

Chapter 2 - A Mission Found

A soothing cool wind was blowing across as a friend of mine and I stood chatting together lounging against the balcony wall in front of our second floor rooms in our hostel on a hot summer evening in Kharagpur in West Bengal. We were cogitating over the publication of the next issue of an independent campus magazine that my friend used to publish at that time. I was then in 1983 in my final year as a student of civil engineering in the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) in Kharagpur. The road from the rural interior to Kharagpur town used to pass through the IIT campus at that time bifurcating it into two. The administrative buildings and the academic departments were on one side and the hostels, recreation centres, markets and the residences were on the other. The hostel in which I used to stay was the first one on the side of this road and had a big open field in front of it. As we looked out onto this field we saw a caravan of bullock carts laden with hay slowly wind its way into it.

On earlier occasions too I had seen these caravans come in on Thursday evenings to spend the night on this field and move out again the next morning. I felt a little curious and asked my friend whether he was ready to come down with me to talk to these carters. He was reluctant at first but when I pointed out to him that we might get a story for the magazine he agreed. By the time we reached them the carters had already had their frugal dinner and were preparing to stretch out for the night. They gathered together as we began talking to one of them. They were all adivasis living in villages on the banks of the River Subarnarekha some twentyfive kilometers away. They were either landless or marginal farmers. In either case they were short of cash all the time and so did all kinds of odd jobs. One of these was to cart the hay from the fields of big landowners to the weekly auction held every Friday in Kharagpur town. They were paid Rs two per day for their labours.

Conversation warmed up and we asked the carters whether they knew what the big buildings in front of which they were camping were for. They replied in the negative. Then my friend explained to them at length, patiently replying to their interested queries, the unique nature of the imposing buildings, before which they so regularly camped for the night under the open skies. On an impulse I asked them whether they thought that their children might some day study in them. The wry smile on the emaciated face of an adivasi carter as he asked me whether I was joking has remained etched on my memory ever since.

Right from my fourth year onwards at IIT, it used to be a five-year graduate course in my time, I had been troubled by the relevance of the education I was receiving to the improvement of the lot of the teeming poor millions of our country. Some of us had formed a science education group and we used to go out to nearby villages and give free tuitions to the school children in science and mathematics, which have always been the fearful bugbears. The sorry plight in which they lived had made me wonder about ways in which their livelihoods could be improved so that they could have at least a leveller playing field than the quagmire of poverty and lack of opportunity in which they were stuck. For the life of me I could not see how the kind of engineering I was being taught could impact on the lives of these people in any positive way. So for quite some time I had been undecided about what to do with my future.

Towards my last years of schooling in Calcutta too I had had similar feelings. Jayaprakash Narayan's epoch making Sampurna Kranti Andolan in 1975, which for the first time effectively questioned from within the constitutional framework the stunted and restricted nature of the parliamentary democracy that was being practised in the country, the

imposition of the draconian internal emergency in response by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi with its accompanying crackdown on civil liberties and mass incarceration of opposition politicians and activists that followed and then the historic election victory of the Janata Party in 1977 had all stirred my teenage mind. I used to walk to school and one day for some unknown reason the beggars on the road attracted my attention. I began thinking about the kind of insecure and useless life they led. From this my thoughts went to the domestic servants who worked for us who all hailed from nearby rural areas but were then living in slums in the city. Their lives too were totally insecure. I found it to be very unjust that so many people had to live such demeaning existences without any hope of realising their potential as human beings. However, apart from doing some social work with the pastor of St. Paul's Church who used to come to our school to give us a sermon on Fridays I did not pursue these thoughts very far in any practical way.

Thus I had had no plan for the future at the end of my schooling also. Those were considerably more easygoing times and there was no career counsellor in our school. When I got into IIT it was more because all the better performing students in my class in school were appearing for the entrance examinations and so I being one of them, followed suit. In those days in 1978 there weren't any coaching classes and the kind of cutthroat competition that there is now and so I had cleared the entrance on the strength of the preparation for the school leaving examinations alone. Thus it was more through inertia and less through any commitment to preparing myself for a career as a technologist or manager that I had drifted into IIT. I forgot my niggling worries about the fate of the poor in the initial years as for the first time I tasted the freedom of hostel life and the great fun that was there for the having. Those were the days when there was neither any relative marking nor any cumulative grading system and so one could easily sail through the exams on the strength of last night cramming sessions. Thus a whole host of IITians used to spend the better part of their time doing everything else but studying (Deb, 2004). But after three years and on the threshold of official adulthood, the voting age was twenty-one at that time, I had finally to begin reckoning what I was to do with my life. All my old concerns about the poor and especially their insecure and demeaning livelihoods began troubling me again.

The adivasi carter's reply shook me to the core. What is the use of such high quality institutions I thought if even after thirty-six years of independence at that time their graduates had not been able to create an India in which the poorest of the poor could dare to dream big, which is the sine qua non of all advancement? There used to be an arrogant saying amongst us then that we IITians were the cream of the nation. So I mentioned jokingly to my friend as we came back to our hostel rooms, leaving the carters to their involuntary communion with nature, that we may be the cream all right but instead of producing butter we had gone rancid! That adivasi carter helped me find my mission in life. I decided then and there that I would devote the rest of my life to helping the adivasis better their lot. Nowadays the whole campus has become a high tech island walled in within itself. The road from the rural heartland has been diverted and it now innocuously skirts its periphery as if to doubly ensure that such rural yokels do not accidentally find their way into the fast lane. Nor are there any possibilities for the inmates to have informal close encounters of the rural kind that I had enjoyed. They instead spend their spare time surfing the net from the comfort of their hostel rooms, which are all wired. Indeed one inmate of the hostel I used to stay in recently hit the headlines for selling CDs of steamy video clips via the internet and landing both himself and the CEO of the internet auction site BAZEE.COM in jail! (Techtree.com, 2004)

Recovering the Lost Tongue - A Manifesto of Anarcho-Environmentalism

Rahul Banerjee, 74 Krishnodayanagar, Indore, India - 452001, cell no: +919425943023

email: rahul.indaure@gmail.com homepage: www.rahulbanerjee.notlong.com

Embarking on my mission was easier said than done and I decided to read up for help in deciding on my precise course of action. The library at Kharagpur had an excellent humanities and social sciences section. I had begun reading up on philosophy and social change as very good teachers of sociology, psychology, and economics triggered my interest in these subjects in our third year. I read voraciously across the spectrum from the left to the right to try and find answers to the questions that had risen in my mind. Hailing as I did from Bengal which had since the pre-independence days been a hot bed of Communist activity I could not but be impressed by Marxism. Indeed right from the early nineteen seventies when I was in my teens and had become capable of cogent political thinking I had been drawn by the idea of revolutionary societal change facilitated through the means of an armed struggle conducted by a party of the dispossessed masses to capture state power that forms the centre-piece of Marxist theory and practice (Marx & Engels, 1964). This idea is especially appealing because it posits that revolution is inevitable. The history of the human race, Marx said, has been one of class struggles in which with the rise in productivity due to improvements in the means of production, a stage invariably comes when further rise in productivity is impossible without a seizure of power by the newer classes that are emerging and becoming conscious of their power. These newer classes then seize power at such times and bring about a new social order. So this law of history ordains that eventually the modern labouring class - the proletariat, too, will overthrow capitalism and bring about a new socialist order. All that one has to do is make the proletariat conscious of their power and the rest will follow as the night the day. The milieu in Bengal in the nineteen seventies was very radical. Even though the heroic Maoist Naxalite uprising of the late nineteen sixties had been quelled it had left a lasting impact and its reverberations could still be heard.

Earlier the Communist Party of India (CPI) had sounded some discordant notes in the ears of the ruling Indian elite through its initial revolutionary thrust immediately after independence in the form of militant peasant movements, radical trade unionism and also some surreptitious armed militancy. These were, however, summarily quelled by ruthless and wholly illegal state repression. So later on instructions from the Communist Party of the Soviet Union the CPI had settled down by 1951, with the formal inauguration of the liberal democratic Republic of India, into playing second fiddle in tune with the pseudo-Socialist orchestra being conducted by the Indian National Congress under the leadership of the first Prime Minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru (Damas, 1991). The first rift in the party came about around leadership disagreements that had emerged after Nehru very undemocratically dismissed the first democratically elected Communist government in the world in the state of Kerala and which gradually came to a head after the Chinese invasion of 1962 as a section of the party felt that a more independent line separate from the Congress party should be adopted. The split in the international socialist movement between the Soviet Union and China following on Stalin's demise too played a role (Ray, 1988). However, the new party formed, The Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)), too remained wedded to working within the liberal democratic parliamentary framework of the Republican Constitution despite being perceived as a threat to it by the Congress party which had most of its leaders thrown into jail immediately. The more decisive second break came in 1967 when the radical section of the CPI(M), which was then a part of the first United Front Government in West Bengal, renounced parliamentary democracy altogether and instead advocated the adoption of the strategy perfected with resounding success by Mao Ze Dong and his comrades in China of organised armed militancy of the peasant masses, first in small isolated base areas and gradually expanding to take over national state power. This faction, which later went on to form the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist)

Recovering the Lost Tongue - A Manifesto of Anarcho-Environmentalism

Rahul Banerjee, 74 Krishnodayanagar, Indore, India - 452001, cell no: +919425943023

email: rahul.indaure@gmail.com homepage: www.rahulbanerjee.notlong.com

(CPI(ML)) in 1969, started its revolutionary campaign with the seizure of landlords' lands by armed adivasi peasants in the Naxalbari area of North Bengal and that is how they have come to be popularly known as Naxalites. The Communist Party of China (CPC) set its imprimatur on this revolt and in its daily newspaper Renmin Ribao or the People's Daily, published from Beijing, welcomed this development as the onset of a peasant revolution in India in an overly optimistic and effusive editorial with the heading, "Spring Thunder over India" (Renmin Ribao, 1967).

My maternal grandfather's youngest brother, who was just a little older than my father, had in fact joined the Naxalites and gone underground and had been caught and tortured by the police before being wondrously let off without any criminal case being instituted against him. One of the young men from the street in which I lived in Kolkata had vanished during the peak of the Naxalite struggle and then surfaced again only after the Left Front Government had been formed in West Bengal in 1978 after the revocation of the internal emergency. Unfortunately by the time I was passing out of school heavy state repression had ensured that the Naxalite movement though alive had become splintered into ineffectiveness. Moreover, the landslide victory of the electoral front of the parliamentary leftist parties led by the CPI(M) in the legislative elections in West Bengal and the immensely successful "Operation Barga" launched by them to give permanent legal tenure to the shareholder tenant farmers of landlords (Bandyopadhyay, 2000) had seemed to renew hope in the scope for radical action within a liberal democratic set up. Consequently there wasn't any viable and practising revolutionary party that I could turn to for firm guidance in the early 1980s when all kinds of questions began bothering me.

Whatever else the rigorous "scientific" training that is given at IIT may or may not do it certainly inculcates a critical attitude in one because this is absolutely essential for the kind of cutting edge problem solving that the modern technologist is expected to do. While this had led me to question the utility to the country of the kind of technological problems that we were addressing in the IITs it also prodded me to question some of the basic assumptions and predictions of Marxism especially in the light of the initial failure of the Naxalite movement and also of the obvious "revisionism" that had taken place in the Soviet Union and China. So I decided to give the ideas of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi regarding non-violent passive resistance and rural reconstruction through the formation of autonomous village republics as set out in his path breaking work "Hind Swaraj" too a try (Gandhi, 1959). This was in part motivated by the fact that in my eclectic search for intellectual direction I had in the meantime also savoured the austere mystical wonders of Hindu Upanishadic philosophy which forms the bedrock of Gandhian thought and action.

About this time I saw Govind Nihalani's heart wrenching film on the oppression of adivasis, 'Aakrosh' (Nikunj, 2006). There was an idealistic new lawyer in the film who was trying to get a poor adivasi man, falsely accused of having killed his wife to tell the truth - that she had actually been raped and killed by an oppressor. A kurta pajama clad activist character chided this lawyer that he would not be able to understand the reality of the oppression of the poor which kept their lips sealed against injustice. However, at the same time this activist tried his best to convince the adivasi man to speak up and so got bumped off by the goons in the process. The whole film made a deep impression on me and I came out from the cinema hall with a romantic idea that I wanted to be like that activist working among the adivasis. I am a great fan of the Nobel Laureate author Ernest Hemingway. Just after seeing this film I laid hands on a copy of his masterpiece novel "For Whom The Bell Tolls" (Hemingway, 1955). There too the character of the American dynamiter Robert

Recovering the Lost Tongue - A Manifesto of Anarcho-Environmentalism

Rahul Banerjee, 74 Krishnodayanagar, Indore, India - 452001, cell no: +919425943023

email: rahul.indauri@gmail.com homepage: www.rahulbanerjee.notlong.com

Jordan, engaged in a dangerous mission behind the fascist lines in the Spanish civil war of the late nineteen thirties that was doomed from the start, fired my imagination. What impressed me about this character was that he was ambivalent about ideology and the result of the war but was still risking his life for a cause. All my reading had by that time matured my understanding enough for me to realise that the project of radical social change, whether of the Marxist or the Gandhian variety would in all probability be a lost cause in the long run and yet there was an yearning in me to rebel. In the words of the famous ghazal sung by Talat Mahmood –

Ae meri jaan-e-ghazal (Oh my dear friend)

Chal mere saath hi chal (Come with me)

In samajon ke banaye hue bandhan se nikal (Break free of the shackles forged by society)

Kab badla hai jamana tu ye jamane ko badal (When has an era changed, change this one)

So while all my other classmates were busy trying to get jobs or seats in the Indian Institutes of Management and in American universities I was floundering around in search of serendipitous utopias! My father, a no nonsense died in the wool technologist and manager himself, had by this time already got an inkling of my predilections and had begun putting pressure on me to abandon what he considered to be nothing more than useless lotus eating! We have a saying in Bengali, which pejoratively depicts all voluntary social activism as a futile attempt to go out and chase wild bisons in the forest on the strength of frugal meals taken at home! My father would repeat this often and exhort me to leave this God forsaken country of ours and take wings to America as one of my elder cousins had already done. I might as well mention here that ever since my great grandparents who had been landed gentry in the eastern part of undivided Bengal had been chased out even before the partition at the time of independence in 1947, the next four generations in our family have produced quite a few technologists and doctors and those of them that have migrated to greener pastures abroad are looked upon as great achievers.

The net result of my father's opposition to my lotus eating was that I decided to join the National Dairy Development Board (NDDB) as a trainee engineer having been impressed by the literature I had read on the "white revolution" brought about by Amul in Gujarat that had reportedly transformed the lives of poor farmers there. So after passing out on one fine day in 1983 I went to the NDDB office in Kolkata to report for work dressed in a kurta and pajama and sandals. The first thing that the officer there said on seeing me was that I was not properly dressed. This angered me and I shot back that I was in national dress and how could he speak derogatively of it. An altercation ensued and at the end of it I was unceremoniously shooed out of the officer's cubicle. Outside the cubicle was a big hall in which all the babus with their tables loaded with files were ranged in front of me. I am a big fan of the British rock group Pink Floyd and involuntarily a few lines from their great album "Wall" (Pink Floyd, 1979) flitted through my mind –

We don't need no education

We don't need no thought control

No dark sarcasm in the classroom

Teachers leave them kids alone

Hey! Teachers! Leave them kids alone!

All in all it's just another brick in the wall.

All in all you're just another brick in the wall.

Recovering the Lost Tongue - A Manifesto of Anarcho-Environmentalism

Rahul Banerjee, 74 Krishnodayanagar, Indore, India - 452001, cell no: +919425943023

email: rahul.indauri@gmail.com homepage: www.rahulbanerjee.notlong.com

I came out of the office and dashed off a letter to my father saying I was leaving for the great unknown to fulfil my dreams and took off to the Santhal Pargana in Bihar where some young people I knew, belonging to one of the many splinter groups of the CPI(ML), were working among the adivasis.

Soon, however, I felt uncomfortable there because of the dogma of my co-workers and a refusal on their part to question received wisdom. They would not budge from the position that the Indian state was semi-feudal and semi-colonial in character. This is how Mao Ze Dong had characterised the Chinese state in the late nineteen twenties (Mao Ze Dong, 1952). Even in the late nineteen sixties when the Naxalbari uprising took place this characterisation could hardly hold for the Indian state and by the early nineteen eighties it had become totally obsolete. Moreover, the Indian state was more powerful than the Kuomintang of Chiang Kai Shek had been in China, especially in the crucial final years just before the Chinese Revolution when Japanese occupation during the Second World War had further weakened it. The CPC may have eulogised the Naxalbari uprising as a peal of thunder crashing over the land of India but it did little to provide any direct military support to the CPI(ML) of the kind it had itself received from the Soviet Union. Thus not only had this kind of blinkered approach on the part of the CPI(ML) led to the dissipation of the Naxalite movement it was also not helping us to address the burning issues that faced the poor Santhals around us. I felt at that time that Marxism was a living ideology and had the capacity to be adapted to suit local conditions as a first step to building up a larger programme for challenging the state. The challenge lay in formulating a praxis that was appropriate to the objective situation of the adivasis and their immediate problems rather than dreaming about a peasant revolution depending for its success on an archaic and downright naive characterisation of the Indian state.

I returned to face the taunts and scolding of my father. I needed time to read more before I could decide on what exactly to do to pursue my mission in life. I finally convinced my father with some help from my mother to let me supervise the building of their post retirement residence for them in Santiniketan and simultaneously indulge in further self study. I began ploughing through more philosophy, politics, sociology and anthropology to chart a path for the future. The more I studied the more dissatisfied I became. So much had been written on social change but eventually little of a lasting nature had been achieved. One of the more inspiring predictions of Marx and Engels was that even though the modern state was a necessary evil that would continue in the interim after the proletarian revolution, albeit under the control of the proletarian party, it would later "wither away". As the productive forces of society grew sufficiently and the capitalist class was eliminated completely the state would wither away as an ideal situation would come into existence in which the mode of production and distribution of the social product would be according to the principle - 'from each according to their capacity and to each according to their need'. A situation in which there would be no need for the disciplining force of the state as people would generally be well disposed towards each other bereft of selfish individualistic goals (Marx, 1949 & Engels, 1947). But in reality all practical efforts at change had tended to wither away after some time rather than the state, which had got stronger and stronger with the passage of time! Whether in Capitalist or Socialist dispensations the basic credo of production and distribution of the social product was more or less the same differing only in degree - from each in inverse proportion to their power and to each in direct proportion to their power! The Nobel laureate author and educationist Rabindranath Tagore's Visva Bharati University in Santiniketan, where I was staying then, had itself drifted far away from his dreams of liberating humanity from self made prisons (Tagore, 1961) and had been

Recovering the Lost Tongue - A Manifesto of Anarcho-Environmentalism

Rahul Banerjee, 74 Krishnodayanagar, Indore, India - 452001, cell no: +919425943023

email: rahul.indaure@gmail.com homepage: www.rahulbanerjee.notlong.com

reduced to the performance of rituals rather than posing a challenge to the rot in the education system.

I wanted to get down to work myself but could not find any light. I felt there was no point in studying and writing any more as almost everything possible had already been written. Lack of adequate good practice was where the problem lay in the various approaches to social change. Much more field level work, especially in the rural areas was needed, as the people there were still unaware of their hidden potential. I also came round to the view that despite its limitations the Indian Constitution, especially with its exemplary protective provisions for the adivasis, provided a legal space for dissent and mobilisation that had not been adequately utilised. In a direct reaction to the challenge of Marxism, capitalist liberal democracy had become much more mass oriented and this was reflected in parts in the Indian Constitution though it largely retained the colonial oppressive character of governance from the British times. I was particularly disillusioned by the way in which the post-revolutionary states in the Soviet Union and China had been converted into anti-people apparatuses of domination far removed from the democratic ideals espoused in the Marxist texts. So I became increasingly inclined towards attempting to exhaust the liberal democratic methods rather than launch into a premature armed struggle against the state. Then the break came from an unexpected source altogether. One day I had gone to a friend's place only to find he had gone out somewhere. While waiting for him I began to flit through a copy of a back issue of Reader's Digest and came across an article on the work being done by Social Work and Research Centre (SWRC) in Tilonia in Rajasthan. This was the first time I had come across the mention of a secular social service organisation, a non-government organisation (NGO), working for rural development and the concept of a mass participatory approach to such work. Here was a chance to do something from a new angle I felt. I wrote to SWRC saying that I would like to offer my services. On receiving a positive response I decided to go to Tilonia once the construction of the house was over.

So in the summer of 1985 I arrived at Tilonia and the first person I met there was Khemraj. We began talking and he told me that he hailed from a jat farmer family of Chittor district and was a first generation literate. He had got involved in student politics while studying in college and joined a radical students' union. Then he had come to hear of Tilonia from a friend and joined the SWRC. He said that after some time he found that rural development work had its limitations, however much one may try to make it participatory, as long as a direct attack wasn't made on the oppressive socio-economic structures that restrained poor people from becoming powerful. This was the kind of stuff that I knew like the back of my hand but what interested me was that Khemraj had left Tilonia some two and a half years back and gone to Jhabua district in Madhya Pradesh to organise the Bhil adivasis there to fight for their rights guaranteed in the Constitution and made some actual headway on the ground. I asked Khemraj if I could come down and join him too and he got up and embraced me with a warmth the memory of which still enthuses me after all these years. Thus, after a brief month's stay in Tilonia supervising the making of lime stabilised mud bricks for a proposed low cost building construction, I packed my bags and took off to work with Khemraj and the Bhil adivasis in Jhabua and finally begin realising my mission in life.

References

Bandyopadhyay, D (2000): *Land Reform in West Bengal: Remembering Harekrishna Konar and Benoy Choudhury*, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 35 No. 22

Damas, M (1991): *Approaching Naxalbari*, Radical Impression, Kolkata.

Recovering the Lost Tongue - A Manifesto of Anarcho-Environmentalism

Rahul Banerjee, 74 Krishnodayanagar, Indore, India - 452001, cell no: +919425943023

email: rahul.indauri@gmail.com homepage: www.rahulbanerjee.notlong.com

Deb, S (2004): *The IITians*, Penguin Books India.

Engels, F (1947): *Anti-Duhring*, Foreign Languages Publishing Press, Moscow.

Hemingway, E (1955): *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth.

Mao Ze Dong (1952): *Analysis of Classes in Chinese Society in Collected Works Vol. 1*, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing.

Marx, K (1949): *Critique of the Gotha Programme* in K. Marx and F. Engels: *Selected Works*, Vol. II, Foreign Languages Publishing Press, Moscow.

Marx, K & Engels, F (1964): *The Communist Manifesto*, Progress Publishers, Moscow.

Nikunj (2006): *Review of Aakrosh*, posted on 7th January 2006, accessed on 8th August 2006 at url <http://www.mouthshut.com/review/Akrosh-91002-1.html>

Pink Floyd, (1979): *Lyrics of Another Brick in the Wall Part II*, accessed on 6th June, 2006 at url <http://www.80smusiclyrics.com/artists/pinkfloyd.htm>

Renmin Ribao (1967): *Spring Thunder over India*, Peking Review No. 29 July

Tagore, R (1961): *Towards Universal Man*, Asia Publishing House, New York.

Techtree.com (2004): *Nasscom urges Baazee CEO Release*, posted on 21st December 2004, at http://www.techtree.com/techtree/jsp/article.jsp?print=1&article_id=56793&cat_id=547 and accessed on 12th September 2005.