

Asif Currimbhoy's *Inquilab*: A Naxalite Movement Perspective

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Abstract:

*The Naxalite movement gets prominence in West Bengal during seventies which is mirrored by Asif Currimbhoy in *Inquilab* (1971). He displays how the Maoist revolutionaries were crying for the blood of so-called bourgeois. The revolutionist cult becomes the cult of violence and retribution which was committed to destroy the existing order as they took it unfair and exploitative. The play portrays a fantastic and realistic picture of incidents of Naxalite movement*

The paper aims at exploring the Mao's idea of liberalism through revolt and armed struggle as pivotal. It also analyses the interaction that takes place among different characters through actions in the play. Characters are placed in carefully selected circumstances and they are made to convey certain points of view marked with conflicting views to produce a wholeness of perspective.

Prominently, the play presents the complex problem of Naxalite movement in all its totality and succeeds in revealing the causes and effects of the revolutionary movement which sparked the imagination of the Bengali youth in 1960s and 1970s but soon despaired them by its excessive resort to its violent means and methods.

Key Words: *Naxalite, Maoist, violence, injustice, revolutionary.*

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Asif Currimbhoy happens to be one of the most prominent playwrights of Indian writing in English today. Currimbhoy is particularly drawn to the social and political concerns of his countrymen, and gives vent to them in his artistic plays. That is why he has been described as "India's first authentic voice in the theatre." (Sehai, 156) While living in Bombay, he realized the problems of humanity at large and of Indians in particular. Currimbhoy is at his best when he writes about public or recent historical events such as Naxalite Movement in Calcutta, India's takeover of Goa, and the Bangladesh War. In one of his most famous plays, *Inquilab* (1971), he has given deep insight into various dimensions of Naxalite movement. The term 'Naxalite' comes from Naxalbari in West Bengal where Indian communists started arming peasants in the spring of 1967. The significance of the Naxalbari movement is that it represents the first experiment with Maoism in this country

Inquilab written in 1971 at Calcutta is a mirror of West Bengal during the seventies. Calcutta then breathed in revolution and breathed out fire, fear, violence and terror. *Inquilab* deals with the Naxalite movement when Maoist revolutionaries were crying for blood of the so-called bourgeois. Processions strikes, gheraos, bombings, killings were the order of the day. The revolutionist cult was the cult of the violence and retribution. It was committed to destroy the present order as they thought it unfair and exploitative. So, we find, in the play, a fantastic and realistic description of incidents of Naxalite movement in Calcutta as the clandestine night study of few Naxalite students, peasants' guerrilla squads with their conventional weapons, a clandestine night meeting of peasants with some outsiders, throwing bombs on police patrol, annihilation of class enemies and self-centered politicians. A specific environment is created through teletype message flashing intermittently on the wall:

BOURGEOIS LANDLORD GOVERNMENT...PEASANTS UNION ... MASS
 ACTION... PEOPLE'S WAR... CLASS ENEMIES MURDABAD
 ...INQUILAB... INQUILAB ZINDABAD (23)

Mao's idea of liberalism through revolt and armed struggle is central to play as well as to real Naxalite movement in West Bengal and it gets thrust through interaction that takes place among

different characters through action performed by various characters. The characters are placed in carefully selected circumstances and they are made to convey certain points of view, and as is customary in Currimbhoy's plays, several and often conflicting views are pitted against each other to produce a wholeness of perspective. Currimbhoy asserts:

"The essence of the theatre in my opinion is conflict. To have your different points of view which come head on... This clash forms the most vibrant factor of the theatre itself... My approach to all my plays is that there is an essential conflict of attitude". (Daphne, 13)

This is what we also find in this play too. Different characters are shown to react towards this movement differently. In this play, the main characters are Professor Dutta, his wife, his son Amar, Jain, a landlord, Suprea, his daughter, Devdas, a politician and Ahmed and Shomik, who are representative Naxalites.

Professor Dutta, a symbol of the British traditionalism, is old, worldish and conservative in his approach to the Socio- political unrest in the state. He is an advocate of democracy, law and order, right to property, a free economy and established institution. He calls the Naxalite, menace the tyranny of the minority. He advises his students to keep away from strikes, gheraos, bandhs, processions, revolt and violence. He asks, "Are there bombs in your head or brains, gentlemen?" (p.10) But his students outrightly reject his exhortations and start banging Desks with fists rulers and Chappals. Amar argues with his father and pleads for proletarian internationalism. He openly proclaims, "I belong... to the cause... of revolution (then whisper almost to himself) and my guru... outside..." (14). The poverty and hunger, disease and unemployment of the masses have made him a rebel. He blames the education system as:

Institutes of education that have now shackled us for generation and generations. What for? What for? I ask? So that there can be more unemployed millions... So that you've doped the masses sufficiently into complacency and resignation." (14.)

He tells his father, "You were the God that failed, father!" (p.14). The same Amar calls Jain a revisionist, a pacifier for maintenance of an existing order. Jain is a kind hearted landlord who does more hard work than his labourers. He provides them good wages and food. He looks after them like the head of a family. In fact, he's like a father to them, indulging, yet correcting them with a firm and gentle hand. His only fault in the eyes of the Naxalites is that he is the owner of areas of land and hence a fine target.

Amar wants change of the existing order which implies land to the landless, collective farming, community holdings on the plea that the land belongs to the tiller. Through it Currimbhoy exposes the appeasement policy of the government. He warns Mr. Jain, "You have enough land!

Don't go putting it in your brothers' and sisters' and dogs' names. Don't go on having captive labour through compulsion or reward. The land belongs to the tiller!" (17)

However, Jain's claim is that the land has been his private property bequeathed to him by his father and grandfather. He also works as much as others on the land. The scene shifts to a clandestine night study of Naxalite students with their leader Ahmed who reminds his comrades of Marxist teaching that, "force is the midwife of every old society pregnant with a new one" (p.25), and that revolutionary theory without revolutionary practice means nothing. Ahmed is totally committed to revolutionary ideas and wants to put his Naxalite theory into practice. The students seem to have been tremendously influenced by him. Ahmed asserts that:

Parliamentary democracy is not an effective weapon for socialist revolution: and armed struggle is inevitable... a revolution in backward countries can only be brought by peasants: start organizing peasants, there can be no revolution without peasants. To reject this is to reject the revolution. (25)

In Act II again, Prof. Dutta is lecturing to the students on the legal aspect of land grabbing by quoting a few articles from Indian constitution. He says that land grabbing is an attack on fundamental rights to hold private property. He declares:

Gentlemen! Boys! Attention, please. This is vital, the point I'm trying to make. Look at the board. What does it say? It says that in democracy where the rule of law prevails, the action must be through appropriate legislation ... (41)

Naturally, the students make strong protest and laugh his words. The scene shifts to Council of Justice in a field at night and landlord Jain is summarily tried. Amar differs with his colleagues and he wants to judge Jain as an individual and not as a class enemy. He tries in his own way to seek Jain's release and advises him to plead guilty but he doesn't agree and gets killed by the Naxalite students. Amar defends Jain so strongly that his loyalty to the party is suspected and he is put to test by students' "inner council" to check his loyalty. This testing of his loyalty leads to the violent death of his father at the hands of the Naxalites.

Amar is totally disillusioned and resorts to keep away from the moment. But Amar's disillusionment represents the disillusionment of many youths who joined the Naxal movement without thinking about its drastic nature and destruction which is brought, later on, even to their loveliest and closest people. But it is not the same in case of Shomik, who represents the poor peasants and captive slaves working in landlords' fields. He has some real philosophical qualities which make him a natural leader of peasants. Everywhere in the play, his thoughts give a thrust

to revolution. This Philosophy is clear in Act I Scene I. When Shomik addresses a clandestine night meeting of peasants with some outsiders:

Our father were serfs, and even if we're not, we're not free either: no... no... no more waiting. The law cannot work equally for both of us. It's either ours or theirs. At the moment it's theirs, so we have to reject it. But the only means we know: Fight, Fight... (28)

So, he represents the real revolutionary spirit of that moment. He promises his wife that revolutionaries like him, never die, or give up the cause, the cause of proletarian internationalism.

Asif Currimbhoy is fully aware of social as well as political absurdities, events and conditions in the affairs of man which strikes his imagination. In the present play, these political absurdities are shown through two politicians named, Devdas and Big Wheal. Both of them are shown to symbolize the politicians' concern towards this movement. They have nothing to do with this anarchy. They believe in game, the game of vote which brings them into power. Both of them are not sympathetic to anybody and whenever they show sympathy, it is the purpose of getting votes in election, which impels them to do so. In Act I and scene II, Devdas tries his best to win the favour of Shomik by making a promise to provide him a fertile land:

Look, Shomik, let's be practical. I'm not here to bribe you, or threaten you... unless I have to. You want more wages, better conditions of work, I will give them to you. If you work for my party. Even that is possible. There's going to be distribution of waste... productive land. I will see to it that your name comes up. Your father is the oldest tiller here. It may take time, but I will arrange it. (36)

Act III, Scene II, marks the denouncement in which the dramatist reflects on the Naxalite movement through Amar and Ahmed. Though Amar still believes in the Naxalite ideology, he no longer believes in its violent means and methods. His words, "I still believe in the socialist revolution, but I disagree with their methods" (80). He again says:

I... I think... my father was right. I mean... his approach was right. That... that change should come the will of the majority... Expressed through a free vote... That society... such as we live in, must follow certain norms... of law and order... to make such democratic expression possible. (80)

Asif Currimbhoy is an outstanding playwright who has successfully portrayed the different aspects of a situation through different characters in his plays. He has a capacity for observation, attention to minute detail and the ability to convey all the shades of human emotions and feelings. Currimbhoy views the Naxalite light movement not only through male characters but also female characters.

In this play, there are four main women characters, Professor Dutta's wife, Suprea, Sarala and Old Mother. Professor Dutta's wife is very religious in nature. Throughout the play, we find her busy in dressing the image of Durga. She's not much conscious about Naxalite movement but whenever she speaks consciously or unconsciously, every word spoken by her evokes a sense of revolution. In Act I, Scene I, she is not conscious of what she said:

I still smell the fresh wet earth, longing for planting of new seeds... (almost sharply) for its all barren! The new harvest, the new green. The food for survival, turning of the new generation. It needs to be planted with care. For the earth is fresh and fertile. Only the seed must be strong... Like the growth of new revolt! (23)

Sarala, Shomik's wife, is an ignorant woman who does not know much about outside world. When she comes to know about her husband as a revolutionary, she advises him to protect his house and wants him to bring safety for himself and his children. She finds fault with Shomik's idea of leading the whole nation into revolution. She tells him that whatever he was doing, it was not for the society or family but for acquiring power and position. Her concern is for the safety of her husband and her family. She fully aware that desire for fame, power and pelf is boundless. She interacts with her husband, "You seem to have forgotten your dream. When it all started, all you wanted was a small piece of your own land. That made me happy. Now you want to lead the whole nation into revolution. That makes me unhappy". (73).

Suprea, the daughter of the slaughtered landlord and beloved of Amar, is kind hearted and intelligent. She is also the victim of Naxal movement because the world which she lives in is to be destroyed by Naxalites. She wants Amar to protect his love instead of involving himself in revolutionary activities. She calls the movement inhumane because many innocent people were killed and hatred spread in the name of revolution which engulfs all like an epidemic. Amar feels that the answer to the evil and hatred lies in generosity of understanding and radiant love.

This three act-play, thus, presents the complex problem of Naxalite movement in all its totality and succeeds in revealing the causes and effects of the revolutionary movement which sparked the imagination of the Bengali youth in 1960s and 1970s but soon despaired them by its excessive resort to its violent means and methods.

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