

## Activism at Crossroads with Signposts

UPENDRA BAXI

Like everything else in India, voluntarism is also said to be in crisis. To escape the tedium of an overworked label, we may vary the phrase and describe voluntarism being at crossroads, interrogating the signposts provided by the state. But the reading of the signposts requires the deciphering of its author - the state.

All of us seem to be confused concerning the Indian state formation in its contemporary profile, we turn to it for the protection of the rights of the impoverished, we turn against it also for the violation of their rights. To some, the political organisation of bourgeois liberal democracy presents scope for genuine articulation of pluralism; to others it appears as a mask for cunning class rule. To some, the Indian state formation appears weak and vulnerable at so many key points; to others, it is a movement towards accentuating social contradictions and class conflicts. The nature, career and future of the Indian state is the unarticulated problematic of Indian voluntarism.

But voluntarism in India is one name with diverse realities. One needs to capture this diversity rather vividly. Tentatively, I propose an ideal-type formulation which distinguishes voluntarism from activism, the traditional from the more contemporary variant of social communication.

### **Voluntarism and Service**

Voluntarism may be seen as typically oriented to the service of the victims of the state and civil society, the principal goal being



existential amelioration of victim groups. Its ideology does not question why the victim groups become and remain so: its ideology, if it may be so called, is based on the perception that every society would have victims who need to be cared for. Compassion and charity constitute ethical foundations for voluntarism. Such values are typically prone to religious or transcendental vision. In its own, unarticulated ways voluntarism is likely, by its lack of interrogation of the structure of power and dominance, to be essentially conservative. It is, therefore, faced with the constant danger of cooptation in the structures of domination and likely to contribute to social change in almost Burkean manner - change by "insensible degrees".

Voluntarism is inherently intolerant of violence, even by the victims. It is also characterised by working for the disadvantaged, deprived and dispossessed - the *Atisudras* in Babasaheb Ambedkar's Hinduised description of the proletariat (Ambedkar 1945).

Voluntarism is marked by its well-bred horror of politics and power which are regarded as genuinely corrupting. In so far as it is genuinely apolitical, voluntarism is either revivalistic or milenarian in its character. Concrete bonds of compassion and caring, fellowship of suffering, hark back to communitarian ethos, stressing the good in self and society and shunning the potential for evil, avarice and domination in human beings. Creation of community solidarity, not achievement of political emancipation, is a hallmark of voluntarism. At its very best, it promises a millennium where we shall all recover our humanity through the community which will marginalise the state.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1948: 126) embodied this very notion when he summoned the Congress party to dissolve itself into a social service organisation on the eve of Indian independence. In ways strikingly reminiscent of young Marx (1843) the old Mahatma wanted his followers to turn to the urgent tasks of human emancipation after the attainment of some kind of political emancipation. We all know the dialectics of *Swaraj* in his thought which signified a fascinatingly intricate movement from independence from the British to a regime of self-determination by communities, rule by an ethic of sharing. Jayaprakash Narain carried this communitarian tradition with total integrity to the extent of advocating the enigma of partyless democracy and

politics, until a major, and radical, discontinuity in his last year explosively summed up in the inchoate notion of *Sampurna Kranti* (Total Revolution).

At other levels, the same characteristics of voluntarism, in different admixtures, pervade the work of great persons like Mother Teresa and Baba Amte. In the same genre, but within the religious framework, we have the work of the Divine Life Society, *Ramakrishna Ashram*, the traditional Christian missionary action. The assorted *Harijan Sevak Samajs*, tribal 'uplift' associations, women's welfare associations to mention a few, represent, more or less, the same blood group of voluntarism. The more contemporary variants of social service clubs, with high participation of professionals and urban intelligentsia, furnish another variant of voluntarism.

The landscape of voluntarism is crowded and richly fascinating. But its contours, and its character, have been the same, imperious in the resistance to change.

### Activism and Empowerment

In acute contrast, activism seeks to empower the victims. It is based on some manifest or latent critique of the organisation of the distribution of power in society. The critique is based, and finds its raw material, in the pathology of power. It unmasks the negative, repressive face of power. Activism is thus characterised by a militant and radical interrogation of power in the title of justices. In helping people understand that their exploitation is due to social, political, human arrangements and institutions, activism seeks to remove the culture of faith. If voluntarism is prone to religion, activism is prone to secularism.

Activism, based on the critique of power and domination, seeks, in the last analysis, to generate a countervailing power in the people. Militant activism even incites violence as a means of social regeneration and transformation; moderate activism tends to be inherently non-violent, either on grounds of strategy and tactics or of principle. But even moderate activism tolerates, it certainly does not fiercely denounce the violence of the oppressed.

Activists, unlike voluntarists, are on talking terms with state power. They confront it, ambush it, overbear it when they can.



They also employ it if it serves their ends, and the ends vary enormously. They are not averse to the use of the law and the constitution or to processes of lobbying the executive or legislature when necessary.

In this sense, they deploy, in a sense, the cunning of history against the cunning of the capital and the class. Some activist groups manipulate the legitimisation deficit of the wielders of state power, often quite adroitly. Some know the right blend, the judicious mix, of recourse to direct action and to the law. Some are adept at exploiting the weaknesses of the state power, and the decadence of the system, as resources for the struggle for people's power.

The activist, typically, believes that there is a realm of politics outside the arena of competitive party politics. The activist, typically, shuns party politics but is not one bit averse to the practice of politics, ideological politics, combining, but certainly going beyond, the configuration of ideologies latent or patent in party politics.

When cooptation strategies fail, the activist is most liable to repression from establishment politics of hues. They perceive the growth and spread of much activism as posing distinct threats to their power and ideology, possessions and obsessions; in short, a threat to hegemonial politics of class domination. At a more mundane level viable activism has the potency of demystifying party politics to the extent of causing the withdrawal of loyalty and allegiance and fostering sullen alienation.

Acts of overt repression brings dis cohesion and brittleness to activism; acts of covert repression aim at deligitimising activism and activists through a whole range of devices, including deployment of caste, religion, official media, and even voluntary associations in conflict with activists.

The map of post-Emergency India is studded with the mushroom growth of activist agents; what has been termed 'New Politics' is here to stay, until another, and more efficient than the first, bout of authoritarianism. In a sense, the New Politics is, broadly, constitutional politics, reluctant to deploy violence in pursuit of its aspirations. Activism is truly fundamentalist in the sense that it seeks to marshal people's power to realise the democratic, socialist, republican values of the Indian Constitution. The process of people's empowerment is one of translation

through vigorous social action of the vision of a just society enshrined in the Constitution. The emphasis is on the rights of the people which the state is duty bound to respect; and, at least minimally, the rights are those whose effective exercise for the masses as well as classes is assured by the Constitution.

Not many activists would want to acknowledge all this. And this for the reason that the Constitution has been expropriated by the managers of the people and used as a symbolic and instrumental code to sustain their power. To emphasise the Constitution is to emphasise bourgeois class rule. At the same time, the Constitution is a handy shield and sword to the activists confronted by the lawlessness of the state.

There is another reason for not articulating the *leitmotiv* of activism in sheer constitutional terms. And that is: most activism is in search of authentic alternatives. In their eyes, the choices made by the founders of the Constitution were very much constrained by the tumultuous realities of the transfer of power, partition and were tinged with the nationalist bourgeois strength, which aimed to speak the universal language of all the classes. The activist finds it too inhibiting to conduct a discourse concerning power within the framework of choices thus made. But instead of talking about alternate global polity for India, activism in contemporary India seeks to identify concrete sectoral features for the immediately concerned communities. Thus, we have a variety of critiques and reconstructions: the feminist and the ecological being the most prominent. We have also a whole variety of concrete societal alternatives in justice, health, education, participation and protest, to mention a few salient forms of this New Politics. These may be said to conceptualise a new society. But there is simply no way of adding the sum of these diverse parts of the new activist consciousness and action and from this to derive (the totality)—the totality of their world-view.

We do get the flavour of diversity, and the measure of distance travelled from voluntarism, when we seek to compare, for example, the *Harijan Sevak Samaj* with the *Dalit Panther* movements, the *Jyoti Sangh* with *Sewa*, the *Appiko* and *Chipko* movements with voluntary efforts in social forestry, *Pidit's* efforts at empowering education with the *Sarvodaya Ashramshalas*, *Harivalabh Parekh's Lok Adalat* with social service societies, auspices of the state *Lok Adalats*, Father Joseph Idiakunnel's para-profes-



sional training with the voluntarist's drives for legal literacy as a part of functional literacy, People's Science Movement with the leader-led production of relevant knowledge in the voluntary sector.

These contrasts do not merely suggest difference in style. They symbolise experiments in creative social discontinuity and fragmentation of veritable consensus on directions of social transformation and the foiling of an entrenched tradition which regards people as objects rather than subjects of history. In this major sense, activism's underlying impulse is to renovate both the civil society and the state.

### Dilemmas of Activists

Activism is haunted by many dilemmas. The first is the dilemma of choice between incremental reformism versus fostering of revolutionary consciousness and organisation. The second is posed by the need to make authentic choices between the relative autonomy of an activist movement and the specific claims of accountability. The third, in all its starkness, is the problem of choice between violence and non-violence. The fourth, and distinctive to the life-cycle of activists, is the dilemma of youth vs. age. The fifth set of acute choices concerns the modalities of activism which prefers non-violent transformation: direct action vs. legal action.

### Reformism vs. Revolution

Is activism all about the existing systems performing their tasks of equity and justice better in a more responsive and responsible manner? Is activism all about strengthening the existing order believed to be capable of being just? Is the New Politics but the continuation of the Old Politics by another means? Is it all about what the post-socialist Jawaharlal Nehru described as the building of a just state with just means? What indeed are the priorities of activist politics in real, historical terms? Does after all, as in a liberal human rights model, activism find itself bedeviled by the confrontation between basic human needs and basic human rights? If not, what *rapprochement* does the activist politics offer?

All authentic activists are troubled by these, and related questions from time to time. It is, therefore, not necessary to

document the concrete contexts of activism where these questions arise acutely to demoralise the activist. In my experience and understanding and I hope that it is as wrong as it is limited, most activists without theoretically subscribing to a reformist approach, ultimately operate it, hoping that the *deus ex machina* of the latent unintended consequences of social action will somehow endow their struggles with a historic quality going beyond mere reformism. This act of faith is necessary but, when the chips are down, we must also accept that it is, after all, an act of faith.

Against this is the ideal-type model of revolutionary activist politics which regards the reformist activist politics as, ultimately, serving and strengthening the very system of domination it so meticulously criticises. Revolutionary activism decides not to supplement but supplant the state. It is the politics of human emancipation, *a la* the Young Marx of the *Jewish Question*. Even when its proponents acknowledge that scientific socialism, from the days of *Das Kapital*, does not allow revolutionary action ahead of its time, they believe that revolution is not a big bang event but merely a culmination of a series of mini-revolutions. Activism, as revolutionary praxis is often condemned as 'adventurism' by its adversaries. But the proponents believe, that:

the present talk of inadequate conditions is a cover for tolerance of repression. For the revolutionary, conditions have always appeared right. What appears in retrospect as a preliminary state or a premature situation was once, for a revolutionary, a last change to change. A revolutionary is with the desperate people for whom everything is on line, not with those who have time. (Mankind) is not betrayed by the untimely attempts of the revolutionaries but by the timely attempts of the realists. (Herkhimov 1973 : 11).

The New Politics of activism, which in one way or the other is reformist, is thus exposed to contempt by revolutionary activism and repression by the state. The state has its own reasons to label even the reformist activism, in some situations, as revolutionary politics, thus either disorganising its past and the potential completely or forcing it to become revolutionary politics, allowing, in the latter situation, another platform for state terrorism.



Moderate or reformist activism, unable to proselytize its reformism, or even to own it, thus becomes somewhat incoherent and vulnerable to the loss of authentic purpose. It does not have the fiery clarity of revolutionary praxis nor is it able to afford the confusion of innovative reformism. Its proponents end up with radical rhetoric, exceeding their ideological resources and creating a dialectic of legitimization with the people with whom they work. Surely, it is time that we debate in Indian terms and conditions the question: What is wrong with reformism?" For those who wish to innovate civil society and the state, ambivalence cannot perform the jobs of a coherent ideology.

### ***Autonomy vs. Accountability***

For 'non' revolutionary activism, clearly autonomy can only mean relative autonomy from the polity and the economy. And such autonomy has to be won through acts of power, protest and struggle. It has to maintain the same way after it has been so won.

But since activism, like voluntarism, is a function of creative social commitment, it is in a sense a bootstrap operation. One becomes an activist by behaving as an activist. On the one side, it is a process of self-appointment; on the other, it is a process of legitimization by the community in which one performs activist roles. An activist is a public personage but unlike all other public personages she is not appointed or elected, not bound by a hierarchy of control or oversight; and the bounds of democratic social action open to her are set by the limits of her vision and opportunities afforded by history. In this sense, an activist is a *Swayambhu*, a self-originating phenomenon. Like the *Swayambhu*, the career and future, and even the nature, of activism depends on the extent of community acceptance.

Thus enters the problematic of accountability. Since activism amounts to the creation of new forms of social power and influence (and in a Foucaultian sense is constituted by power) the age-old question of accountability of activists arises in uncanny ways. Some Indian activists, in a splurge of thoughtless reformism, have advocated stricter bureaucratic legal accountability to the State (See Baxi, 1986).

Clearly, such ventures betoken a lack of historical understanding of activism (and of the differences between voluntarism and activism) which, by definition, is a struggle against the state formation, even in various incarnations of 'reformism'. But when we reject these, as I do, the problem of accountability remains. The problem is not acute with what I have called PORP (Participatory Organisations of the Rural Poor). But it certainly is acute and urgent with ORP (Organisations of Rural Poor) and SAG (Social Action Groups). ORP and SAG, of course, do not exhaust the varieties of activist experience, organisation and consciousness (see Baxi: 121-124).

Where the activist is not herself regarded as worthy of state repression (for a variety of reasons) but when people in struggle alongside her are repressed, and brutally so, the problem of accountability assumes almost terrifying dimensions. In not a too substantially lesser measure, when an activist decides to call it a day, enough being enough the same problem arises with all its acuteness.

Compared to these aspects of accountability, the ones currently subjected to national discussion through the proposed Bill (Roy, 1986) are historically trivial.

The answer to this problematic of accountability of activist must be severely left where it belongs. "To the bosom, where perhaps consciences are located," is a cruel and a callous answer, at least under the existing conditions of standardless use of force by the state against people who insist on being treated as humans and as citizens. Even if we grant that the activist conscience is superior to that of a power-politician, the problem of the formation of that conscience and its functioning remains. How do activists avoid the very conditions of power without accountability the protest against which furnishes, at least in part, the very legitimization of activism?

Once this question arises for introspective dialogue, the second-order questions of struggling of accountability will be the easier ones to grapple with. It is indispensable for the coherence of activism in India that such dialogue takes place at authentic levels, uninfluenced and undeterred by uncreative sterile proposals for state mechanisms for souring the accountability of activists.



### Violence vs. Non-violence

Non-violent activism cannot, clearly, perceive violence as a legitimate resource of emancipatory politics. That conceded, arises the question how activism is to confront violence by state and in civil society. How does activism respond to patriarchal caste or communal violence? What does activism offer by way of alternate features to victims of mass violence? What does it offer to victims of state violence? And, indeed, what its response to 'terrorist' violence? The mere fact that an activist espouses non-violent methods of social transformation as a creed does not, morally or historically, exonerate her from understanding and redressing structural violence in civil society and state.

Activists in India, and again I hope I am fully wrong, have not conceptualised the possibility of legitimate violence, permitted in the law as self-defence, as a moral and historical entry point for meeting force with force. In a sense, this raises the problem of accountability at the level of cognitive poverty, also arising from not learning the full reasons from historical encounters with brute power.

The more fundamental question of justification of the violence of the oppressed evokes deep ambivalences among activists across the country, who neither refine Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's justification of non-violence in a new-colonial context nor articulate cogent reasons for acknowledging that violence of the oppressed is morally defensible as providing the very matrix of people's power and of new human rights. For how long shall we neglect theoretical praxis and yet expect the miracle of success through democratic social action?

### Youth vs. Age

Essentially, the dilemma here boils down to production of activist leadership. If dynastic succession is evil in the arena of power politics, is it legitimate in New Politics? Also, should an activist remain so till death to do his part or make room for new styles of leadership? At what point of time, and in which conditions of evolution of an activist movement, is 'youth revolution' legitimate? These problems are expressive of different orders of activist choice-making; and yet each one of them is acutely

relevant, both philosophically and pragmatically, for the future of activism in India.

### Direct Action vs. Law

The choice of strategies for democratic social action becomes very acute in pursuit of emancipatory politics. The phenomenal incidence of social action litigation, and the current dynamics of disenchantment with it, poses several puzzles.

One puzzle is the problem of dependency-creation; turning to one agency of the state to reform other organs of the state power raises the question of how best and how far one can use the system against itself? That it can be so used has been indubitably demonstrated. But the limits of this use are perceived subjectively in terms of gains to a particular model of activism, regardless of future potentialities. Another puzzle is that of 'judicious mix'. Even social action litigation, with all its informality in initiation, remains or becomes an aspect of third-party, professional adjudication and thus reduces space for creative experimentation of people's power. Does social action litigation enter the stream of struggle, as it were? Or is it regarded by activists as a messianic cargo cult, periodically bringing to the afflicted the miraculous succour? Are the choices between direct action and social action litigation made in a participative manner or in the manner of professional domination? What social learning occurs through experimentation through law and courts? To what extent qualitative and quantitative power relations charges occur as a result of court recourse?

Even as a reformist strategy, are the activists aware of the full potential of social action litigation for emancipatory or liberation struggles? Is the reformist strategy adequately grasped or are the state courts looked upon as *Kamadhenus* (celestial cows) which can be *dohanned* (milked) inexhaustibly? What has been the activist role in the public discourse on judicial appointments, in terms of constitutional commitment of the Justice, the number of Judges required to cope with people's problems and their timely appointments?

The problem is, of course, more comprehensive than recourse to courts for the enunciation of new rights and dramatic democratisation of judicial remedies. Other creative experimen-



tation in law - such as legal aid and legal literacy programmes, *lok adalats* (direct plagiarisation and vulgarisation of people's law and justice) need, literally, to be "hijacked" by the activists for their own purposes. The present record is one of utter incomprehension, self-cancelling cases, self-serving demoralisation concerning the liberational potential of the recourse to law.

Wearisome as the refrain may sound, it is time for activists to put their house in order. If they are to be genuine reformists there is a whole agenda of action and struggle to turn around, bit by bit, the institutions of law and justice. There is still time to stop using decadence of the legal system as a recourse (manipulation of delays, multiple legal pathways to obstruct state action, fashioning onerous forms of accountability for the impoverished) and to take initiatives for a thoroughgoing transformation of the law, its institutions and processes, in ways which make them legitimate instruments of countervailing people's power. For those who *ad-lib* Karl Marx's nihilism concerning bourgeois law, I invoke his dictum that "constitutions and laws are necessities of class struggle" and his famous analysis of Factory Legislation as worth several times to the bourgeois nonsense about the inalienable rights of men (Marx, 1933). What is more, let me add for the sake of authenticity, that Karl Marx has said all this in the pages of *Das Kapital*; one simply does not have to invoke the Young Marx for his view of the law.

### Conclusion

If socialism is to come of age, and not be aborted or subjected to infanticide, the inverse Brahminism of activists has to be challenged. The distrust of analysis, the conversion of organic, praxiological knowledge, to an introspect estate of the elect few, the inability or the reluctance to communicate authentic experience of life struggles - in a word, the anti-intellectualism the anti-theory and anti-knowledge stance of activism needs to be firmly rejected and reversed. There is room for dialogical sharing of knowledge arising from the struggle. Not merely should this knowledge be allowed like all knowledges, organic and erudite, to cumulate, but the growth of priesthood among social activists laying claim to specific knowledges and monopolising it, must also cease.

Such a *progamschrift* for activists is essential to check a nefarious tendency towards, what psycho-analysts call, interjection, a process by which one reproduces all the pathologies and deformities of agents or agencies against which one is locked into a mortal struggle. Activism, even when reformist, is in mortal danger of reproducing the deformation of power with its critiques in state and society: territoriality, unaccountability, arrogance, anti-intellectualism, lack of authentic dialogue, and an inability to share, learn and unlearn. Refusal to interject, refusal to reproduce the configurations which one criticises and critiques, is by itself an act of liberation, of emancipation. By definition, activism can have no territoriality, no hegemony, no competition for power, no lusting for eminence in the media market, no questing for recognition, or rewards. In this profound sense of the word 'dedication', activists have much to learn from the selflessness of voluntarism at its authentic best.

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