



Pedagogy, Public Sociology and Politics in India

What is to be Done?

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abstract: The current phase of economic liberalization may be understood in terms of a shift in the notion of the nation, especially the shrinking of the public sphere and the increasing exclusion of subaltern groups from public discourse. Disadvantaged groups can only strive for recognition by invoking the fictive ideal of 'community' with moral claims upon the nation-state. The engagement of sociologists in these struggles may entail suppressing critical issues, steering clear of questions about internal democracy, ideological contradictions or long-term strategy. To orient and equip students and younger scholars to engage in a public sociology that speaks to subaltern causes, we need to change the academy itself – its internal values and its terms of engagement with others outside it.

keywords: community ♦ democracy ♦ India ♦ public discourse

Introduction

The new year brought death to Orissa. On 2 January 2006, police opened fire on a group of *adivasis* (members of India's Scheduled Tribes), killing 12 and injuring many others in this state in eastern India. For 23 days, the *adivasis* had blocked the state highway at Kalinganagar, peacefully protesting against the takeover of their farmlands by a steel company. Their refusal to surrender their land was a red rag to an administration under pressure to expedite industrial development in the state. The stakes were high: not only this piece of land but the entire policy of accelerated industrialization would be jeopardized if the government were to entertain the *adivasis'* demands. The police was brought in to forcibly clear the highway. In the confrontation that followed, 12 *adivasi* men and women lost their lives.

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Many of them were shot in the back as they were trying to run away. When the dead *adivasis'* bodies were returned to their families, it was found that the police had cut off their hands, the men's genitals and the women's breasts. The corpses' mutilation was a warning: we mean business.

The Kalinganagar incident, like many horrors before it and since, briefly made the headlines and then disappeared from public view. The lives and deaths of these poor *adivasis*, the stigmata of state power on their bodies and their lands,¹ slid back into obscurity. Yet their struggle still continues and by revisiting it, we not only remind ourselves of the need to address ongoing injustice, but also appreciate how this conflict encapsulates many of the key issues in the sphere of political practice and public discourse in India today. Like many *adivasi*-dominated parts of the country, Kalinganagar in the Jajpur district of central Orissa (eastern India) is a paradox. Its wealth of natural resources contrasts sharply with the poverty of its inhabitants, mainly small farmers and labourers. The rich iron ore deposits in the area are state property and their 'development' means that *adivasi* lands are compulsorily acquired by the state for a pittance. While a handful of local residents may get secure jobs on the lower rungs of the industrial sector, most are impoverished even further and survive on the edge of starvation as wage-labourers. It is estimated that 30 million people, more than the entire population of Canada, have been displaced by this land acquisition policy since India became independent in 1947 (Fernandes, 1991). Of these, almost 75 percent are, by the government's own admission, 'still awaiting rehabilitation'.² This process of land acquisition is justified as being in the public interest since the state is committed to promoting economic growth by expanding industrial production and infrastructure. It is claimed that such growth is necessary for national development.

Development, Dispossession and Accelerated Extraction

To these arguments has been added a new justification. Since 1990, the Indian government has adopted a policy of economic liberalization: divesting the state of its welfare functions, enabling foreign investment, easing imports, privatizing public sector assets and dismantling the institutions regulating private firms. Economic policy has been reoriented to maximize foreign exchange earnings, with concessions and subsidies given to Indian and foreign firms to encourage them to invest in production for export. Kalinganagar's iron ore attracted increased interest due to the booming international demand for steel and spurred the Tata Iron and Steel Company (TISCO), who had bought land from the Orissa state government, to start work on a new steel plant by building a wall enclosing the

factory site. It was the construction of this wall that sparked off protests leading to the killing of *adivasis*. The state government had forcibly acquired this land from them years ago by paying them a few thousand rupees per acre. Since the meagre compensation did not enable *adivasis* to invest in an alternative livelihood, they had continued to live in the area and cultivate the land that legally no longer belonged to them (after acquiring the land, the administration had not put it to any use). TISCO's move in December 2005 to enclose this land directly deprived *adivasis* of their sole source of livelihood. Their desperation was fuelled by anger when they learnt that the state government had sold the same land for which they had been paid a few thousand rupees to TISCO for several hundred thousand rupees per acre, without any improvement. The state was profiteering by impoverishing the very citizens that it is supposed to protect. *Adivasis* took to the streets, refusing to give up the land that they survived on.

The struggle of *adivasis* in Orissa and its violent reprisal highlight how conflicts over land and related natural resources remain central to the challenge of India's development. Kalinganagar is now marked along with the Singrauli power projects; the Narmada, Tehri, Hirakud, Koel Karo and Suvarnarekha dams; Nagarhole tiger reserve; the Plachimada Coca-Cola bottling plant; and many other sites on the map of environmental conflicts in India.³ In 2007, two more places achieved prominence in this geography: Singur and Nandigram, both in the state of West Bengal, have recently witnessed violent clashes over state acquisition of village lands for private corporations. The fact that West Bengal is governed by a Left Front coalition led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) only highlights the hegemonic power of the neoliberal paradigm in India. The protests in Nandigram represent the strongest challenge to the policy of establishing Special Economic Zones (SEZs), a major new state initiative that has met with widespread resistance across the country. An SEZ 'is a specially demarcated area of land, owned and operated by a private developer. . . . With the intent of increasing exports, . . . utilising a large number of concessions – tax exemptions, guaranteed infrastructure and the relaxation of labour and environmental standards' (Srivastava, 2007a; see also Srivastava, 2007b). Real estate developers and builders from India and abroad have rushed to invest in SEZs, leading to sky-rocketing land prices even as small-scale agriculture becomes more unviable than ever. The alarming numbers of farmer suicides and the phenomenal growth in rural out-migration across India point to a deep divide that splits the country into two: the affluence created by India's economic boom is accompanied by distress and dispossession for subaltern groups. Just when the consumerist promises of liberalization are being beamed nationwide, creating a rising tide of aspirations and expectations, large sections of the Indian population find themselves mired in misery, many worse off than before.

Time and Space in Environmental Politics: The Question of Waves and Scales

The social conflicts and cleavages that characterize contemporary India are consistent with Michael Burawoy's analysis of 'third-wave marketization' and the commodification of nature (Burawoy, this issue, pp. 351–9). Yet, Burawoy's periodization of political economy in terms of the three 'waves' of marketization – of labour, finance capital and nature – is too tidy to explain the unfolding events in India. The cliché that several centuries exist all at once in India is apt here. For instance, the SEZ initiative is marked by the simultaneous commodification of land, labour and money, a process that resonates with Karl Polanyi's description of the transformation of land and labour into 'fictitious commodities', forged together during the period of the enclosure movement and industrialization in Britain (Polanyi, 1957). Rather than being a 'second wave' that is now spent, international capital is more powerful than ever in the current scenario. One could also argue that the timeline of the commodification of nature (the 'third wave') stretches back 150 years when the British colonial government rearticulated agriculture and forestry to insert agricultural crops and forest produce into global circuits of trade and manufacture (Guha, 1989).

From the vantage point of India, the current phase of economic liberalization is better understood in terms of a shift in the notion of the nation. Among the elite, the idea of India as a democratic society, where the state is charged by the Constitution to safeguard and promote the rights of the poorest citizens first, is gradually being replaced by an impatience with the 'old' problems of being a Third World country and an ambition to achieve 'world power' status. The promise of development for all citizens, however ineffectively rendered, was at least an acknowledgement of the state's role in bringing about social justice and economic betterment. This commitment is being jettisoned in favour of a vision where economic growth is paramount and inequalities in the distribution of assets and opportunities are no longer a matter of serious state concern. The transformation in the state's idea of India is reflected in the shrinking of the public sphere and the increasing exclusion of subaltern groups from public discourse. Denied full membership in civil society because they lack landed property and other forms of symbolic capital from which social legitimacy flows, disadvantaged groups can only strive for recognition as members of 'political society', invoking the fictive ideal of 'community' with moral claims upon the nation-state (Chatterjee, 2004: 57). This is the discourse that many environmental movements have adopted as a part of their strategy of resistance.

This point also has a bearing on Burawoy's schematization of the shifting scales of political practice. According to him, 'the response to the

commodification of labor in first-wave marketization was local. . . . The response to the next round of marketization – the commodification of money – was national', whereas 'responses to third-wave marketization cannot be confined to local or national arenas but have to assume global scale' (Burawoy, this issue, pp. 356–7). This is necessitated by the global character of ecological processes, which mean that the commodification of nature in one place has consequences around the world and for the planet as a whole. Global processes and problems demand global responses, hence the significance of local movements linking up with campaigns against global institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) and gathering at events like the World Social Forum, which helps to build solidarity and shared strategies.

The protests against land acquisition in India defy this characterization. While they build alliances with national and, occasionally, transnational networks of protest, that is not their defining feature. The legitimacy of these movements in the eyes of the media and the metropolitan intelligentsia who constitute the state's reference publics comes from their demonstrably 'local' provenance. If campaigns and social movements are perceived as being orchestrated by 'outsiders', they lose their credibility and political purchase. The need to foreground villagers, indigenous people, affected men and women, is essential for claiming authenticity (see Conklin and Graham, 1995). Of course, the 'local' that is thus presented is constituted through national and local processes, thereby complicating the question of scale. The very category of 'villager' or '*adivasi*' is a national-level administrative construct that is shaped by transnational discourses of development and indigenism, but which has been internalized by the people and thus classified as a part of their cultural identity. Thus, the notion of the 'local' is a social fact that is produced through national and global processes of knowledge formation. As Akhil Gupta (1998) points out in the context of agrarian and environmental movements, it is ironic that the 'local' achieves a political charge only when it has been thoroughly permeated by the presence of the national and the global. It must also be noted that environmental and social protests in India are still overwhelmingly articulated towards the Indian state and not a transnational institution or audience. The state is still regarded as the key agency around which democratic politics must revolve. Even though, with liberalization, the state has become more blatantly partisan in its promotion of corporate capital, it continues to command a high degree of credibility. Subaltern groups' expectations and aspirations of a more just society are still oriented towards demanding state action and intervention. The intermingling of the global, national and local scales in environmental and social politics in India does not fit Burawoy's temporal and spatial schematization. However, Indian sociologists will agree

with him about the centrality of the conflicts and contradictions that are highlighted by his analysis.

Burawoy's account, then, throws up a challenge for us. If the Indian case doesn't quite fit – and I would suspect that studies from other parts of the world such as Brazil, Thailand or South Africa would also sit somewhat awkwardly with the temporal and spatial scheme that he elaborates – how do we generalize about the social effects of what are indubitably global processes? Among the methodological and conceptual issues at stake here is the status of comparative sociology, which, despite frequent exhortations, still isn't undertaken on a footing that might do justice to the global scale. In the absence of comparative data, generalizations are constrained to proceed from secondary sources, which may lead to superficial and selective analysis. Besides conducting more rigorous, in-depth comparative research, we also need to theorize better about 'difference and disjuncture' (Appadurai, 1996) in the world, whether through the lens of articulation (Hall, 1980) or other conceptual frames, to understand the global without giving up the national and local.

Pedagogy and Public Sociology

Having discussed some of the conceptual issues raised by Burawoy's analysis of contemporary political processes and oppositional practices, I now turn to the question of what sociologists should do. Burawoy asks us to be organic public sociologists, in dialogue with our publics, in a relationship marked by mutual respect and reciprocity. An organic public sociologist would challenge the common sense of commodification and help construct 'a counter-hegemonic notion of human rights' that consolidates 'the struggles of organizations creating community against marketization'. I concur with Burawoy's view that the times demand greater engagement with public issues and forums. His prescription is particularly apt for the US academy (especially the more prestigious research universities), where the reward structure is oriented to prize scholarly performance narrowly defined in terms of peer-reviewed publications, over pedagogy or public engagement. In the US and elsewhere, individual and institutional academic success has also become contingent on securing research funds from outside sources. Scholars in the global South only too often find that they must recast their work to highlight its 'relevance to public policy', a criterion imposed by national and international funding agencies. The requirement to be accountable to the politically bland and conceptually banal world of international development places a huge constraint upon sociologists who wish to take on more exciting, politically charged projects.⁴ This scenario affects

young scholars and students of sociology in two significant ways: those who are attracted by the glamour of high theory and the appeal of professional recognition look down upon both public engagement and policy application, as corrupting influences on the ivory tower. Those who spot opportunity in the market of NGO-funded research embrace the study of *social problems* – teenage drug-users, sex workers, refugees, victimhood of various kinds – without seeking to critically examine the larger social and political field that creates these subjects and our knowledge of them. The ideology and structure of academic life do not allow organic public sociologists to be held in high regard. Appreciation, if any, comes from outside.

Outside lies another challenge. Most social movements and social justice organizations want sociologists to champion their cause rather than engage them in dialogue. They expect sociologists and other sympathetic intellectuals to lend their authority before the state and metropolitan reference publics. An instrumental use of academic authority – to write an ‘independent’ report that corroborates the movement’s claims, to meet politicians and bureaucrats as part of a delegation of dignitaries, to appear on television talk shows – is mainly what social movements desire. A partisan scholarship of pedagogy and public performance in support of subaltern groups wins praise from these groups and also makes the scholar more prominent outside the academy. In a situation where subaltern groups are battling for survival, and where academic institutions are not structured to speak to their struggles, such championing is urgently needed and from increasing numbers of sociologists. Yet engagement on these terms may entail suppressing critical issues, steering clear of questions about internal democracy, ideological contradictions or long-term strategy (Baviskar, 1999). Abandoning critical enquiry on these issues may help create the impression of a unified and coherent – and thus, more effective – public campaign but, in the longer term, it serves neither sociology nor social movements.

I believe that the endeavour to be an organic public sociologist, someone who is true to his or her social conscience as well as discipline, creates a tension that is productive of good scholarship as well as politics. Yet it is difficult to sustain this endeavour since it is unlikely to bring academic or material rewards, much less accolades from the public. How do we produce the conditions that foster critical public engagement? To orient and equip students and younger scholars to engage in a public sociology that speaks to subaltern causes, we need to change the academy itself – its internal values and its terms of engagement with others outside it. This is not a new analysis: it comes to us from Gramsci, Illich and Freire among others. The challenge lies in making it happen.

Notes

1. See Baviskar (2001) for an analysis of a similar incident from central India.
2. See draft National Policy for Rehabilitation.
3. Apart from these sites of (largely) non-violent protest, significant sections of central, east-central and northeast India are dominated by Naxalite armed groups espousing an ultra-left ideology of annihilating the state. Control over resources is a key issue in the Naxalite struggle, which, in states like Chhattisgarh, has taken the form of civil war, with the government deploying citizen militias along with state police and paramilitary forces to oppose the militants.
4. This problem is all the more acute in countries where academic activity is under surveillance or strictly supervised by the state for its subversive potential. Sociology in the Philippines, Pakistan, Indonesia, Egypt and elsewhere has suffered as a result of such censorship.

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