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The question of ‘subaltern’ in Indian revolutionary movement: A critical appraisal

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Abstract

While early revolutionaries made no substantial effort to go beyond middle class educated youth and students either theoretically or in practice, later revolutionaries was also not very successful in this regard. But does this mean that the concerns of vast majority of the Indian population i.e. the peasantry were irrelevant for them? Looking at the propaganda literature, we clearly see that economic and social conditions of colonial India held a lot of importance for pre-Bhagat Singh era revolutionaries and greatly influenced their politics. Among the books which were circulated, the most common was *Desh Ki Baat*, a textbook on economic nationalism which described the destruction of peasants and artisans due to British rule in great detail. Arya Samaj played a very crucial role in the lives of most leaders of the revolutionaries of North India but for the purpose of circulating books among students, they preferred Arya Samaji Swami Satyadev Parivrajak's texts on social and political themes more than Dayanand's *Satyartha Prakash*. Books on revolutions and revolutionary thought were published and distributed. Religious idioms were used in these writings to express concrete political programmes.

Keywords: Revolutionary movement, subaltern, colonial intelligentsia

Introduction

It cannot be denied that despite their concern for the subaltern, even the later revolutionaries chose to focus on upper caste middle class Hindus. Nirbhay Singh ‘Ulfat’ explains how Dev Narain, leader of the Matrivedi group, focussed on Rajput students while recruiting from his school ^[1]. Caste prejudices and cultural anxieties thus certainly influenced their politics but does this mean that the revolutionary movement was all about anxieties of the intelligentsia? From the writings of Edward Said and Dipesh Chakravarty, we know that in a colonial context, elites are also subaltern due to the colonisation of their mind ^[2]. However, it is not a one sided process as the colonized also uses the colonial modernity to rebel against exploitation, racial humiliation and oppression. An episode from the activities of Matrivedi in Mainpuri district of UP is interesting in this regard when it tried to mobilize schoolboys for a strike in the Mission High School. Dalpat Singh, one of the government approvers in Mainpuri conspiracy case, informs that Hindu boys of the school started appearing with sandalwood paste marks on their foreheads. When this was objected to, they went on strike which was led by Matrivedians. The Superintendent of the boarding house was assaulted when he opposed the staying of some students in the boarding and also mistreated a boy. Nine students were expelled from the school including the Matrivedians ^[3].

So was Matrivedi fighting for self-respect of caste Hindus against the British? How can it be called ‘revolutionary’ then when it was actually a struggle to revive the lost glory the elite enjoyed in the pre-colonial traditional society? But then why do revolutionaries make such vicious attacks on successful and well-to-do Indians who were able to live a life of pomp and grandeur due to their loyalism? Instead the literature they promoted made fun of their prosperous lifestyle and exaggerated their slavish relationship with the British. In contrast to these collaborators, those patriots are always invoked who fought for crores of poor peasants of India.

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¹ Sudhir Vidyarthi, *Shaheedon Ke Hamsafar*.

² Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. London & Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978; Dipesh Chakravarty, ‘Minority histories, subaltern pasts’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, February 1998, pp. 473-79.

³ Mainpuri Conspiracy Case Papers, Vol.11

If it was the condition of subaltern which really moved them, what role did they see for themselves in their emancipation? Here comes the concept of 'revolutionary elitism' which I argue was the guiding force behind their politics and also of the Hindustan Republican Association despite ideological differences. They shared the vision of mainstream nationalists who according to Gyan Prakash gave central importance to the state in the process of nation-building^[4], but what differentiates them is their uncompromising struggle and the concrete programmes, strategies and tactics which they laid out and tried to implement for de facto capture of state power which was missing even in the politics of Indian communists for a long time. They dreamt of seizing power from the British through an open armed rebellion led by a revolutionary elite, which once it would capture the state would bring about the transformation of the country and ensure national progress. In this sense, while they certainly wanted to replace the colonial masters by a revolutionary elite mainly consisting of individuals from the traditional/new dominant social groups (i.e. from the propertied classes) but they were not really concerned with the interests of these classes. The feudal elites were always attacked by revolutionaries as oppressors and exploiters, despite many of them coming from the same background, and their relationship with middle class as a whole also remained vacillating mainly due to the radical programme of their politics. By late 1920s, many revolutionaries recognized the wavering character of the middle class, though its members continued to dominate their politics, and increasingly came out in favour of giving peasants and workers a predominant role. Bipan Chandra also argued that 'in northern India, the spread of socialist consciousness owed a lot to them'^[5]. That is why revolutionaries as a political force joined the communist movement in such huge numbers. The vision of an all-transforming revolution continued to dominate their politics.

Sole focus on violent actions of revolutionaries by historians tends to dilute their radical interventions on many contentious issues of the time even before Bhagat Singh. Far from being reckless, they took into account various contradictions in the Indian society. Some like Ram Prasad Bismil many times expressed their revolutionary vision in religious idioms but clearly exhibited an understanding of diversities of Indian nationalism.

But what differentiated revolutionaries from other radicals such as B.R. Ambedkar was their single-minded approach towards the question of capturing state power. While they tried to accommodate the aspirations of peasants and workers in a big way from 1920s and some like Bismil were even thinking of women, dalits and religious minorities, they did not think in terms of 'fragments' and also were also not in the illusion that more representation or sharing of power with the colonial state could bring any real transformation. They committed themselves to the goal of complete severing of relationship with the British and organized their politics around this vision.

The students and middle class youth were deeply influenced

by revolutionaries. Bismil and his comrades got lots of sympathy in UP and their hunger-strike in jail also served the cause of propaganda. Fearing this, the government engaged itself in counter-propaganda. It was keen to establish their links with the Bolsheviks and the approvers were tutored to make personal attacks on the accused especially regarding their integrity. HRA activists used their press contacts especially in popular nationalist periodicals like *Pratap*, *Swadesh*, *Abhyuday* and *Chand* to organize a 'media-campaign' for the under-trials^[6].

Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi was not only at the forefront of the media campaign but also published one of the earliest editions of Bismil's autobiography. Kakori Day was celebrated in many cities and towns of UP. Their strategy literally forced the political leadership to come out in their support in the press, in the legislature and even in the courts. One might argue that the Congress hijacked the revolutionary propaganda as Kama Maclean argues happened in case of Bhagat Singh^[7] but if one looks more deeply then there are evidences to show that it was revolutionaries themselves who were able to propagate their radical anti-imperialism in contrast to the prevailing electoral or communitarian or Gandhi's 'constructive programme' kind of politics through their supreme sacrifices and publicity efforts by their colleagues outside the jail. Kakori became a legend in UP and the propaganda of Bismil and his comrades in HRA bore fruit in late 1920s when Bhagat Singh and Chandrashekhar Azad were able to build up a stronger revolutionary movement out of its ashes. While many revolutionary (in the sense the term is used in this paper)-turned-Marxists called their former politics romanticism and adventurism due to their acceptance of a new ideological framework, the revolutionaries' vision of a national armed revolution had its own theoretical justification and historical context and even in their practice they were many times able to make such inroads that while 1857 or Bolshevik Revolution remained a distant dream, the horrors of Irish War of Independence which had resulted in the Treaty of 1921, granting partial independence to Ireland, were there to haunt the government of India.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that many revolutionaries were soon to realize the inadequacies of their political programme, the historical necessity of militant radicalism of the middle class cannot be denied as is proved in our contemporary history by the students upsurge during the JP Movement or the national liberation movements of oppressed nationalities throughout the world. Historians have since long enough recognized the need to study subversive ideas and popular rebellions but not enough efforts have been made to locate those visions which had concrete programmes of bringing about radical transformation. Along with the histories of dissent, protest and resistance, one needs to also recover the histories of revolutionary visions which went beyond them and openly laid out seizure of political power and establishing alternative system as their goal, even if they were not realised. This would enrich our understanding of radical ideas and politics.

⁴ Gyan Prakash, *Another Reason*.

⁵ Chandra, Bipan, Mridula Mukherjee, Aditya Mukherjee, K.N. Pannikar & Sucheta Mahajan. *India's Struggle for Independence*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1988.

⁶ Ramkrishna Khatri, *Shaheedon Ki Chhaya Mein*. Nagpur: Vishwa Bharati Prakashan, 1983.

⁷ Maclean, 'The Potrait's Journey'; 'Imagining the Indian nationalist movement'.

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