
REINVENTING REVOLUTION

New Social Movements
and the
Socialist Tradition in
INDIA

Gail Omvedt

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An East Gate Book

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Comrade

by Prabhakar Gangurde
Astitva, Aurangabad, 1978

*Don't expect revolution
from those living corpses,
comrade.
First you
become their beacon.
The revolution that
will flash like lightning
and not be extinguished in any storm
is still far far
away.
Don't be in a hurry for revolution.
You are still very small;
your ability to resist
the atrocities, boycotts and rapes
that go on every moment
has become nil,
comrade.
Tomorrow's sun is yet to rise;
sleep undisturbed until then.
Take the fantasy out of
your daydreams.
What will happen
from simply waving the red flag
over the many colors of reality?
In showing the way to violent revolution
take care
of your own existence, comrade.
I'm worried about you,
not knowing
what will happen tomorrow.
The sun will set.
Where are you going
with your existence in the dark,
comrade?*

*Don't be so impatient,
 there are some boundaries to sacrifice.
 From a thousand sacrifices
 what will be accomplished?
 This is the
 story of each generation.
 Why give to one generation only
 the sacrifice of all generations?
 Comrade don't be so anxious,
 don't worry about me.
 Now I have awakened,
 I am moving in blazing sunlight.
 Come . . .
 You won't come with me
 you won't embrace me.
 I have tiger claws scattered
 all over my body.
 They won't pierce you.
 If they pierce you it is
 certainly not for your sacrifice
 comrade.*

(Dalit poem of the late 1970s; translated by Gail Omvedt and Bharat Patankar. The “tiger claws” in the last section refer to the weapons used by the Maratha king Shivaji to kill the Muslim chief Afzal Khan in an embrace at a meeting in which both were planning treachery.)

Introduction

"LONG YEARS ago we made a tryst with destiny, and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge, not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially. At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom."

These were the words with which Jawaharlal Nehru, a leader of India's dominant Congress party and the first prime minister of the country, hailed its independence in 1947.¹ Nehru, the aristocratic scion of a long line of Kashmiri brahmans, was himself to be a virtual dynastic founder, with his daughter (Indira) and grandson (Rajiv) to follow him. Nevertheless, he and other Congress leaders had led a long, often militant if nonviolent struggle under the leadership of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, and with planning and public ownership accepted even by the Indian bourgeoisie, the country seemed set on at least a semisocialistic path. Nehru had some basis to proclaim his achievements.

But others were not so optimistic. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, "Babasaheb," son of an untouchable minor military officer, educated to heights that would have been unimaginable for any earlier generation, leader of his people and a vociferous opponent of Nehru's Congress party as the "party of brahmans and the bourgeoisie," had nevertheless been chosen to draft the constitution of the newly independent nation. "On 26 January, 1950," warned Ambedkar before the constituent assembly, referring to the day celebrated as "Republic Day," "we are going to enter into a life of contradictions. In politics we shall have equality and in social and economic life we will have inequality. . . . We must remove this contradiction at the earliest possible moment or else those who suffer from inequality will blow up the structure of political democracy which we have so laboriously built up."²

If atrocities against untouchables did not stop, thundered Ambedkar on subsequent occasions to his impoverished and oppressed followers, "I myself will burn the constitution."

Over four decades later, it is Ambedkar's centenary that is celebrated with tumultuous mass meetings rather than Nehru's, and it is the explosions and

contradictions he prophesied that appear to be overwhelming Nehru's promises. Even more striking, they are not the explosions of the "class struggle" of traditional Marxism but rather have been revolving around the kind of issues—of caste, gender, community, and ethnicity—represented by people like Ambedkar.

These are the issues of what are beginning to be called, as they exert their force in countries throughout the world, the "new social movements." By the end of the 1980s they were the questions defining Indian politics. Workers' struggles persist, but calls for "nationalization" are no longer heard, and it is instead demands for higher prices for farm products and debt relief that are part of the agenda of every political party. "Agrarian reform" is still a slogan, but only in small pockets are there serious efforts to capture land from big landlords; instead, determined popular struggles have emerged throughout the country to save land being lost for the construction of dams or other government projects, with an increasing call for "alternative development." The urban and rural poor have responded with only moderate enthusiasm to "class demands" such as struggles for employment, while proposals to give members of their castes and communities reservations in public service have shaken up the country and emerged as the central slogan of the "left and democratic" forces. And, while "armed struggle" clearly remained on some people's agenda, it is not the armed struggle of revolutionary upsurge, but more often religion dominated "liberation movements" for autonomy or independence in the peripheral regions of the subcontinent, shaking not only Kashmir and the hill tribes of the northeast, but also Punjab, Assam, and, in different ways, Tamilnadu.

By the late 1980s the predominant features of Indian politics had become the "new social movements" of women, dalits and low castes, peasants, farmers, and tribals as well as ethnicity-based struggles for autonomy or independence on the periphery and the violence-ridden assertion of religious fundamentalism. The hegemony of the Congress party has been decisively broken; "Nehruvian" models of development are discredited. The major "centrist" alternative to the Congress, the Janata Dal, has been defined in terms of at least some of the issues represented by the new movements. The Communist parties have survived, better than in most countries in the world, but only by taking up the same issues. The main theme of the Janata Dal left-regional party campaign in the 1991 elections was in fact a major demand of the movement led for so long by Ambedkar, that is, the implementation of reservations in public service for dalits and low castes, under the slogan of "social justice."

Have the new social movements then "arrived"? Hardly, for the caste oppression, patriarchy, loot of peasants' labor and natural resources, drought, and environmental destruction that they have protested against goes on. The parties, left and center, keep backtracking and "betraying" their promises, and the movements can get no direct representation in the party structure and have failed to form an alternative political front of their own. The ideological hegemony of the Congress party has been broken along with its political hammerlock on the

center, and the preeminence of traditional Marxism among the opposition has been shaken up by the slogans and theories raised by the activists of the new movements; yet no new alternative, no differently articulated version of socialism has as yet emerged as a political force. The new social movements have thus arrived on the threshold of an alternative model of politics and development, but they are as yet unable to cross it, while the unmapped terrain beyond is barely discernible.

This book focuses on the four major new social movements in India—the women's movement, the anticaste movement of dalits and other low or "shudra" castes, the environmental movement, and the farmers' movement of peasants struggling over issues of market production. Based on participant observation, documentation from the movements themselves and from newspaper and journal reports, and academic studies, it describes the process of their rise from the early 1970s to their arrival on the threshold of the 1990s.

It is also concerned with the great debate surrounding these movements. This is a debate that has taken place largely within the context of Marxism, since Marxism has been the main ideology of those struggling for relief from oppression and exploitation in India, and as people have begun to struggle in new ways and formulate new theories and ideologies, they have done so, quite often, in confrontation with what I describe as "traditional Marxism." It is important to note that this debate has included academics as well as activists, and that academics, as upper castes, as males, as members of an urban elite, are often confronted by the movements. For this reason I have treated the studies and theoretical positions of intellectuals regarding the social movements as part of the ongoing ideological debate in and about the movements, conditioned by their own social position and related to the hegemonic ideological structures of the society—not as theories that should be used to analyze the movements or which are to be tested with reference to the movements. In other words, this is a book about the movements themselves, not an effort to give a full analysis of the social system that has generated them. To give an example, I am concerned, at this point, not so much to refute or confirm interpretations of the women's movement as "bourgeois feminism" or of the farmers' movement as representing a "kulak lobby," but rather to understand the significance of the fact that they are understood in this way by specific groups of people.

Nevertheless, some major distinctions with important studies of Indian political economy should be mentioned. Overwhelmingly, those who work with some kind of "class" model of Indian politics, indeed any notion of a "political economy," whether it is the Rudolphs, Francine Frankel, other European Marxists, the traditional Marxists of the "mode of production" debate, or the new Marxists of the "subaltern studies" group, or for that matter left-identified scholars such as Atul Kohli, define "class" in terms of private property and overlook the relations of exploitation and surplus extraction between toilers (for instance, landowning small peasants) and those controlling other conditions of production, the market,

or the state itself. That is, they may see the state as backing up a system of exploitation and maintaining "domination" (with more or less autonomy), but they do not see it as a direct agent of exploitation, and they do not see state powerholders as exploiters. "Class/caste" conflicts are thus defined as centering on the village or local level, whether within the enterprise between capitalists and workers, or within the locality between rich farmers and laborers, landlords or moneylenders and peasants, landholding "dominant castes" and low castes/dalits. Outside of this are "political" relations only. The exploitation of nonwage laborers, with petty commodity producers, sellers of minor forest produce, or subsistence producers, is missed, and so are the processes of surplus extraction of nature's products that are linked to the destruction of nature.

Thus the Rudolphs can see Indian politics as "centrist" in spite of struggles mounted by small peasants, precisely because they define these as petty-bourgeois commodity producers ("bullock capitalists") and not as exploited toilers.³ Similarly, Atul Kohli can argue in his latest book that "The socioeconomic forces at work are well understood by development scholars and require only brief mention. . . . What looms even larger . . . is a series of political variables" only because he, like the "development scholars" who presumably thoroughly understand them, defines "socioeconomic forces" exclusive of relations between the state and workers or peasants.⁴ For that matter, in spite of the brilliant contributions of the "subaltern studies" school with regard to the colonial period, its practitioners have hardly made a stab at dealing with the postcolonial period, partly because of the dilemmas in defining "subaltern." (Was Ambedkar subaltern? Are upper class women subaltern?) Those who do so, such as Partha Chatterjee, still use "traditional Marxist" frameworks that see the peasantry as necessarily differentiating, so that the maintenance of "community" is seen as now illegitimate. Nearly all interpretations of social movements, new or old, are within this framework.⁵ Only a few recent studies and analyses, for instance Tornquist on India and Indonesia or van Schendal on India and Burma, have begun to look at relations of exploitation and surplus extraction between the centers of national and world capitalism and the rural localities,⁶ and there are even fewer that deal with new social movements.

Within India, there has not been much conceptualization of the "new social movements" as such. In the early 1980s Rajni Kothari and others connected with the Lokayan group brought forward the concept of "nonparty political formations," which brought together new women's organizations, nonparty mass organizations such as the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha, and funded "voluntary agencies" to contrast them with traditional left parties and their mass organizations. But funded organizations (though sometimes connected with movements) are neither "political" nor movements, and it is more accurate to treat specific women's organizations and groups like the JMM as "people's organizations" and the movements they are connected with as "social movements." Many Marxists have suggested the term "popular movements," but this tends to imply a privileged

(and vanguard) position for “working class” movements, a position that the new movements themselves reject in theory and ignore in practice.

Finally, there is an increasingly popular conceptualization of the new movements as “grass roots” movements. A recent article, “Nine Theses on Social Movements” by André Gunter Frank and Marta Fuentes, describes new movements generally as basically “grass roots” and apolitical. This has been criticized by D. N. Dhanagare and J. John as “essentialist,” arguing that “Frank and Fuentes conspire theoretically to take away political consciousness from the exploited classes and bestow upon them an apolitical force of morality and social power.”⁷ The point is well taken. Frank and Fuentes are essentialist, for instance, when they claim that “similarly to the women’s movement, the very notion of state or even political party power for them [individually small-scale community-based movements] would negate most of their grass roots aims and essence.”⁸ This rests on defining movements in such a way as to exclude those that are “political.” Yet, in India, the anticaste movement has had political power as a core thrust; the farmers’ movement has consciously sought to organize a political impact even while shying away from politics in the traditional sense, and even the women’s movement has enthusiastically taken up political aims at the local and regional levels. Similarly, the new movements are no more “grass roots” than “old” social movements based on workers and peasants. Yet most discussions of “new social movements” appear to be influenced by the “grass roots” conceptualization, and usually exclude discussion of the anticaste movement and the farmers’ movement. Thus, while using the concept of “new social movements,” it is necessary to differentiate the analysis from “Theses” such as these, which are too much under the impact of NGO-generated ideologizations of social movements.

The “new social movements” have the following characteristics:

1. They are “social movements” in the sense of having a broad overall organization, structure, and ideology aiming at social change.
2. They are “new” in that they themselves, through the ideologies they generate, define their exploitation and oppression, the system that generates these, and the way to end this exploitation and oppression, in “new” terms—related to traditional Marxism but having clear differences with it. They cannot, in other words, be seen as simply “popular movements” of sections willing to follow along under the vanguardship of the working class and its parties or accept working class ideology; they consciously reject this kind of relationship and question the ideology as they have experienced it.
3. They are movements of groups that were either ignored as exploited by traditional Marxism (women, dalits, and shudras) or who are exploited in ways related to the new processes of contemporary capitalism (peasants forced to produce for capital through market exploitation managed by the state, peasants and forest dwellers victimized by environmental degradation) but left unconceptualized by a preoccupation with “private property” and wage labor.

4. The full analysis of their position requires thus a modified Marxist, that is, a historical materialist analysis of the contemporary capitalist system.

As noted, this report focuses on four major new social movements. It will deal with them in their relation to Indian society and the state, and to the Marxism of the existing left parties and Indian intellectuals.

Following a background section in part I, the four chapters of part II describe the emergence of these movements in the period between 1972 and 1985. Part III examines the relationship of the movements with the working class movement and traditional Marxism (both the Marxism of the intellectuals and the Marxism of the Communist parties); it looks at their interaction with the politics of the period, including the issues raised by the ethnic-nationality movements (e.g., those of Assam and Punjab); the problems of the rising of religious fundamentalism, or “communalism” as it is called in the Indian context (referring to the defining of religious communities as the relevant unit of action); and the responses of the political elite. Part IV takes up the period from 1985 to the present, one of the intermingling of the movements at the base (spearheaded in some ways by developments in the women’s movement, particularly among organizations based on rural women) and a move to formulate models of and struggle for aspects of “alternative development,” an emerging concept implying an “alternative socialism.”

The approach offered here is that the movements are revolutionary in their aspirations and antisystemic in their impact; they have been oriented as single-issue (“one-point program,” in Indian terminology) efforts to bring about change, but, because they have grown in a period in which the solutions of “traditional socialism” are so overwhelmingly discredited, they are faced, in spite of this “single-issue” orientation, with the task of “reinventing revolution.”

The basic framework of the approach used here is that while Marxism has been called the historical materialism of the proletariat, what is needed today is a historical materialism of not only industrial factory workers, but also of peasants, women, tribals, dalits and low castes, and oppressed nationalities. It can no longer be assumed that a theory that (apparently) serves the needs of the industrial working class is adequate for the liberatory struggles of the whole society. An analysis of capitalism will be insufficient, even erroneous, if it does not move out of the sphere of commodity production and exchange in which value is defined in terms of abstract labor time and capital accumulation is defined through the appropriation of surplus value only.

Domestic labor produces surplus labor (but not as surplus value) necessary for capital accumulation; “nature” is the source of wealth (but not of exchange-value) and thus also contributes to capital accumulation even while being kept outside the sphere of valorization. Finally, the thesis of “primitive accumulation” points to the way in which the sphere of commodity production and exchange (“capitalism” in the narrow sense) is embedded in a larger society in which production relations and accumulation are defined in terms of force and violence

exerted against nonwage laborers. All of these have to be taken together to produce a unified theory, for the sphere of capital accumulation and its processes is wider than the sphere of commodity production and exchange as normally defined.

And so, revolution itself has to be defined in broader terms: it can no longer consist of the “proletariat” in commodity production taking over the “means of production,” for this will only yield a state-managed system of wider exploitation. The fate of the East European statist societies has sufficiently shown this. Redefining revolution, then, is the need of the time, and the beginning of this process can be seen in India’s new social movements.

This study owes its origin to the innumerable movement activists and participants with whom I have interacted, debated, and argued; who have given me their time and hospitality and passed on something of their fervor for change. Their names are too numerous to mention here; many of them appear in the following pages. I owe a great debt to the Centre for Social Studies in Surat for providing the facilities and time necessary to carry through the production of a viable manuscript: a library and computer room open twenty-four hours a day and gracious and helpful colleagues and staff have made all the differences.

And for moral support and inspiration I owe gratitude to the entire “Patankar-Nikam” family, most especially of course to Bharat Patankar. Of them, I would like to dedicate this book to Surya, whose own special moral support and inspiration was tragically too brief.

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