

MAPPING AGRARIAN STRUGGLE IN BHOJPUR

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The contemporary unease in Indian society manifests itself in multiple forms which demands serious rethinking in terms of identifying its locations. The application of conventional devices dealing with all these longstanding inconveniences has not yielded desired results. Indeed, the persistence of turbulent times is indicative of something which is fundamentally flawed. The instrumentality of state and democracy hardly seems to rescue us from the engulfing flames of protest and discontentment- they rather appear to be more sustained and continue to happen in the routine and regular form. In such a scenario, it is not imprudent to think alternative ways in dealing with them. The paper, therefore, seeks to present a critique of the existing model of agrarian development in India along with focusing on the people's struggle in Bhojpur, and argues for a serious thinking no how to ensure democratic rights to the poor and the marginalized people.

The task of devising new ways takes us on the excursion of democracy and development pursued by the Indian state since independence. Although the legacy of freedom persisted in the decades following independence making the years relatively calm, the period of late sixties began to manifest people's grievances, protest and disquiet. The vision of development did not apparently include all people and places in its embrace and largely remained lackluster in yielding desirable results. Contrary to the hopes, the fruits of economic growth accrued mostly to the rich while the process of development seemingly bypassed the poor. Such

unevenness gave rise to the sharp increase in the incidence of poverty during the 1960s as both the number of the poor and their proportion in the population below poverty line grew substantially.¹ Situation further deteriorated as the poor faced the apathy and indifference of the state on the one hand, and famine and hardships concomitant to them, on the other.

The increasing grip of poverty without tangible sign of improvement forced the poor peasantry in Bhojpur on the path of struggle as an only redemptive alternative. Subsequently, this gave rise to a long narrative of agrarian struggle in Bhojpur that survived and countered the violent responses of both, the state and the entrenched classes. What it did was not only to highlight the failure of the state to keep its promises but alternatively also posited that its basic constitutive premise was flawed. The underlying assumption was based on the then proliferating movements manifested through the Naxalite struggles spreading in Srikakulam, Bhojpur and many other places that posed challenge to the ideology, programme and policies pursued by the state. To put it differently, the politics of democracy and development followed a paradoxical path where the former generated the hope of empowerment and inclusion whereas the latter marginalization and exclusion. The reduction of democracy to merely holding regular election was nothing more than legitimizing such a development that apparently places the rich in a commanding position. In other words, democracy was sought to sustain hegemonic position and pretension of the

state. But the movement and its varied trajectories exposed its claim and rather raised fundamental question on a rationale that was not only totalizing but also creating a realm of conformity. In this context, it was the insistence of these movements that unless 'there is defamiliarization from the dominant mode of experiencing reality, until the oppressive familiarity with the given object world is broken'², the possibility of the emergence of an alternative discourse of human liberation hinges on the future. In the case of India, the formidable alliance forged between two historically opposite classes- the feudal and the capitalist- makes the oppression of the poor brutal and excruciating. The unprecedented alliance between them was sustained and cemented by the mediation of the state whenever there was any rupture. In order to avoid confrontation, the programme of serious bourgeois land reforms was abandoned through a combination of feudal resistance, judicial conservatism and connivance of state congress leadership³. However, the contemporary Indian state has shown explicit inclination towards capitalism based on neo-liberal ideology under the influence of liberalization, privatization and globalization (LPG). In short, this is the trend being pursued seriously and systematically by India since 1991 when it made a crucial turn around in its development discourse.

The context of liberalization in India was influenced both by the internal as well as the external factors. The crisis of Indian state displayed in the decade of 1980s was primarily a result of internal crises such as, a variety of autonomy movements, agrarian struggles, tribal people's movement, anti-caste movements, and above all, the breakdown of political consensus among the elites. Externally also since 1991, this situation coincided with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the unipolar world, making the United States the sole super power. Both these crises entailed the process of transition in the direction of neo-liberal agenda, strongly supported by the dominant foreign powers, albeit on the acceptance of certain specified conditions. In this situation, the national elites, which found difficult to

cope with the growing challenges to their power, now leaned upon the forces of capitalist globalization to maintain their power, and the latter welcomed them if they adopted the terms of globalization. Gradually it became clear that 'economic globalization, military hegemony and communications monopoly were unified package, though with some internal contradictions'⁴. Thus, the process of new market ideology was set in motion from the early 1990s. But the political forces (Congress & BJP) responsible for bringing these changes did not succeed initially in convincing the people of the effectiveness of these policies and as a result, both suffered electoral defeats in 1996 and 2004 elections respectively. The dilemma of democracy and development posed a new challenge which has been aptly characterized as 'the economics of market' and 'the politics of democracy'⁵. The former is exclusive while the latter inclusive. The dynamics of market necessarily exclude people particularly those who do not have purchasing power (the poor and the deprived) but the politics of democracy entails the process of inclusion. Evidently, the contemporary trend of liberalization and globalization has accorded significance to the dynamics of market and tried hard to rationalize it in the realm of politics as well. However, it is difficult to synchronize the economics of market and politics of democracy, notwithstanding the active role played by the state in mediating between these two diverse priorities. Conscious of the fact, the state has realized that the compulsion of electoral politics can only be avoided on its own peril, a kind of realization that has forced state to turn its attention towards the poor-dalit, tribal, backward classes, minorities, women- to hold its hegemonic position. In order to reinforce this position, a host of ameliorative socio-economic programmes were launched by the Government of India in the post 2004 period. NREGA (National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) is one such flagship programme of the rural employment along with many such as, National Rehabilitation and Resettlement policy, Planning Commission appointed Expert Group Report on Development Challenges in Extremist Affected Areas, Arjun

Sengupta's Report on Unorganized Labour, Forest Act, Bihar Land Reforms Commission etc. Needless to say, all these programmes were deliberately designed to legitimize the role of state, establishing its hegemony over all other influential agents of social change. That apart, the real intent of the state seems to create huge domestic market for the capitalist commodity production which is not possible without removal of the unequal land relation as it would enhance the purchasing capacity of the agrarian classes. Being a facilitator for the growth of capitalism, it is incumbent upon the state to suitably appoint commissions and committees with their favorable recommendations to win the consent of the people. This syncs well with the idea that capitalism as a social form needs to be complimented with some political-institutional apparatus in order to expand and reproduce its economic structures. There are certain types of political-institutional forms which constitute preconditions for purely economic reproduction of the capitalist society⁶. To realize this possibility, there is a need of speedy implementation of recommendations given by the various commissions and committees from time to time. The score of the state on this count, while turning to the ground reality, appears to be poor as it has failed to implement the major recommendations of the distribution of surplus ceiling lands and conversion of oral tenancy and its registration in the record of rights. The refusal of Nitish Kumar to place the recommendations of Bihar Land Reform Commission on the floor of the Assembly in 2008 is a testimony to the fact that he relented to the pressures exerted over him by the landed classes, beneficiaries of the non-implementation. Thus, unlike the persistence of the hold of the entrenched agrarian classes, democratic capitalist reforms seem to be ameliorative in the sense of ensuring rights to the poor.

Before being specific to Bihar and Bhojpur, what that follows is a brief appraisal of some basic data concerning agriculture in India. Agricultural issues are also in the forefront of the movement led by the Naxalites- 'Land to the tiller' has been their

main demand constituting the central plank of the struggle for the poor and the landless. Although a large number of people are still dependent upon agriculture for their livelihood, its contribution in gross domestic product (GDP) registers steady decline. While only 18% of the GDP comes from agriculture today, the proportion of the workforce that is engaged in agriculture is 58%, making it even more, 64% in the case of Scheduled Castes. Forty percent of rural households have no land or less than half an acre of land. The estimated number of rural family in the country is 1.30 to 1.80 crores. The number of small and marginal operation holdings has been increasing steadily over the years⁷. While the economy is at present growing at a rate of 8% to 9%, agriculture which provides employment to 58% of the country's work force is growing at less than 3%. This is rightly seen as signifying rising economic disparity between the agriculture and non-agriculture sectors of the economy, but it also signifies continued immiseration of the lower strata in the rural community in an absolute sense⁸.

Situating this overall picture in the contexts of Bihar and Bhojpur would yield some interesting facts about the existing agrarian condition. Historically, Bihar falls in the permanent settlement area of the British India. This gave rise to both unequal land relation and persistence of underdevelopment. Since the land revenue was once permanently settled with the zamindars, the British government was left with little money to invest in rural areas in subsequent years. This made rural Bihar not only to suffer the brunt of *zamindari* system but also from the lack of development of infrastructure. Secondly, the host of parasitic rent seeking social classes pauperized the peasantry, many of whom lost their land-holding leading to widespread landlessness. Elites that it produced were rent seekers based on landed interest. Thus, land determined one's status in society⁹ in Bihar as a result of which it became the most precious possession of the well-off sections who resisted any move to alter the land-relations in the society. In short, this gives historical clue to the emergence of radical peasant movement in the form and under the

leadership of the Naxalites in Bihar and Bhojpur just after two decades of India's independence,

This unequal land pattern has caused multiple disentanglements. The legacy of impoverishment, pauperization and landlessness still continues in today's Bihar, Landlessness in Bihar is increasing as the National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) estimate shows that it has increased from 9 percent in the beginning of the 1990's to 10 percent at the end of the decade¹⁰. Landownership is also closely associated with poverty, and this association is found to be worsening for the landless in the state. While only 67 percent of the rural poor were landless or near landless in 1993-94 by 1999-2000, 75 percent of the rural poor were landless, an increase of 8 percent¹¹. Importance of access to land in poverty alleviation stands out from the fact that while the incidence of poverty had declined for almost all landowning classes, the incidence of poverty has increased for the landless from 51 percent to 56 percent during the 1990's. The share of this group (landless) in the total number of poor has increased from 12% to 14%. The marginal landholding group's share among the total poor had also increased from 55 percent in the early 1990's to 1 percent by 1999-2000. The fact that the condition of the landless and near landless had worsened in the period (i.e., the nineties) when poverty-declined at a faster rate in the state than the national average, only indicates essentiality of access to land as a component of any effective poverty alleviation program¹².

The NSSO survey reports (Report 491, 2003) reveal a very alarming landholding picture in the state. While the marginal and small farmer constituted roughly 96.5 percent of the total owning community, they owned about 66 percent of the total land. Medium and large farmers constituting only 35 percent of the landowning community owned roughly 33 percent of the total land. In particular, if one takes a look at the large landholding group, while such farmers constitute 0.1 percent of the total landowning community, they owned 4.63 percent of total land area. What is worse that while their proportion in total population

of landowning households has declined from 0.2 percent in 1992 to 0.1 percent in 2003, their share in total land area has increased from 4.4 percent to 4.63 percent over the same period. It shows how skewed is the landholding pattern in Bihar. It also indicates that significant amount of land would still be available for distribution provided the ceiling were rationalized and implemented with zeal to avoid outburst of rural violence and unrest.

BHOJPUR EXPERIENCE

What the account discussed so far suggests is that the pervasive landlessness is the main cause of rural poverty in India. The escalation of agrarian violence and unrest in Bhojpur is also the result of poverty which is primarily based on landlessness. As identified by the government of India, Bhojpur is one of the poorest districts among the hundred districts (Prakash Louis, 2002: 75) of the country. It is also predominantly an agrarian society characterized by unequal landholding like the rest of Bihar. This district invites the attention of the people because of its turbulent history of peasant unrests. The decade of 1920's was marked by two distinct movements, one that was led by the Kisan Sabha under the leadership of legendary Swami Sahajanand, and the other by the Triveni Sangh under the joint leadership of backward castes, creating a new political consciousness among these people that marked the politics in the post-independent Bihar. Yet their benefits were mainly reaped both by the landowning upper castes and the upper backward castes as well, leaving the poor and the lower castes not only out of the ambit of any benefits accruing to them but also without being lifted from the oppressive semi-feudal agrarian condition. These are the people who were mobilized by the radical peasant movements that surfaced in the districts in the early 1970's. Although it was unheeded by the state branding it as unlawful Naxalite onslaught, it truly galvanized these poor people and brought a new political consciousness of their rights, particularly those of land, wages, and dignity that they pursued with zeal and vigour brought by the movement. Since then, these democratic demands kept reverberating in all their

struggles that followed, despite partial fulfilments of the demands. Despite being called the radical or the Naxalite, their demands were the democratic demands that could be recognized by any democratic regime, first articulated and mobilized by the movement and participated by the poor people in the district.

The livelihood of the people in rural India critically depends on the possession and cultivation of the land. Therefore, any program of agrarian development has absolutely no possibility of success if it is not followed with concomitant land reforms. Although Bihar is one of the early states in India to abolish *zamindari* system in 1950s, the agenda of land reforms largely remains incomplete and unaccomplished. The land reform measures which were meant to be implemented just after the abolition of *zamindari* system were in fact implemented in 1970s after several revisions and re-revisions. This provided enough opportunities to the vested landed class to make necessary changes by transferring land to the known and unknown people to evade the provisions of land ceiling Act. Consequently, the delayed and incomplete land reform measures have caused widespread landlessness in Bihar in general and Bhojpur in particular. The major issue of agrarian struggle revolves around the distribution of ceiling surplus land and the ownership right on common government land. The issue of land sustains the strong desire of landless and marginal peasants for getting land that is illegally possessed by the rich land holders.

The persisting unequal land relation set the stone rolling, recognizing the urgent need to alter the continuing conditions. It is in this context that the Bihar government of Nitish Kumar constituted the Bihar land reforms commission in 2006 to make recommendations on the land reforms to remove hurdles in its implementation. The commission submitted its report in April 2008, foregrounding three specific agrarian issues-share cropping, fixation and distribution of ceiling lands, and distribution of lands donated in Bhoodan. After working meticulously on the existing ambiguities on different

land ceiling categories and way to their removal, the commission set one single category of fifteen acres for all kinds of land for distribution in case of exceeding the limit. Secondly, in order to remove and rectify the unjust oral tenancy, it recommended the registration of all tenants to ensure them tenurial security, making stringent provisions against the eviction of the tenants. These recommendations were intended to empower and enable the share croppers in order to make them avail all kinds of bank loans on the basis of recorded cultivation of land. Lastly, it also recommended the identification and distribution of bhoodan land, not distributed even after being donated four decades ago. Ironically, the very government of Nitish Kumar that appointed the commission to recommend measures to democratize the agrarian relation summarily rejected the report even before placing it on the floor of the state assembly. This shows how difficult it is to break the strong hold of socially dominant classes over the agrarian life of Bihar. In case of Bhojpur, this aspect was long highlighted by the World Bank expert, Wolf Ladejinsky when he was supervising the prospect of intensive area development project in Shahabad (Bhojpur was then the part of undivided Shahabad) in 1963. Ladejinsky complained of the forged land records in Shahabad in which the tenants did not find place. Being aware of the causes of miserable conditions of the tenants, he observed, "Ejection of tenant has taken place in the past and the landlords still continue to change tenants from plot to plot to defeat the tenancy law. The few tenants who were allowed to continue over a fairly long period also feel insecure. Thus, a large number of cultivators hold no title to the leased lands, pay exorbitant rents and are never certain of their statuses...¹³. The existing coalition of social interests reflected through the government headed by Nitish Kumar posed insurmountable challenge to him in implementing these measures as they would not only harm the interests of supporting social groups but would also jeopardize his own position as the chief Minister. In addition, the fear of election and its uncertain verdicts also deterred him not to dare antagonize the dominant social classes of Bihar. Nonetheless, these recommendations have already

created a crisis situation by stirring the poor peasant and their expectations being raised of getting land. The report may turn out to be Operation Barga of Bihar sooner or later and the political force which would organize the poor peasant around these issues may succeed politically in the long run because it defies the logic of dominance.

The existing structure of dominance and its subversive capacity stands unabated as it can easily stall any measure of poverty eradication if it poses challenge to its dominance. The enduring nature of nexus between social and political power greatly impedes any programme of democratizing agrarian structures. It reminds that if democratic claims are not followed in the practice, the possibility of alleviating poverty becomes, if not impossible, difficult. It is also posited that democracy instead of becoming legitimizing tool must become the part of political mobilization and participation of the people.

Unlike the Western society, capitalism entered in the non- Western societies through colonialism that was imposed upon them coercively and deceptively by the European powers. In other words, it has no indigenous roots, nor has it emerged as a result of revolution, replacing a strong and well laid feudal system. So, from its very inception, it is an imposition and a symbol of domination in India and elsewhere. Clearly, the trajectory of capitalism in the post-independence India is not new and uncharted like never before but forms a continuum in the hands of capitalist class. When the British left India, the Indian capitalist class expanded the existing base of capitalist infrastructure but without antagonizing the rural agrarian elites. The joining of two altogether different oppressive systems has always severely impoverished the life and living of the poor in India. The two unjust systems can in no way facilitate the process of deepening democracy in such societies. Therefore, the countervailing forces are not only fighting against the oppressive agrarian structures but simultaneously mobilizing people against the imminent threat of capitalism and corporate globalization. The various shades of left and democratic movements along with civil society

initiatives fall in the category of democratic countervailing forces. It is important to know that the radical and violent outbursts of extreme left in such society gradually turn into democratic mass mobilization and ultimately, they realize the merit and significance of mass mobilization and participation in the election process. The split in the Communist Parties is mostly on the issues of radical agenda and the aggrieved left faction parts ways from the main party to pursue the course of radical violent path of social change. However, gradually they also realize the untenability of violence morally, politically and practically. The significance of democracy does not lie in succumbing to the imperatives of power, led either by the state or the countervailing forces supported by the uncritical adherence to the ideological power, but making it to move in the direction of democratizing the forms of power. Yet the danger of co-option looms large in the name of democracy. But it is not unusual, unnatural. It happens many a time that the autonomy of the ideology/world view succumbs to the imperatives of power/systemic power. To avert the dilution of democratic ideology and co-option of leaders of the struggle, there is an urgent need of the formation of people's democratic organizations (PDOs). These PDOs can promptly exercise their control on any deviation either of their leaders or of their commitment to democracy. The report of the Bihar land reforms commission (2006-2008) has also hinted on this aspect "the key to success would be strong organizations of prospective beneficiaries, vociferously claiming and demanding change in their favor ..."¹⁴. Apart from this, the fear of co-option and the issue of violence are overstated because we are unnecessarily swayed by the idea of finality. In fact, the tool of finality in understanding social phenomena does not help solve problem, rather it creates a web of confusion around the issue that is sought to be resolved. No solution or ideological construct is final and absolute. The dynamic core of it always corresponds to the changing existing reality which obtains from time to time. All these realizations made the cadre and the party to turn towards the politics of democracy and mass mobilization. No wonder the CPI (Maoist) – which

doggedly pursues the politics of violent change in India at this juncture – might change suddenly and ultimately turn towards the politics of intense democratic mass mobilization like CP (ML) Liberation. Moreover, at both the phases of radical violent struggle and intense mass mobilization, their actual agenda remained democratic. In both the phases, they mobilized people for the realization of democratic rights like land, wages and dignity. Though its professed long term ideology may be based on an orthodox understanding of capturing state power by force, in its day to day manifestation it is to be looked upon as basically a fight for social justice, equality, protection and local development.¹⁵ In this context, it is important to note that the main demand of the Maoist backed Committee led by Chakradhar Mahto in Lalgarh(Jharkhand) is first, to stop police atrocities against the tribal which is the basic democratic demand of protection of life and dignity in any society. In fact, the realization of rights such as distribution of ceiling surplus land, the demand of minimum wages and dignity are all explicitly democratic demands. But the objective social reality of semi-capitalist and semi-feudal agrarian society acts as a shield against the realization of these democratic rights. Also the state, which has a strong stake in such a reality, consciously dithers to take bold steps against these entrenched social classes. Consequently, democracy continues to remain elusive for the large masses, gradually forcing them to take recourse to struggle. The process of struggle consists of both violent and intense mass-mobilization in which many left forces and variety of civil society organizations are actively involved. Historically, the task of democratic transformation continues unabated, the validity of any political project of change is also historically driven and determined. No matter how meticulously a grand narrative of change framed, seldom it becomes infallible.

The understanding of democracy as the democratic transformation of the forms of power invites attention on the merit of the use of violence by either of the contending parties. The radical movement in Bhojpur repeatedly hauled up on the

issue of violence and its justification for lasting social peace. Evading answer not only keeps the extreme left forces away from the normative human concerns, they are also denied hegemonic position in the democratic discourse of social transformation in India. Yet, the issue of violence is too intricate to content with simple selective position on it. Resorting to violence indubitably lies in the hands of strong persons, groups, and the other similar collectivities. The series of massacres of the poor peasants in Bhojpur and other places in Bihar are not orchestrated by the poor and the meek but by the strong and the entrenched. Ironically, such massacres do not shake the conscience of those who pretend to detest the use of violence. In contrast, if in a bid to save himself the poor kill the socially powerful, it is strongly condemned by these people, and the state acts promptly in arresting them and seizing their properties. Such double standards and selective positions will hardly ever serve the cause of peace in society and the establishment of violent free society. To negate violence from social life urgently needs to address the primary cause of violence where it is looked into in its entirety and not from socially driven selective positions.

What emerges out of the above discussion makes it explicit that the struggle, despite being partially successful, has yielded some positive gains to the peasants, denied to them for centuries in Bhojpur keeping the democratic hopes alive in concert with their dignity as well. Democratic failure never ever allows its significance to wane, working as a beacon for future struggles. Indeed, this is the historic gain making people conscious of their rights, and imbuing determination in them to achieve and ameliorate their condition without being exhausted by the intermittent failures. The agent of such social change may be a particular party with its specific ideological inclination but the importance and successes are largely settled by the spontaneous responses rendered to such efforts at crucial historical junctures by the people themselves. It is true that this task of shouldering radical peasant movements was initially undertaken by the militant left group/groups but its long spell made it

categorical that what was desired by these groups was not as important as what was prioritized by the people moderating the initial militancy of the movement and reorienting it towards the democratic agenda. Clearly, the changing mood of the people was read well by the CPI(ML) Liberation that forced it to turn from a radical outfit to a democratic political party legally recognized and thereby enabling it to participate in elections and also registering electoral victories in different assembly constituencies of Bhojpur. The experiences thus gained in Bhojpur is an example for other radical groups to emulate and incorporate the lessons learnt during the long course of struggle in Bhojpur, defying the logic of finality and orthodox adherence to any ideological persuasions. Thus, if the possibilities are not realized in one go does not make the 'idea of democracy' redundant but gives a chance for introspection and rectification in order to relaunch the movement in the light of understanding gained at the instance and guidance of the people during the cessation of such democratic movements. In brief, the upshot of the long saga of the agrarian struggle in Bhojpur is nothing but rekindling and reinforcing hope in democracy even at the times of crisis and its apparent failures.

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