

On Transformative Politics

(Comments at the “Echoes of Ghadar”, Organized by South Asia Solidarity Initiative (SASI) in New York)

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Transformative Politics is a large subject and one always runs the risk of stating the obvious while dealing with such things. One can also go entirely wrong. But there is an even greater danger. One may end up offering banalities that are – to borrow a phrase from a famous physicist – *not even wrong*. In these brief comments, I will try to state what may be obvious but useful to keep in mind nevertheless. And I will also stick my neck out enough to be proven wrong if that serves a purpose.

Transformative politics, in my opinion, is necessarily the politics of the Left. In the era of capitalism, Left is necessarily Marxist, although the term is interpreted variously. In today’s world, Left, despite its historic achievements of the past and despite its global spread now, is not doing very well. Capitalism, on the other hand, despite its recurrent crises and despite our daily declarations about it being moribund, is doing quite well. This describes the basic challenge confronting the Left today.

Now, I am aware that such a description, or diagnosis if you prefer, may disappoint many and for very different reasons. Back home, in certain circles, I would expect to be heckled as someone who has given up the fight. Why else would I say that Left is not doing well and capitalism is? In other circles I would be dismissed as someone incapable of learning any lessons. After the spectacular collapse of the twentieth century socialism, should it not be obvious that time is up for the Marxist Left? In these times of various ‘*posts*’-, including that of post-Marxism, how can one ascribe transformative politics exclusively to the Marxist Left? Does it not smack of the same old economism, class-reductionism, vanguardism and totalitarianism? Is it not being blind to the fact that transformative politics is now powered by a rainbow of new social movements?

Instead of engaging with such questions right away, I will ask you to bear with me for a bit and take a call at the end.

Ideally, I should be dealing with both the questions – why is Left doing badly and why is capitalism doing well. The two might be correlated. But, given the time constraint and the nature of the occasion, I will take up only the first one – one about the Left. That, in any case, links more directly with the issue of transformative politics.

My view, however, may be limited by my location. If I know a thing or two about the issue, it is only in the Indian context. But one hopes to have some relevance beyond the boundaries of one’s experience.

Left in the third world was born in the era of colonialism and feudalism. Those were the days of its glory. One thing it knows – and knows quite well – is how to fight feudal lords, kings, and foreign rulers. The problem is that it has not yet figured out how to deal with capitalism – its current adversary. Not a single revolution has happened so far by directly fighting

capitalism under the political conditions of bourgeois democracy. The latest illustrative example may be from Nepal where the Left deposed the king but does not seem to know how to proceed from there. In India it often takes another route. It declares that India is still ruled by feudalism in the countryside and by foreigners and their compradors in the metropolis. Now, India is such a large and complicated place that you can find almost anything you are looking for. But finding the enemy of your choice does not add up to transformative politics. Left must figure out how to fight regular capitalism. And it should be able to do so without being subsumed in the parliament or without being confined to the outskirts. That is the first big challenge.

Figuring this out may take time. It will largely be accomplished by the coming generation of leftists. If you heard younger comrades like Alia (Amirali), you would agree with me that my hopes are not misplaced. And, I hope Alia does not mind my labeling her as coming generation. This generation has very much arrived to lead us forward.

Of course, my generation has not departed, nor is it defeated. My intention here is to underline its predicament. This was a generation that was caught in the middle of a huge transition. We were *prepared* – or *constructed*, to use a more popular term these days – in one way; the realities of a changing world were asking us to act in another way. Some were left brooding about this gap; many others kept doing what they were trained to do.

Fighting a new adversary would require altogether new strategies. As I said, these are yet to be forged in a comprehensive form, although its components are scattered all over world in the practices of the Left and other emancipatory movements. Let me give an example of what we are confronted with.

Ninety per cent of working people in India work in the unorganized sectors – small peasants, landless laborers, contract workers, workers in the small and handicraft production who might even own some productive assets, and a growing army of slum dwelling service providers. You cannot organize them into unions against a clear and present big exploiter, whether feudal or capitalist. Organizing them requires that they be assisted first in improving their life conditions under the same system and in the same market – possibly through a large movement of building *real* cooperatives and collectives. But that is often discarded as reformism and anarcho-syndicalism. That might have been true in the revolutionary days of the early twentieth century kind. But now the world is a different place.

Undoubtedly, transformative politics is, first and foremost, a matter of state power. But under capitalism the road to state power may go through a long passage of weaning people away from the hegemony and the spell of capital. Cooperatives and collectives are a difficult project not because they are institutions of a distant or utopian future. They are difficult because no party of the mainstream Left has made them a part of large scale transformative politics. They are not seen as the mainstay of revolutionary strategy, which is precisely what they are. This strategy prepares the working people to take up smaller responsibilities now so that they can take up a much bigger responsibility later – that of taking control of entire

economy and polity. We heard about this in Omar's (Freilla) clear-thinking and inspiring presentation yesterday.

The second big challenge is about envisioning the future – what kind of system will replace capitalism. Such a vision is not merely a therapeutic need of those unhappy with capitalism. This is a necessary component of future revolutionary strategy. People living under feudalism and colonialism may just fight for land or independence, but people living under capitalism need to know what they are getting into before they agree to overthrow or walk out of capitalism. Left used to present twentieth century socialism as the alternative. But as we know, that collapsed or metamorphosed into something else. Now most leftists keep quiet about the vision and go on with the daily struggles. When pressed they might say that things went wrong because bad people came to power in the party and in the state. That, obviously, does not count for much as a materialist explanation of such a colossal phenomenon.

It is a mystery to me why does the Left not say, loud and clear, that twentieth century socialism is not the model for alternative to capitalism. Even if we were to find a way to avoid the fate it suffered, people living under capitalism would not opt for an alternative where jobs and basic necessities of life may be secure but they still would not have real control over economy, polity, and many other aspects of life. Of course they may forget that under capitalism they neither have the basics secured nor any real control over anything. But they are settled into it, and it is unsettling to move into something new, especially if a suspicion lurks in their mind that it might not be the best deal. They would like to make sure, and I would not blame them for that.

Perhaps many in the Left are hesitant to say this because they think this will be renouncing the heritage of twentieth century revolutions. But this is a mistaken view. One upholds the heritage but that does not mean one must imitate the twentieth century revolutionaries. We are assembled here to celebrate the heritage of the Ghadar Party, but it would be quite a sight if we were to imitate them in every respect and try to liberate the subcontinent from colonialism once again by sending pamphlets and guns on ships.

A few things, in my opinion, need to be stated boldly and clearly. A future socialist economy cannot be one where economic life is run exclusively by the state, which in turn is run by the party. It is no workers' paradise if, under a good leadership, they can live and work happily without taking responsibility for running the factory or the farm or for that matter the entire economy. If they were to live happily and without responsibility under a good regime, they would be forced to live unhappily and without any recourse under a bad regime.

How can such a system, where working people run the economy, be designed and put in place? That is a difficult and open question. We do not yet know the thousand steps needed to take us there, although we know quite a few that we should not take. One thing we certainly know – in capitalism money makes money and it does so in thousand different ways; in socialism there will still be thousand ways to make money but not a single way for just money to make money. In our jargon we say – private appropriation of socially produced surplus will not be allowed by the socialist constitution. Wage labor will be abolished right

away. However, inequality of wages and many other deeply entrenched inequalities, as well as the state and the law of value, will take time to wither away. This is why collectives will be the core of socialist economy – not private capital, not state capital.

Similarly, a future socialist polity will not be the one where the state is monopolized by a party. Humanity has come to a stage where people are expected to constitute the state, even if the practice is deeply flawed and they end up constituting a state that cannot protect them from the logic and the power of capital. This does not mean, however, that under socialism they should hand over this power and this responsibility to the good and wise elite.

How shall such a socialist polity, in which people constitute the state in the real sense, be organized? That is another difficult and largely open question.

I will add just one more thing to this list, although this may be the most abstract and the most challenging one. The future socialist system must be such that it does not take more and more aspects of life under its control. On the contrary, it should be designed to shrink progressively and release more and more aspects of life from the system's sphere. Twentieth century socialism could not do so.

Or, perhaps, one can say more than that. It tried, erroneously and perhaps willfully, to take more and more aspects of life under the system's control. There used to be prescriptions even about proletarian culture and way of life. As someone who was once a professional physicist, I have been interested in the history of physics and physicists in the Soviet era. Their training was unsparingly rigorous; their creativity and achievements were mind-blowing. But they all had to put up with party philosophers who instructed them about what was materialist and dialectical in their science and what was not.

On a more serious note, an impression has been created that socialism means a disciplined, regimented and homogenous life where conformity is valued and diversity is discouraged. If this were to be the case it would be a prescription for unfreedom. Left has to reclaim the language of freedom because *that*, in Marxist understanding, is the ultimate goal of humanity. A better system is needed to take better care of *the realm of necessity*, but even a better system must shrink to facilitate passage into *the realm of freedom*.

Of course, down-to-earth leftists laugh at this freedom talk. It is all well for the armchair theorists to talk of the lofty goals of humankind, but there is a tough world out there which does not allow revolutionary politics to be shaped by dreams and theories alone. Twentieth century socialism was shaped by the real world conditions, and if future socialism is going to be any different, it will be so only because it would be shaped by the conditions of a different world. I tell them, you have a point, but you also risk going too far in trying to be a hard-headed realist. If you want to push the world in one direction, there is not much point in going in the opposite direction and then complain or justify that it was the world that pushed you in that direction.

As I said earlier, many become very upset with such evaluations and criticisms. But there are many others who think that this falls far too short and fails to diagnose the main problem. All

this is still too economic and class-reductionist – too much of a top down approach. What happened to gender, caste, race, and many other axes of social oppression and exclusion? And what happened to the question of environmental sustainability? Didn't Left fail mainly because it ignored all these dimensions? Should it not be clear as daylight that transformative politics in the post-Marxist era would be woven with a thousand strands of new social movements?

Many things get thrown at the Left but not everything sticks. Left has been blind to many things and it is deservedly criticized for that. But it is not supposed to be a pioneer of all movements and it should not be criticized for not being that. Increasingly it is coming to a realization that there will be many movements because there are many issues and no one, including itself, should think that it will lead all of them.

There is little doubt that Left, at times, has done things in a rather strange way. In India, for example, it has always worked with Dalits – in many areas much before anyone else started working with them. And it has not just fought for land and wages. It has also resisted violence against Dalits and raised the issue of their human rights and dignity. It has even fought for their entry into the Hindu temples where they were not allowed. But it never said that it fights for Dalits. It preferred to say that it fights for the landless proletariat. It said that it works on caste issues because in India caste axis overlaps significantly with the class axis. Isn't that strange and foolishly so? Now things are changing. All left parties are making extra efforts to show that they recognize caste for what it is and adding paragraphs and sections about it in their party programmes.

Now, this to me is a complex situation. What would you like to blame the Left for? If you say that it has been dogmatic and mechanical in its theory and understanding, I would agree with you. But if you say that it has been blind to the caste-based oppression of Dalits, then I would say it is an unfair criticism. It has fought against such oppression as much as anyone else and in many instances more than anyone else.

Similar things can be said about Left's approach to gender and patriarchy. There are stories galore about prevalence of patriarchy and misogyny in Left parties and circles – about the leading committees being exclusively male preserves and even about sexual exploitation of women in the party. While such things are deservedly denounced, one should not conclude that if you are leftist you are especially prone to being patriarchal and misogynist. In India at least, Left has been a pioneer of women's movement. But, it is also realizing now that it is women themselves who should be the pioneers and leaders of women's movement.

The question is not about how to apportion the blame. The real question is: how would the social movements join together to become one powerful torrent of transformative politics? Is Left the only obstacle and once it is removed all streams will join effortlessly? I doubt it. And my doubts are not based on what is known as subjective factors – such as, the leaders will refuse to unite. That also will be a problem – as much as it has been in the Left if not more. But there are more objective reasons.

To take one example, there has been this issue of Uniform Civil Code in India and I have now come to the understanding that both the Left and many in the women's movements may have taken problematic positions on this issue. If what is considered cultural and religious right of a community clashes with the more universal rights of women – which one should take precedence? Now, I do not have time to discuss it here, nor am I informed enough about the intricacies of the problem. My point is to underline the inherent complexity within the realm of the social movements. Who can speak for whom has been turned by celebrated theorists into a deep and vexing question. Who, then, can speak for the Muslim women, or for the Dalit women?

No one can deny the importance of social movements. Each movement is doing its job and life is getting better as a result. But this has limits – systemic limits. Transformative politics can have edges against regressive aspects of culture, tradition and social practices, but it cannot really be transformative politics if its principal edge is not against the system. And, you cannot turn all movements into anti-system movements by attacking the state for everything that happens in the society. It does not stick if you blame the state for Khap Panchayats (caste councils) killing young couples who decide to marry across caste lines. Functionaries of the state may protect these murderous village elders, but that does not make caste killings an inevitable outcome of the nature of Indian state, which may itself be far more murderous in many other ways.

Thousand streams of social movements – all doing a commendable job of making life better – may still not add up to transformative politics if they do not feed into one coherent revolutionary strategy. Social movements raise necessary demands of the people. Left too raises these demands, but it may not be able to raise all of them. More importantly, Left's principal responsibility, beyond being a part of people's movement, is to forge revolutionary strategy. Revolutionary strategy is forged by orchestrating *necessary demands* of the people into *impossible demands* for the system. Social movements cannot do this. They are based on specific issues and mobilize specific sections of people to achieve their specific objectives. They cannot, by themselves, orchestrate all demands into one revolutionary strategy. For that they will have to join with the Left and the Left will have to join with them.

It is often pointed out that Left is invariably dogmatic. Social movements, on the other hand, are often afflicted with populism. Actually, there is no such neat division of ailments. Dogma and populism are twins, even if not identical. They feed on each other. Both Left and social movements are often afflicted with both of them simultaneously, although in ways different from each other.

In the last two days we have heard many presentations and arguments underlining the importance of mass organizations and mobilizations as the bedrock of transformative and emancipatory politics. There is no denying the truth behind these examples and experiences. However, there could be another side too of which we should be aware. Mass character by itself cannot ensure the emancipatory character of a movement. In India the biggest mass movement of last several decades has been the Hindu rightwing mobilization that culminated in the demolition of the Babri Mosque. It was an utterly reactionary mobilization in which

tens of millions of ordinary people participated over several years and it changed the political landscape of the country. India is still dealing with its aftermath and will do so for a long time to come.

It is important to realize that transformative politics cannot draw energy and sustenance only from the ocean of people existing today. It must draw from the deep well of history as well. Its values and inner dynamics arise from there on which grow the muscles and the vitality nourished by popular aspirations and demands of today. It is a process of a peculiarly democratic kind in which all past generations buried in history and the future generations yet to be born vote along with the generations alive today.

Perhaps, I should make one clarification. By transformative politics I do not mean only the politics of the distant future. It also means politics of today. In India, for example, there is a danger that a person who should have been tried for crimes against humanity may become the duly elected Prime Minister. India, after all, may have its own edition of the German 1933. Averting this danger is part of today's transformative politics, and Left can play a role in this, much larger perhaps than all the social movements put together. I do not know whether they will actually do that or not. Global dogma and local realpolitik may come in the way. But its capacity and potentials cannot be ignored.

I will conclude by congratulating SASI once again for organizing this inspiring *Convergence*. But I hope you do not mind if I bring up something here. There may have been technical issues, and excuse me if I am making wrong assumptions. But if this event was taking place in India, I would ask – where is the mainstream Left? The CPI, the CPI(M), the other CPI(M), the numerous factions of the CPI(ML) and so on? They are as much inheritors of the Ghadar Party legacy as anyone else. Kavita (Srivastava) pointed out yesterday that they are not doing anything about this centenary in India. They should be taken to task for that. But if we organize this celebration, we must invite the mainstream Left, even if we have many issues with them.

Let me bring up another challenge or puzzle. You chose to celebrate this centenary and that is great. Now, as we know, 2017 is not far away. Would you consider celebrating a centenary then too? Do not get me wrong – I am not proposing to turn SASI into CCI – Centenary Celebrating Initiative. I am pointing towards complex and subtle processes that underlie our choices – which parts of heritage we acknowledge and celebrate and which ones we let go.

Let us inherit and own the heritage of everything that has made history take a big leap for the humankind, even if after some of these leaps we lost the way for a while.

Thank You.

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