a narrative of originating in the city and moving towards the village or town. With respect to mentions of harvesting festival by Anwasha, he raised the question of dilution or contamination of the movement and if it can be seen as a Brahminical trait in the revolutionary movement. Lastly, he pointed out that the whole perspective can be turned around and seen from the light of how a particular locality or settings can effect a movement.

Questions, Comments and Observations

Iman Mitra noted that in case of familiarity, the notion of memoirs play an important role. How then can such texts be read vis-à-vis governmental records which have a different narrative. Atig, while replying, mentions the difficulties of selection of governmental reports and records as texts since they are oftentimes a personal account.

V. Ramaswamy, with respect to Anwasha's paper, observed the role of Manoranjan Byapari and his accounts of CPI's treatment of refugees in the camps.

The next observation was regarding the role of *VisvaBharati* in Shantiniketan in the local movements and the silent relationship between the commoners and the academia. Atig responded that there have been people who have taken part in the left movements of the region.

Prabhu Mahapatra, with reference to peasants' upsurge in France during the French Revolution, questions into the differences of class structure to explain the dynamics of the movement. The question was directed towards Atig who replies that the movements were different and in the case of *Naxalbari* movement, there was an element of excess.

Paper VI: Long March or Garden Path? The Left Front's First Term in West Bengal (1971-1982)

Presented by: Atig Ghosh

The Left Front's coming to power in West Bengal (1977) as a possible moment of culmination of the decades of popular movements in this province is being explored in Atig Ghosh's research entitled, *LONG MARCH OR GARDEN PATH? The Left Front's First Term in West Bengal (1971-1982)* How did the new government under the leadership of Jyoti Basu addressed the demands that had been raised through such movements, how did it cater to the needs and expectations of the "peoples" that were created in the course of such movements and what spaces for new protest movements were created are important to understand. While the new government implemented radical land reforms and freed the political prisoners immediately after coming to the power, in 1978 they tortured the Dalit

refugees in Marichjhapi, killing hundreds of them, in the name of protecting a tiger reserve. Examining the early years of Left Front government - popular measures that they took as well as state oppression that they unleashed - is important in order to understand the history of the popular politics in West Bengal in the decades after independence.

Prasanta Ray, one of the discussants, started the panel discussion by enquiring into the inability of the Left Front Government to implement a radical land reform programme. The obstacles that he mentioned are – fear of a backlash by the middle-class people, the fear of opposition from the Central Government, too much dependence on bureaucracy and other governmental organs. He noted that the paper addressed the issue of such failed initiative but he also advised to put such issues in the bigger perspective of party ideology and governmental administration. He also suggested to probe into the role of the Coalition Committee, its efforts in the establishment of a leftist Government and its inability thereafter to positively affect the lower bureaucracy; Ray noted that in order to establish this link, it would be necessary to look at labour formations.

Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, the other discussant, reiterating the basic premise of Ray's criticism, opined that such literature have existed for a long time now and requires a new and different perspective to facilitate a better understanding of the Left front regime in West Bengal. In the case of land reforms, he urged for a complicated and more nuanced understanding of land and power relations. The other point he raised, and asked for a detailed exploration was the issue of "middle peasantisation". With regard to the question of class support that the paper raised, Bhattacharyya stated that there are statistical evidence to show the important role played by middle peasants and school teachers in the mobilisation of the Party.

Questions, Comments and Observations

Prabhu Mahapatra observed that the framework has to be reworked and move beyond the motifs of betrayal and radicalisation. His suggestion was to perceive the shift in the logic of land reform itself. In the period post 60s-70s, he stated that there has been a macro-shift which requires greater deliberation. Bhattacharyya took forward the dialogue and added that a demographic shift had occurred.

Professor Samaddar, citing the differential treatment that the Left front Government doled out to the land reforms and *Operation Barga*, and the functioning of landlords and *jotdars* in 60s and 70s Bengal, suggested that the paper probe deeper into the functioning of the Left front Government in the first few years, its policies such as that of appeasement and its subsequent shift.

Atig, in response, argued that the basis and method of land reform is complicated for a lot of reasons. Migration patterns, sometimes from one village to another, in search of employment was an important factor. On the question of labour and industrial labour, he answered that it is an area that requires research. He further opined that *Panchayati Raj* and *Operation Barga* was instrumental in taking attention away from land reforms. These land reforms, as he explained, did not result in land holdings for landless agricultural workers. *Panchayati Raj* was used for the abolition of peasant organisation.