

Routledge Studies in South Asian Politics

RADICAL POLITICS AND GOVERNANCE IN INDIA'S NORTH EAST

THE CASE OF TRIPURA

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1 Marxism and the national/ethnic question

Theory and practice in India

Introduction

The national question has been very challenging to the Left radical politics in India's North East since pre-independence days. Given the very different and somewhat underdeveloped economic structure in the region, class was not and is still not the defining category of social and economic relations. In most States in the region, tribal ethnic identity, most often formulated as a national question, or what is most commonly known as the ethnic question nowadays, and inter-tribal and intra-tribal as well as tribal and non-tribal ethnic conflicts, have tended to define the space of politics. In such predominantly tribal inhabited States as Mizoram, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh, Left radical politics has failed to make any inroads. In Assam, and Manipur, Left radical politics had had a significant beginning and still retains some areas of influence, most notably in Assam, but in Manipur the Left lost all its bases in the face of the more powerful and belligerent ethnic challenge and insurgency. In Assam, although the Left, particularly the CPI-M, maintains a level of influence, the very powerful surges of national/ethnic political mobilizations since the 1960s have tended to occupy most space rendering the Left to marginality. Therefore, the success of the Left in Tripura in the midst of severe ethnic conflicts, on the one hand, and the failure of the Left in the rest of the region, on the other hand, raises the important question about the strategic success and failure of the Left in building bases in ethnically sharply divided society. Why it failed in most States in the region and also why it succeeded in others are bogged down to the Left's strategic understanding and handling of the national/ethnic situation. The categories that the Left (parties) theoretically adhered to were universal and secular (mostly derived from the external international environment); but the actual context within which they had to operate defies the application of such universal categories. In the actual context, class conflicts, if there were any, arguably, played little role in the development of Left politics. This is not to underplay the role of class and class conflicts, but to suggest the very complex social and economic reality in which class elements were intertwined with ethnic elements. The national/ethnic question remains the most challenging for the Marxist Left in the region as much as in the rest of India.

A brief theoretical analysis of the relation between Marxism, on the one hand, and the national/ethnic question, on the other, is called for putting in place the Marxist positions on the national/ethnic issues. The Left mobilizations and explanation, what Kaviraj would call 'strange practices' need to be placed in reference to the theoretical position left behind by the founders of Marxism. Can Marxism have a 'theoretical' position on nation and nationalism? Can one bank upon Marxism for finding solutions to the ethnic problems the world over today? How does an ongoing radical Left politics grapple with the national or the ethnic question? Can the former overcome the latter? Or, else does radical politics itself becomes ethnified in the course of hobnobbing with ethnic politics? The following brief exploration seeks to address some of those issues.

If the national question has proved very challenging to Marxism from its very inception through to the Russian revolution (1917) and the revolutions in China (1949) and Vietnam (1967), the ethnic question has emerged since the 1970s and early 1980s as equally challenging to Marxism. This does not mean of course that the ethnic question has replaced the national question although there are considerable overlaps between the two in actual political practices. In the non-Western and multi-ethnic countries with lesser industrialization and without clear cut (industrial) class divisions in societies, the issues of national/ethnic question remain perplexing for the Marxists engaged in movements for major social transformation. However, the historical evidences from across the world suggest that this perplexing reality has proved to be resourceful to political parties and movements with profound ethnic orientation. For sub-nationalist and ethnic elites, the growing awareness of sub national deprivation and the sharp ethnic divisions in society are a minefield for political mobilization and power. The legitimacy that many such sub nationalist movements and parties acquired in decades of struggle has been quite stable and deeply rooted. The Parti Quebécois (PQ), the Basque, the Catalan and the Scottish nationalists and others, for example, are well established as the legitimate partners in power-sharing and self-governance (Gagnon and Tully 2001). In fact, the communities they represent are accepted as 'nationalist' rather than 'sub-nationalist'; the nationalist space involved is recognized as a distinct society. In Canada, for example, even the aboriginal peoples are now constitutionally recognized (1992) as the *First Nations* with their right to land and self-determination (Tully 2001: 23). While the liberal democratic States the world over have rather successfully grappled with the questions of ethno-nationalist forces and agreed to the mutually acceptable *terms of engagement* with the latter, the mighty and multiethnic former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia broke into pieces in the early 1990s by the heavy weight of ethno-nationalist forces. Late Eric Hobsbawm (1992: 163–92), in an early statement on the breakup of the USSR argues that although nationalism was not the factor in the breakup of the USSR, the Soviet Union disintegrated into many 'nation-states' for the ethno-national identity proved attractive to the peoples in time of disintegration, something to cling to in times of crisis. If the national, or the ethno-national question proved very challenging to classical Marxism, theoretically as well as practically, the post-Soviet and post-Yugoslav nationalisms proved as problematic to Marxism.¹

Categorical imperatives: class, nation and ethnic identity

Classical Marxism remains philosophically incompatible with the categories of nation, nationalism or the national question. This incompatibility is categorical rather than ideological. Classical Marxism is based on the assumptions that the most fundamental human divisions are horizontal class divisions that cut across ethnic or ethno-national divisions. Class here is understood as an economic category with a particular location in the mode of production, and secular in nature. Marx defined classes in relation to their location within the given mode of production. Classes are economic, secular and rational categories; class action, if any, therefore would be inclusive of all persons belonging to that class irrespective of any non-class character of the people. The category of class is divisive but would imply unity (class unity) of the particular class concerned. The question of class leadership and the ideological basis of class action, if any, would follow from the above basic premises of class. Classes in Marxism are seen as trans-ethnic, as nations are trans-class in nationalism. Nationalism, on the contrary, is based on the assumptions that human societies are fundamentally divided along many vertical cleavages of ethno-national groups (Connor 1984: 5). Nation and ethnic groupings, on the other hand, are trans-class categories; they centre on identity markers which are emotive, sentimental and exclusive. The leadership and ideology of nationalism and ethnic mobilization therefore appeal typically to the emotions and sentiments, and the attendant loyalties of the ethnic brethren for consciousness and action. In actual political mobilizations, nationalist and ethnic actions prove more effective than class actions. When translated into subjective dimensions and political actions, the nationalist would argue that national consciousness, or nationalism would prove more powerful than class consciousness. The Marxist, on the other hand, would argue that just the opposite will happen: in a test of loyalties, class consciousness would prevail upon national consciousness (Connor 1984: 5). That is an ideal typical position. In actual practice, workers may be gravitated more towards national and ethnic loyalties than class movements. In pre-revolutionary Russia, Lenin had to adjust his strategies by promising political democracy (national self-determination) in the future to the warring nationalities if they joined the revolutionary movements.

Marxists consider nations and nationalism as part of the superstructure of the capitalist base which is economic and which sustains and determines the superstructure. The latter is secondary to the base which is primary. Therefore, nations and nationalism are epiphenomena which will not survive capitalism. Since such non-class categories include identities such as religion, ethnicity, tribe and so on, the questions relating to them are subjugated to the class or the labour question. In the post-Napoleonic Europe Marx and Engels, as pointed out by Hobsbawm (1992), nationalism was no less powerful than class struggle as the vector of social change. The founder themselves were witnesses to what role nationalism was playing in the making of modern Europe; in the consolidation of the capitalist order in the continent. And yet, they diagnosed that class struggle as the motor of history, and that the recorded history of mankind was but a history of class struggles (*The*

Communist Manifesto 1848). This theoretical incompatibility between the two is intelligible. Classes are related to the mode of production either as the owners of the means of production, or the non-owners i.e, the workers irrespective of the national or ethnic character of either. For reasons of political mobilization, the class space and the ethno-national space are also very different from each other. The class space is homogeneous, equal, universal and secular admitting of no ethnic, linguistic or religious borders. The ethno-national space is segmental and exclusive; it excludes those who are non-nations, and who do not belong to the same ethnic category. For the Marxists, the capitalists as capitalist do not exploit less their ethnic brothers; the workers' struggle will not compromise because the capitalists belong to the same ethnic group. In nationalist or ethnic mobilizations, the internal differentiation along class lines are deliberately underplayed in order to present a cohesive unity among all members of the nation or the ethnic groups. In this case, the intra-ethnic emotional and other cultural bonds are highlighted for unity and power. Therefore, the categorical differences between Marxism and nationalism are irreconcilable.

Categorical imperative: ethnic identity

The world which has experienced a high degree of 'ethnicization' witnesses, quite naturally, proliferation of studies on ethnicity. As a result, the current literature on ethnicity is too vast. In this small section; we will attempt to find a workable definition of ethnicity for our purpose. The term 'ethnicity' is derived from the Greek term '*Ethnos*' which has two basic elements: the idea of living together, and being alike in culture.² The English language possesses no term for the concept of an ethnic group or ethnic community, and that is cited as one of the reasons for the wide spread neglect of ethnicity. The foremost sociologist of ethnicity, Anthony Smith, has listed a number of usages of the Greek term: a band of comrades; a host of men, e.g. the tribes of Achaeans or Hycians (as in Homer's *Iliad*); the race of men and women, e.g. the Median people or nation, (as in Herodotus); the casts of heralds (as in Plato), and so on.³ Smith believes that the Greeks have not made any distinction between tribes and nations: 'it is the similarity of cultural attributes in a group that attracts the term '*ethnos*'.⁴ In his famous book the *Ethnic Origins of Nations* (1986), Smith has strongly argued that ethnic roots have provided the 'constant elements of nationhood': ethnicity has provided, in a very general manner, a potent model for human association which has been adapted and transformed, but not obliterated in the formations of modern nations (Smith 1986).

Smith's definition of 'ethnicity' is sociological in the sense that it overemphasizes the social-cultural dimensions of ethnicity, and this is where it is to be modified to incorporate the political dimension of ethnicity. One major conclusion of Smith's great study of the origins of nations (1986) that the ethnic elements have never disappeared from history and remained a constant factor in the making and unmaking of nations (Smith 1986: 209-27).

Any serious student of modern affairs knows that the development of nationhood involves political mobilization. Another interesting aspect (and which is

quite relevant for our purpose) of the Smithian definition is that the Greeks did not make any distinction between nation and tribes. This is significant for the modern period not only because the tribals justify and rationalize their claim for nationhood on the criterion of their being tribes, but also because the real world is faced with a mixed situation where tribes and nations may appear to be synonymous, not objectively, but in terms of the deliberate constructions that are undertaken.

Marxism's opposition to ethnicity

Unavoidably then, Marxism, theoretically, is, in fact, more opposed to ethnicity than the national question. Ethnicity is a lower order phenomenon than nationality, or nationhood. In the broader framework of the classical Marxist understanding, as above, a nation (such as the German, the French and the Italian) may consist of *ethnie* but then the founders would not consider them separately. Ethnicity implies an identity and a movement which contradict the basic Marxist assumptions. True, what we today mean by the term 'ethnicity' was unknown at the time of Marx and Engels or even Lenin. Ethnicity is, as Wallerstein wrote,⁵ a very recent phenomenon connected with a distinct identity. The non-class identities, movements and ideologies that baffled Marx, Engels and Lenin, and also Stalin, were mostly 'nationalist' in character. It was the question of nationalism that seemed to puzzle Marx and the Marxists. It was the force of nationalism that was challenging to the Marxists; it was the nationality question that appeared as a rival to the class question. The nineteenth century and most of the twentieth century have known the nationality question', 'nationalism' and 'nationalist movement'. It is only since the break-up of the USSR that scholars, especially those who specialized in the study of nationalism, have noticed the decline of nationalism.⁶ What has emerged out of the break-up of the USSR, and the forms this break-up has taken eventually, is not nationalism, at least, not in the classical sense, but precisely ethnicity.⁷ The end of the Cold War and the decline of the USSR have strengthened the question of 'ethnicity' which has found favour with the post-modern political theorists. This post-Cold War era believes in as much globalization as ethnicization.⁸

How then to conceptualize the relationship between Marxism and ethnicity? The question is important, for theoretical as well as practical purposes. Sociologically-oriented studies of ethnicity emphasize the 'social identity' dimension of ethnicity: 'ethnic identity is to be understood and theorized as an example of social identity in general'.⁹ While Anthony Smith considers ethnic communities and identities as 'pre-modern' (Smith 1994: 376), Wallerstein under Marxist inspiration sees it as a 'peoplehood' which is a 'major institutional construct of historical capitalism':

Ethnicization or peoplehood resolves one of the basic contradictions of historical capitalism – its simultaneous thrust for theoretical equality and practical inequality and it does so by utilizing the mentalities of the world's working strata.

The working people, depressed and marginalized all over the world, have organized themselves in 'people' terms. This has been a dilemma for the world's proletariat. Wallerstein makes sense when he says that class-based activities are not divorced from 'people-based activity',¹⁰ but his assertion that this is not a dilemma resolvable within capitalism, and by implication resolvable only in socialism, is too far-fetched a hypothesis that sounds idealistic. While Weber saw 'ethnic groups' as 'status groups',¹¹ Marxists, historically, were not at ease grappling with the problem known today as 'ethnic'. The reason why Marxism and ethnicity do not go together, or cannot co-exist, is categorical. Ethnicity or ethnic identity suggests a community space and is trans-class; it also sustains itself on horizontal communal feeling and sentiments which admits of no internal divisions along classes. Class space, by contrast, is egalitarian, secular and universal, which admits of no non-class markers of unity. Classes are economic categories directly related to the prevailing mode of production. While an ethnic zealot would look at society in terms of ethnic distribution of powers and resources, Marxists would argue along the class lines and explain society in terms of classes. Thus, it is found that class and ethnicity are diametrically opposed categories. In practical political mobilizations, ethnic and class movements would be mutually exclusive; the ethnic leaders would not allow class dimensions to be brought in the ethnic mobilizations; class-based communist movements would prevent an effort to ethnicize the working class; ethnicization of the working classes would greatly harm the movements. The working classes may have some ethnic identity, linguistic, religious and others; the ethnic movements necessarily include people who are working classes. But in both cases, ethnic and class elements are not allowed to loom large at all.

Marxism and the national question

The Marxist approach to the national question provides the route to the ethnic question because what is understood as the ethnic question was not considered as such during Marx's time, and secondly, because the founders' overall approach to the national question, ideologically as well as strategically, remains the key to later day Marxist approach to the question. The second approach above applies with full force to the ethnic question of today. Although the founders were deeply committed to class analysis and involved themselves in political movements for class struggles in Europe, their writings show that they were persistently pre-occupied with the national questions of their times. To begin with, the national questions were those of the people of a country as a whole such as the Irish, the Polish and others, and their role in national self-determination from alien rule, or colonialism in favour of capitalist progress and development. In this respect we find the intellectual engagement of the founders with the national liberation movements of the Irish and the Polish. However, their differential assessments of the two cases at different times, often at odds with each other, do suggest that there was no theoretic explanation of the issue involved. The reason, to follow Connor (1984), was strategic: the 'ostensible commitment to the principle of self-determination in the abstract, while concomitantly reserving to themselves as to

whether a particular movement was to be supported or opposed' (Connor 1984: 12). Their stereotypical remarks on the 'lazy Mexicans', or the *wild, headstrong, cheerful, light hearted, corruptible sensuous* Irish people were symptomatic not of theoretic explanation but very casual, if not, condescending allusions. Those remarks were made by Marx and Engels in the mid-1840s. In their subsequent private correspondence, which was more frank, the same Irish question received serious attention: 'not merely a simple *economic question* but at the same time a *national question*'¹² (emphasis in the original).

In Marx and Engels there were two perspectives on the national question. First, the most importantly, they wrote and commented upon the broader nationhood meaning the whole citizenry of a nation-state such as the German, the British, the Polish and the French. The nationality involved here was based on nationalism as articulated by the victorious bourgeoisie against feudalism. Nation and nationalism that the bourgeoisie upheld was, for them, artificial constructions designed to cover, ideologically, the capitalist domination. Tribes, clan and peoples in this perspective are pre-capitalist in form and character. Nations and States in this Marxist perspective have been used interchangeably; the term 'nation' has often been used to refer to the total population within the boundary of the States regardless of their ethnic complexion. Connor (1984) has observed some terminological confusion, or conceptual imprecision in the perspective of Marx and Engels with regard to their use of nationality to mean as ethno-national groups, or often as a synonym for nationalism; they used the term sometimes as referring to the legal definition of citizenship (Connor 1984: 9). Be that as it may, it was the firm belief of the founders that national differences and antagonisms would disappear along the path of the further development of the bourgeoisie, of commerce and trade, and the world market (Marx and Engels 1848). This overall perspective suggests that the national characteristics of citizens were transient, and the loyalties of nationalism determined by economy and not by ethno-national factors will not survive the demise of capitalism.

The relative theoretical neglect of nations and nationalism in Marx and Engels prior to 1848 was rectified, as it were, in their writings post-1848 in the wake of the uprisings of many ethno-national groups in Europe. But then, as Connor pointed out, the greater attention to nations and nationalism in the writings of the founders was paid not for any new theoretical consideration; from now on their thought on the subject assumed a profoundly strategic consideration (Connor 1984: 11). As we have indicated above, from the beginning Marx and Engels were found to be grappling with the theoretical implications of nations and nationalism, offered no place of them in their theoretical scheme, held a negative attitude to the issues and settled down to strategic considerations while affirming their ideological support to the cause of nationalism, to the idea of self-determination, in the abstract, if they found the latter to be progressive. This strategic outlook was not simple an expression of intent on the part of Marx and Engels but confirmed in the political revolutionary activities they were involved as leading elements. For example, the *Proclamation on the Polish Question* (1865) drafted by Karl Marx and endorsed by the London Conference of the First International in 1865 noted the need 'to

annihilate the growing influence of Russia in Europe by assuring Poland the right of self-determination which belong to every nation and by giving to this country once more a social and democratic foundation' (Connor 1984: 11). And yet, in 1866 Engels (with Marx's urging) disclaimed the universality of the principle reserving this for a few select people (Connor 1984: 12). In many other writings, Engels confirmed the ambivalence maintained by the founders with regard to the question of self-determination of nations. In all cases, Engels would support the self-determination of large nations such as the German, the Italian and the French but would not concede the same to the nationalities such as the Germans in France, and the Basque in Spain. In other words, he would not concede Statehood to the small nationalities; those ethno-national sentiments would not be supported for Statehood (Connor 1984: 12). The above only confirms the *strategic flexibility* of classical Marxism with regard to the vexed national question so as even to take precedence over ideological purity and consistency.

Strategic considerations: post-Marxist positions

After Marx the major theoretical explorations on the national question, nation and nationalism were made by the Austro-Marxists, most notably Auto Bauer and Karl Renner (Nin 1935), but then the theoretical attempts were motivated to understand the relation between capitalism and nationalism, and finally to show how nationalism gave way to imperialism, ideologically speaking. While Bauer underlined the connection between the rise of capitalism and the nation-state, Renner sought to show how the once progressive, revolutionary principle of nationality gave way to imperialism. According to him, as 'capitalism is now passing from its industrial to its finance-capitalist stage' so the old principle of nationality which was democratic, revolutionary around the goals of unity, freedom, and self-determination, is over and done away with, paving the way for rise of 'social imperialism', or the 'imperialism of the whole people' (quoted in Bottomore 1979: 101).

Most significant strategic contribution to the issue was made by Lenin and Stalin, who developed the strategic angle in classical Marxism with regard to nationalism and the nationality questions to suit a different revolutionary situation in Russia before 1917. However, we seek to argue here that Lenin's immensely strategic approach to the national question in pre-revolutionary Russia was not something universally accepted among the leading Marxist thinkers of the time. Rosa Luxemburg, for example, raised a fundamental question here by arguing that the Marxist can never uphold any right to self-determination of nations because that would be akin to taking a bourgeois standpoint. As a Marxist, she defended the self-determination of the working people alone (Davis 1978: 54-5).¹³

The Leninist formulation of the question has been known for its strategic implications. Lenin proposed a three-pronged strategy for harnessing nationalism to the cause of scientific socialism in which the manipulation of the national aspirations of peoples, especially minorities, is a key element.

Lenin's first injunction was: *prior to the assumption of power, promise all national groups the right of self-determination (including the right to secede) while proffering national equality to those who wish to remain within the state* (Connor 1984: 580).

The second injunction was: *following the assumption of power, terminate the fact (though not necessarily the fiction) of a right to secession and begin the lengthy process of assimilation via the dialectical route of territorial autonomy for all compact groups* (Connor 1984: 583).

The third injunction was: *keep the party of all national proclivities* (Connor 1984: 584). The party here means of course the Communist Party.

In the first socialist State, immediately after the revolution, the Bolsheviks' commitment to the national question was honoured only in its breach. The national question was now re-interpreted as the self-determination of the toiling masses; the national question now came to be subordinated to the class question; actual self-determination of any nationalities was made impossible by hedging around the theoretical possibility with a lot of conditions including the willingness of the Communist Party. The preservation of socialism in the USSR was to take precedence over any other questions; any question of secession came to be defined as going against socialism.

This manipulative Leninist 'strategy' on the national question, though having seen both successes and failures, has informed many communist movements and parties throughout the world in their dealing with the national question. The brief outline, given above on the relation between nationalism and Marxism, may be concluded with a few observations. First, the philosophical and theoretical incompatibility between Marxism and nationalism has not stood in the way of the Marxists' 'manipulation', 'utilizations' and adaptation of nationalism in the cause of socialism in many parts of the world. Second, communist movements scored greatest success in countries where communism and nationalism were wedded in the popular imagination because that ensured broad-based acceptability for communism in the colonial and post-colonial societies. Third, communists make nation and nationalism subservient to class and class-struggles. Last, in grappling with the national question, communists adopt an instrumentalist attitude and consider ethno-national groups and identities as pre-modern and regressive. Marx's attitude of condescension towards such 'pre-modern' issues and identities is intelligible.

The relation, then, between Marxism and nationalism remains unresolved, and little ground has yet been broken in this regard in conventional Marxism. Practically, this gives rise to a host of tensions, since Marxists are inclined to treat nationalism, the nationality question and national identities from a typically negative perspective.

Stalin's 'theory' of the national question is worth considering here, at some length, not for its 'derivative' intellectual merits, but for its subsequent political influence (Hobsbawm 1992: 1). Stalin's 'theory' of nationalism and the national question has remained the 'operational' model for practicing Marxists all over the world until the breakup of the Soviet Union. Although

Stalin wrote altogether twelve pieces on the question,¹⁴ his *Marxism and the National Question* (1913) remains the central text. The political need for such a tract on the national question was more motivated by the political considerations then prevailing in Russia and the dangers of nationalism gripping the ongoing working-class movements in Russia, especially in the border areas. As Stalin said:

From this it follows that the views of Russian Social-Democracy (read the Bolshevik party) on the national question are not yet clear to all Social-Democrats.

“Consistent Social-Democrats must work solidly and indefatigably the fog of nationalism, no matter from what quarter it proceeds”.

(Stalin 1913: 2)

For a Marxist leader engaged in a revolutionary struggle, class struggle and class consciousness are the *sine qua non*, and hence an opposite consciousness is therefore to be condemned. In *Marxism and the National Question*, Stalin gave not one but two definitions of what constitutes a nation:

A nation is a historically constituted stable community of people formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture.

(Stalin 1913: 5)

None of the above characteristics taken separately is sufficient to define a nation [. . .] it is sufficient for a single one of those characteristics to be lacking and the nation ceases to be a nation. It is when all these characteristics are present together that we have a nation.

(Stalin 1913: 5)

The ‘people’ mentioned in Stalin’s definition of the nation rules out the tribes, which is not a historical but an ‘ethnographic’ category (Stalin 1913: 8); hence it does not qualify as a nation, for Stalin.

A close and critical look at the definition suggests that first, his first definition does not mention at all the State as any element of the nation; apparently his is a cultural definition of the nation. But when one read the whole text and understand the background of his writing one will not miss the reason as to why he did not mention the State, which was a deliberate omission. Stalin was aware of the phenomenon of the State, and of the nation-states in the West. In his brief reference to what happened in the West he made a distinction between what he called a ‘national community’ and a ‘state community’ and said that the national communities developed into State communities in the West (Stalin 1913: 3, 9). But in his definition he abjured the issue of the State, which was contrary to the modern lesson about State formation in the world. Max Weber, the famous German political sociologist, famous for his definition of the nation-state emphasized that a nation becomes truly a nation when it has got a State of its own (Weber 1948). Stalin here made an interesting distinction between the West and the East:

Whereas in the West nations developed into states, in the East multi-national states were formed, states consisting of several nationalities (Stalin 1913: 9) (emphasis is added).

That is historical fact but when providing a definition which is a scientific exercise and which should command universality, one cannot have two different definitions one pertaining to the West and the other to the East. Horace Davis (1978) raised a different question here concerning whether a Marxist should at all attempt a definition and fixing up factors for all times to come. When things are always in a flux, and changing how can we fix up the factors as permanent in the definition of the nation? This way explaining nationhood is fragmentary in the sense that on the one hand, nations are considered by Stalin as sovereign and on the other hand, Statehood is not ascribed to the nation: 'Social-Democracy in all countries, therefore, proclaims the right of nations to self-determination. [. . . .] Nations are sovereign, and all nations have equal rights'.

(Stalin 1913: 14)

In support of the above claim, the right to secede is accepted by Stalin (Lenin also accepted it on strategic considerations!) but it implies that the nations first have to come under the control of a multi-national State, and then they may demand the right to secede in favour of a separate State. In his tract Stalin mentioned again and again the right of nations to self-determination but does not support any programme of recognition to nationalities that gives birth to nationalism. So Stalin had two solutions to the national question: first, one of course is self-determination; and second, regional autonomy as the 'essential element to the solution of the national question' (Stalin 1913: 48). However, one is not sure how one can prevent a community demanding self-determination from developing nationalism among them as the precondition for such a demand?

Analytical Marxism and ethnic identity

Dissatisfied with the wisdom of conventional Marxism, the 'Analytical Marxists' have since the late 1970s, but more prominently since the 1980s, expressed a positive attitude to the ties of nationality (Chohen in Callinicos 1989: 69). The foremost analytical Marxist G.A. Cohen argues that Marx and his followers 'have underestimated the importance of phenomena, such as religion and nationalism which satisfy the need for self-identity'.¹⁵ As he wrote:

It is the need to be able to say . . . who I am, satisfaction of which has historically been found in identification with others in a shared culture based on nationality, race or religion. They generate or at least sustain ethnic and other bonds whose strength Marxist systematically undervalue, because they neglect the need for self-identity satisfied by them.

(Cohen 1989: 157)

One of the fundamental traits of this new tradition of Marxism is that it expels Hegelian modes of thinking from Marxism (which implies that the State is a good medium for the embodiment of nationality), which according to this Marxism, stands in the way of developing a positive attitude towards such identities. The full implications of such assertion by analytical Marxists are yet to be assessed, but one thing can be said with certainty is that analytical Marxism by questioning the embedded Hegelianism in Marxism has cleared the deck for rethinking anew non-class identities without the State. But then it begs a whole lot of questions about the relation between nationality and political power; religious identity in a situation of Statelessness; and ethnic identity apolitically.

Sudipta Kaviraj has approached the question from a different but very interesting theoretical angle worth considering. For him, two interlinked issues are involved here: the State, and nationality Kaviraj (1992: 173). has argued that Marxism as a form of modernity, as a political theory and as a movement, is statist in orientation. For Marx, the market and the State were the two instruments of 'rational' allocation of resources which capitalist utilization had slowly brought into being.¹⁶ The Marxists beginning with Marx have not been able to visualize alternative agents of rationality in socialism beyond the State. Thus, when those non-class identities, especially 'nationalist', assume distinctly political forms, often demanding a State of their own, Marxists face a real challenge. Marxism shares a common ground with bourgeois political theory so far as it visualizes a centralized (nation) State as the political framework for socialism. It is statist to the same extent as it is centralist. The non-class movement and identities, such as nationalist and ethnic ones, are a challenge to the 'centralized' authority of the nation-state. The Hegelianism embedded in Marxism, that analytical Marxists want to remove, may be a reason why Marxism tends to be statist. But it is today a big question about Marxism: how much of Marxism remains when it is truly divested of Hegelianism?

Adaptation to local environment: recreating political categories?

The founders of Marxism reiterated that while the general principles of their theory remained, but the (successful) application of the same would depend on the particular historical contexts concerned. What did they imply by that? One aspect of the implications of what they said was the need for proper understanding of the particular social, economic, cultural and historical reality of the context concerned. The second aspect would entail formulation of the appropriate strategy of revolution: organization, leadership, objectives and goals. But in both cases, the central question remains the formulation of the most appropriate categories and idioms to address the specific contexts. Late E. P. Thompson, renowned British Marxist historian, dismissed the attempt made by the Marxists worldwide to imitate in the name of 'internationalism' the discourse of Western Marxism:

But internationalism, in this sense, ought not to consist in lying prostrate before the ("Western Marxist") theorists of our choice, or in seeking to imitate

their modes of discourse. The reasons why this kind of imitation can never produce more than a sickly native are complex. Mimesis, for some reasons, can copy but cannot originate or create. The “adoption” of other traditions – that is, adoption which has not fully worked through, interrogated, and translated into the terms of our own traditions – can very often mean more than the evacuation of the real place of conflict within our own intellectual culture, as well as the loss of real political relations with our own people.

(Thompson 1987: iv)

Therefore, a certain translation of Marxism is unavoidable when applying Marxism to different traditions not simply the non-Western world but even in the Western context itself. But as Thompson argues, this translation has to be creative into the terms of each tradition. Mechanical imitation of what others have done, or adoption of the terms and categories derived from other sources but not interrogated or worked through, is a very poor recipe, and it dilutes the real conflicts by the imposition of terms and concepts alien to the contexts but superimposed on the same. This practice serves to establish ideological-political hegemony over the indigenous theatre of conflicts but remain alien to the former.

A brief overview of Marxism and the national question/ethnic in India

A brief and cursory glance at the intermeshing of Marxism and varied non-class categories (nationalism, ethnicity and regional identity) in India is in order to buttress the point made above about the mechanical translation of Marxist categories to varied contexts even within India. The way the radical Left movements has been carried out in different regions of India suggest the possibility of an ethnic history of Indian communism or radical Left politics. To place it a comparative perspective from Asia, the political adaptation to local environment took place where the theatre of conflict remained more around ethnic, or nationalist and less obviously around classes. The challenge of conflicts around non-class identities was quite strong and daunting even to the Bolsheviks. Lenin faced this in the making of the Bolshevik revolution in 1917 with regard to the acute nationalities problem confronted in pre-revolutionary Russia. Lenin and his party comrades had to concede some ground to the cause of the nationalities in his famous pledge to the right of nations to self-determination as a tactic to mobilize the nationalities in the process of revolution. The strategic implications of Lenin’s formulation of political democracy have been explained by scholars (Hill 1947; Connor 1984). Immediately after the Revolution, Lenin’s advice to the people of the East on 12 November 1919 was that the Asian parties would have to adapt themselves to ‘peculiar forms’ of waging the revolutionary struggle. A. Doak Barnett, who had studied the varied radical Left in Asia, emphasized the need to study ‘local applications and adaptation of the so-called “universals” of Marxism and Leninism’ (Barnett 1963: 4). Her study suggests how the indigenous factors became important in communist politics in Asia and the problems that arose out of such

adaptation to indigenous factors and forces. In Turley's study (Turley 1980) on Vietnam, it is shown how the Vietnamese revolution reconciled the borrowed doctrine with indigenous nationalism and social conditions, and pointed out also how the ideological conformity and creative adaptations co-existed in the making of the Vietnamese revolution (Turley 1980: 1). He made the methodological suggestions that the adaptation to local cultural-historical factors had meant the 'marks of compromise with ethnic and religious identity' (Turley 1980: 1).

What then happened to Indian communism? What was the ethnic history of Indian communism, if any? How did the communists in India adapt themselves to local indigenous factors and contexts? What was the diagnosis of the communist parties of the Indian situation? The Communist Party of India (CPI) as the most radical political organization of the time was painfully aware of the local contexts of India and the difficulty it confronted. In an inner-party document (1952) it was stated:

Inevitably in a vast country like India where the conditions are different in different parts, where the popular movement is marked by its extremely uneven development, no generalization can be made which would hold true for all areas.

(quoted in Bhattacharyya 1999: 5-6)

This serves to show that from early on the CPI conceded to the forces of regional/local factors and foreclosed any possibility of generalization. However, if one reads carefully the overall policy directions of the party it will be obvious that when its regional units were grappling with the indigenous factors, the party had adopted a global perspective, or the 'universal' derived either from Moscow or Beijing, or Moscow again depending upon the inclination of leadership of the party as well as the international political line then in vogue, either dictated by Moscow or Beijing (Overstreet and Windmiller 1959: Vic 1958). In other words, the party's global shifts in policy were far removed from the specificity of the local situations, or the character of class conflict at the ground level. There was thus a great gulf between the party's so-called universal approach, or theory, on the one hand, and the specifics of mobilizing the different sections of society in highly regionally-based social, economic and cultural environment, on the other. At the same time, the Left radical intellectual exercise was undertaken by some left-wing scholars for recovering Indian history in the image of the West as identified by the founders of Marxism. For example, the late S. A. Dange's attempt in his *India from Primitive Communism to Slavery* (1949) was to show that India had also passed through the same stage of history as identified by Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto* (1848), and, therefore, India had also had a slave society before passing on to what Kaviraj terms 'mandatory' evolution into 'feudalism' (Kaviraj 2009: 181-2).¹⁷ And yet, when it was so done, the overall policy directions of the party widely diverged from any theoretical seriousness whatsoever. What passed on as 'theory' was but the particular strategy of revolution dictated either by either Moscow or Beijing. The absence of any theoretical seriousness

and the mechanical imitation of some international line allowed a lot of space for practical purposes. Each regional units of the party, predictably, followed its local considerations often paying only a lip-service to the general line; often the local situations were forced, intellectually speaking, to toe the overall policy line of the party, as if, the received 'theory' was always right; the particular practice had only to confirm and re-confirm it. The late E. M. S. Namboodripad, the former general secretary of the CPI-M who headed the Ministry in 1957 of the world's first democratically elected Marxist government in Kerala, quoted in his 10-page *Preface* to an odd 900-page volume a long passage from Karl Marx's *Class Struggle in France from 1848 to 1850* in order to underline the absence of dogmatism and the emphasis on the interactions of non-economic with economic factors in Marx and Engels, without bothering about the gap in a century between when Marx and Engels postulated in the above and Namboodripad's uncritical reference to the founders' understanding. This is an instance of theoretical short-circuiting.¹⁸

On the basis of the detailed empirical case studies of region-based communist movements in different parts of India, it is possible to provide a brief summary of the same. Andhra Pradesh was until the early 1950s a stronghold of the CPI. In this region, there was a strong affinity between communist politics and the Telegu ethnic identity. Mohan Ram (1973) who observed the movement from inside argued that the communist movement in Andhra was so powerfully regionally rooted that it gave the movement a character of a regional nationalist movement. Sen Gupta (Sen Gupta 1972: 136–7) believes that the Communist Party was able to mobilize peasant nationalism against the oppressive rule of the feudal Nizam of Hyderabad; this also implied, he says, the communist identification with linguistic nationalism of the middle-class elite because the CPI unit spearheaded the struggle for a separate Telegu-speaking State. The following passage from P. Sundarayya's *Visalandhrala Praja Rajyam* (1946) is strongly evocative of the Andhra nationalist fervor under the leadership of the CPI in the late 1940s:

We are three crores of Telegu people, living in the same or only one area; our history is very ancient. We have our own language, culture and tradition. Our political and economic future will be bright if all our Telegu people, belonging to one race, have a right to decide freely independently whether to join an Indian federation or not.

(quoted in Bhattacharyya 1999: 9)

Ram said that the Andhra communists who had a stronghold in Andhra region since the late 1920s exhibited some 'creativity' in associating themselves with the movement for a separate language based State of Andhra going somewhat against the then international lines (Ram 1973: 281). At about the same period (1946–51), the CPI in Telangana (then under the princely regime of Hyderabad), now a State within Indian Federation since 2014, led the movement for the rich peasants against the feudal Nizam rulers, a movement launched as an application of the Maoist experiment in peasant revolution.¹⁹ Beyond doubt, the Andhra case was adaptation certainly to local conditions, but no creative conceptual categories

emerged. The way the movement was simply cancelled out in 1951 under directions from the 'authority' of the international communist movements was something to be desired.

In Kerala, formed in 1956 out of three distinct territories of Malabar, Travancore and Cochin, the case of communist adaptation to regional environment was very complex because of the complexity of caste, class and communities that made up the sub-national identity. But, as Nossiter (1982: 38, 366, 1988: 194-6) argues with detailed case studies, the communist success in Kerala lay in their identification with Malayali sub-national moorings that transcended caste, class, village, community and party. And yet, the process of this identification with a very complex regional environment was facilitated by such factors as the breakdown of the joint family system, the intensity of caste discrimination, the changing agrarian system and the diffuse impact of high level literacy. The CPI and later CPI-M and other Left parties have retained subsequently a strong support base among the property less and underprivileged although their bases of support dwindled in electoral politics due to highly institutionalized competition in a fragmented political system. The Kerala communists could not recreate any original categories of understanding and mobilization that has comparative significance beyond Kerala. The niceties of electoral politics in which the communists have since been fully immersed have demanded class compromise rather than class struggle in the sense that in an election the communists have to appeal to the cross-sections of society. Bhabani Sen Gupta (1972) argued that the CPI in Kerala was most successful in mobilizing the untouchable and the lower castes; the party sought to secularize the castes but 'became exposed to caste influences' (Sen Gupta 1972: 181).

One of the other regions in South India where the CPI built some support was in Maharashtra. The communists here built two types of support corresponding to two types of movement with which they identified themselves and fought for the same. In the formerly bilingual State of Bombay, the CPI identified itself with the middle classes who were engaged in a movement for a Marathi-speaking State (Maharashtra) for the Marathas (Sen Gupta 1972: 137). The party's support for Marathi self-determination was anchored in the 'political thesis' of the Second Congress of the CPI (1948) in Calcutta when the party's General Secretary was late B. T. Ranadive, himself a Marathi. The thesis in fact criticized both the Congress Party and the Socialists for not incorporating in their demands the cause of self-determination movements in Tamilnad, Andhra or Maharashtra in the late 1940s (Sen Gupta 1972: 137). In the estimate of the party those movements were 'directed against the imperialist feudal big bourgeois combine' (Sen Gupta 1972: 157). However, the Communist Party lost ground after the creation of Maharashtra by the Government of India in 1956 on the basis of the recommendations of the State Reorganization Commission. The other type of movement that the CPI led was that of the tribals in the Worli region of Maharashtra since the early 1940s for a decade. The movement of the *adivasis* (i.e. India's aboriginal peoples) was directed against the prevailing system of bonded labour and the marriage of serfs. It was a successful movement which resulted in the end of the dreaded and

brutal feudal system of bonded labour. Godavari Parulekar, one of the leaders of the movement, said that the communist identification with the movement was not to be seen as identification with the tribals *per se* but with the tribal peasants (Parulekar 1978: 422–53). Awfully with the change of guards in the leadership of the CPI the movement came to receive only a negative assessment (Rao ed. 1976: 81–2). There is no detailed study of what happened to the movement afterwards. From a report of Hare Krishna Koner (1970) to the Central Kisan Council (quoted in Sen Gupta 1972: 302–6) it is recorded that due to the ‘powerful peasant struggles of Thane district’ in Maharashtra, the government had to retreat from evicting the peasants from about 48,000 acres of land. Peasants’ occupation of land of 5,000 acres in Wardha and 1500 acres in Chandrapur was recorded too (Sen Gupta 1972: 204–6). This small piece of information is an indication that the communist movement in the State subsequently has engaged in class struggles among the rural poor. But the party membership figures of the CPI-M of the very recent years show that the communist influence in the State is rather minimal: 12,051 in 2007 to 12,586 in 2011 (CPI-M 2012: 173). The figures are meagre given the large population of Maharashtra. This is in a State which is most industrialized with Mumbai (Bombay), the State capital and India’s commercial capital.

The communist influence (beginning in the early 1920s) in Tamil Nadu (formerly Madras province) was very limited; the CPI made very limited headway in the pre-independence period and immediately after. As shown by Padmanavian (1987: 225–50), the small unit was subjected to all the shifts and turns in the all-India movement and was hardly able to withstand such changes. The only success that the party unit scored in the post-independence period was in the first general elections in 1951, and that too, by joining a United Front with the Tamil regional party DMK. Padmanavian (1987) says that the CPI candidates won in 13 out of 16 seats to the Madras Legislative Assembly and that was solely because in those seats the communist candidates were supported by the DMK (Padmanavian 1987: 233). The CPI took the leadership in forming a United Front with T Prakashan as the Chief Minister, but the Governor did not allow that to happen, and invited C. Rajagoplachary (Congress) to form the Ministry (Padmanavian 1987: 234). Unlike Maharashtra and Andhra, the Communist Party in Madras/Tamil Nadu could not make any headway in an ethno-regional movement of the Tamils because the space, if any, was fully occupied by the Tamil regional party DMK. And the CPI’s refusal to support any secessionism of the Tamils from the Indian Union meant loss of further ground. The CPI-M, the major communist force after the CPI split in 1964 in Tamil Nadu, was found to have achieved as many as 11 seats (on 3.89 per cent votes) in the fourth general elections in 1967 and became part of the United Front ministry with the DMK voted to power. Subsequently, the CPI-M in Tamil Nadu fully engaged in parliamentary politics and mobilizing the industrial and rural agricultural labourers has increasingly been marginalized in the State politics although the party maintains a regular organization and its mass fronts with decent levels of membership. The party membership figures at 94,472 in 2007 in such a large populous State is not much but in the various mass fronts membership figures are quite satisfactory (CPI-M 2012: 173–7).

Left politics *per se* have remained marginalized, if not, non-existent, in most parts of the North East except Tripura. In Manipur, an erstwhile princely State, there was a beginning of radical Left since the late 1940s under the leadership of Irabot Singh who led the Praja Mondal movement against princely autocracy, was influenced by the CPI and the AIKS but preferred to form the Manipur Communist Party by resisting to transform his party into the Manipur State Council/Committee of the CPI. This resistance reflected the overall public mood in the State against integration with India in 1949. With his death in 1951 the communist movement, however, dissipated in the State. Of late some underground communist organizations have been formed in the State such as the Maoist Armed Revolutionary Party (formed in 2011) (banned), the Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP) (formed in 1980) (banned) and the Maoist Communist Party (banned), which are all based in armed struggle; the KCP above believes in restoring the sovereignty of Manipur from the Union of India. But then since they are all underground and banned, it is difficult to gauge their real influence in society. We find that the territorial sovereignty of Manipur in this case was a bone of contention, although the movement by the Praja Mondal against feudal autocracy was genuine.

On ethno-territorial issues emerging in the areas of Assam, now carved up as Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland, the scope of action of the CPI, the undivided Communist Party (until 1964) was limited. The CPI and its trade unions organized strike actions in tea gardens and oil refineries, and among the peasants (Sen Gupta 2009: 22–30) with limited success, but on the thorny issue of language and ethnic identity, the party's ambiguous approach was the cause for alienation of the party from the masses. On the burning issue of the land question in Assam, aggravated by the incessant migration from the former East Pakistan and (now) Bangladesh, the party sided with the Assamese nationality with its understanding of the 'very question of self-existence of the Assamese people as distinct and growing nationalities' (quoted in Sen Gupta 2009: 27–8). When the Statehood for Meghalaya to be carved out of Assam was becoming a reality, the party supported the move although the leadership in the struggle for Meghalaya was in the hands of the tribal ethnic organizations such as the APHLC and the Hills State People's Democratic Party, the more radical wing which split out of the former, the CPI only passed resolutions to welcome the formation of Meghalaya in 1972, a position which was at variance with the party's positive approach to an 'integrated Assam' espoused in the late 1960s (Sen Gupta 2009: 82–3, 86). The point that is made here is that as ethno-territorial issues arose one after another for the separate Hill States of Meghalaya, or Nagaland, the Left parties found themselves increasingly isolated as they could not, for 'theoretical' reasons, offer leadership to those movements. At party CPI split in 1964 nearly the entire party went over to the CPI-M but the latter along with other Left parties failed to make an enduring mass bases in the State except the State Assembly elections in 1978 – which brought some surprises to the CPI-M itself.²⁰ The mass bases of the Left as such dwindled, and the Left as a whole paled into insignificance in the face of the growing strength of ethno-national questions. The questions of 'nationalism' and 'nationality' has stood strongly in the way of any mass building efforts by the

CPI-M and other Left parties in the State – the former always loomed large over any class perspective. In the last State Assembly elections held in 2016, the CPI and the CPI-M drew a blank with 0.22 per cent and 0.55 per cent popular vote share respectively.

Notes

- 1 Hobsbawm (1992) made a distinction between classical Mazzinian nationalism premised on the principle of one nation, one state, and the notion of nationhood as nation-building by 'nations uniting, one the one hand, and nation-building by nation-splitting of the post-Soviet variety, on the other'.
- 2 Avineri, S. and de Shalit OP. cit. esp. 'Community and Citizenship' by David Miller, pp. 85–101.
- 3 Smith, A. D. *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* p. 21.
- 4 See for an instance of the Marxist neglect of ethnicity, see, Bottomore et al. (1983) (eds.), *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought* in which the term 'ethnicity' does not occur at all.
- 5 Wallerstein (1994).
- 6 Hobsbawm (1992), esp. chapter 6 'Nationalism in the Late twentieth century' (pp. 162–192). See also, Paul Brass (1990) provides an opposing view.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Winter (1992).
- 9 See, for instance, Jenkin (1984); P.I: Banton (1994); and Smith (1994).
- 10 Wallerstein (1991: 85).
- 11 From Weber (1948), Chapter VIII.
- 12 Marx's *Letter to Ludwig Kugelmann* dated 29 November 1869 in Marx and Engels (1975: 216–17). The founders' serious engagement with the Irish question was not to be doubted given the large extent of their writings on the subject. Marx and Engels (1972).
- 13 Rosa-Luxemburg's fundamental disagreement would be that to defend the right of self-determination of nations would mean an absolute right for all people. The Marxists, she argued, can only defend the specific right of the working class. (Davis 1978: 58).
- 14 *Selections from Lenin and Stalin on the national Colonial Question* (1975) for details.
- 15 Callinicos (1989), especially, G.A. Gohen, 'Reconsidering Historical Materialism'.
- 16 Kaviraj (1992).
- 17 Kaviraj (2009) pointed out that Indian historians followed suit by uncritically applying Marx's categorization to Indian context.
- 18 Namboodripad (1989).
- 19 Interestingly, the movement had to be abandoned in 1951 at the instance of the international intervention by the Cominform. (Ram 1973: 282), 1.
- 20 In this election, the CPI-M got 11 seats and emerged as the second largest party in the Assam State Assembly in the post-Emergency elections. See Sen Gupta (1979: 187–97).