

READING GRAFFITI LIKE A PALIMPSEST



ON A HOT summer day in 1967, a radical faction of Communists earmarked a farm field in the Naxalbari area of North Bengal at the Himalayan foothills with red flags, declaring that the right to till the land and harvest the crop was no longer with the landlords.

The next day a police contingent raided the villages looking for the outlaws. In the battle that followed, a police inspector died; the arrow that hit him was shot by a tribal woman.

The uprising was led by two young hardliners disappointed with the communist mainstream – Kanu Sanyal and Jangal Santhal. The news of rebellion in the marshy grasslands of the Terai close to the In-do-Nepal border spread like wildfire all across India, and gave birth to an armed movement pegged on the Maoist ideology.

The violent clashes between the police and the radicals on May 23 in that obscure corner of the country triggered waves of protests as far as the southern peninsula. Bright young men and women walked out of elite campuses to organize the revolution. Long after the rebellion was repulsed, Naxalbari remained a metaphor for change, an expression of no-confidence in the status quo, and a fervent plea for clearing the deadwood. The movement deeply impacted our culture. Sensitive film-makers, writers, theatre activists – they all sought to recapture the essence of the uprising in their works. In the Naxalite movement,

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V. S. Naipaul perceptibly remarked in *India: A Wounded Civilization*, “India had lost the best of a whole generation, the most educated and idealistic of its young people.”

The world seemed to have been on cue. In the spring of 1968, the campus of Columbia University erupted in protests after revelations of the institution’s links with an apparatus supporting the US involvement in the Vietnam War. Students occupied many university buildings. And before the Columbia protests went off the headlines, a series of student strikes broke out on the university campuses in Paris. The de Gaulle administration’s attempt to quell the unrest by brutal police action provoked the students further leading to pitched street battles. Students fought the helmeted cops in the city’s Latin Quarter and practically laid siege to the Sorbonne. In a robust show of solidarity, 11 million workers – about 22 per cent of France’s workforce at that time – went on a strike bringing the country to a halt. Unnerved by the spectacular urban uprising, Charles de Gaulle took refuge in Germany.

Years later, political commentators and social analysts saw the May 1968 protests as the “single most important revolutionary event of the 20th century.”

All across the decade, the angry, angst-ridden youth strode the scene as much in politics as in culture. Waves of student unrest shook the United States in 1970. On May 4, 1970, a group of students at Kent State University in Ohio gathered to protest President Nixon’s invasion of Cambodia. Tension gripped the area as the protestors refused to retreat defying the advancing police contingents. The Ohio National Guard fired 67 rounds into the unarmed crowd. Four students died, one was paralysed and eight others were injured. The deaths left America stunned, leading to protests which often turned violent across the country. Over 450 educational institutions, from high schools to universities, were closed when a staggering four million students participated in the protests. Chaos followed with protesters targeting ROTC (Reserve Officers’ Training Corp) buildings and burning or bombing them. They marched to Wash-

ington, D.C. turning the capital into an armed camp, slashing tyres, breaking windows and pulling cars into intersections. It was a scene of veritable civil war, not merely a student protest.

Latin America, too, came under the spell of youth uprising. In Argentina, a group of revolutionaries headed by Mario Roberto Santucho attempted a daring escape from jail in August 1972. Of the 19 recaptured 16 were killed sparking protests in the cities.

Whichever way you look, the 1970s were decisively the decade of the twenty-somethings, turbulent, irreverent, nonconformist in tone. In the history of post-Independence India, it was the most defining decade. Amitabh Bachchan loomed over the gigantic Bollywood canvas as the angry young man, giving voice to the deep disillusion and dismay of the first generation of Indians born after Independence. Parallel cinema was more directly and deeply impacted by the defiant tone of the times. Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Buddhadeb Dasgupta, Govind Nihalani – they all captured the tensions of the

turmoil in their films. In theatre, stalwarts like Badal Sarkar, Vijay Tendulkar and Mohan Rakesh brought on to the stage the dominant antiestablishment tone of the times. Reverberations of the discontent continued to be felt much later. P. Rajan, an engineering student in Calicut, a radical activist, died of torture in police custody during the Emergency. The police never admitted to the killing until a fierce legal campaign forced them to. The 1988 Malayalam film *Piravi* was inspired by the student's strange disappearance.

After an interregnum of three decades, after the collapse of communism, disintegration of the Soviet Bloc, after globalization, the ultimate victory of capitalism and China's strong promise to be the world's economic boss, everything around us seems to be a throwback to the street-fighting seventies. There is disquiet in the air – you feel it. The signs are telltale: the Jasmine Revolution, Arab Spring, India Gate upsurge protesting gangraping of *Nirbhaya*. *C'est du déjà-vu*. Clamour for change, intolerance of the hackneyed, clichéd system

– the angry young man is back; we are revisiting the seventies. “The year 2011 will go down in history as a year of youth revolt. Throughout the year, beginning with the Arab Spring, protests, riots, and revolutions involving tens of millions of teenagers and twenty-somethings have shaken the global political order,” writes activist Zach Zill. Very logically, therefore, the tone set by 2011 will be followed through the remaining years of the decade. But very basically, the second decade of the 21st century is different from the 1970s on two counts: poverty no longer fuels rebellion, and more importantly, instead of crude guns smart gizmos are the weapons of the new war.

The 1967 uprising was caused by the acute scarcity in the wake of the 1965 India-Pakistan war and sharp spikes in food prices. Today, even Sub-Saharan Africa is eating more lavishly than India in the late 1960s. Today’s unrest is not spurred by hunger, but impatience with an essentially rotten system. The clamour is not for a regime change but for dismantling of the old order which cannot accommodate the rising aspi-

rations of an increasingly young nation. Every second Indian today is a 25-year-old. In 2020 the average age of an Indian will be 29, compared to 37 for China and 48 for Japan. In fact, millions of jobs have started leaving China because of its aging workforce. If we had the infrastructure and an efficient system, catching those fleeting jobs would not have been difficult.

Unlike the radical woman activist whose sharp arrow killed the police inspector in Naxalbari, today’s revolutionary is armed with technology. Technology gives you the cutting edge. In the badlands of Waziristan the young Taliban fighters send a hail of bullets into the sky from their Kalashnikovs every time the stealthy unmanned drones bombard their hideouts. Well, anger cannot keep pace with the gizmos. Barack Obama’s re-election was powered by the smartphones. India is at such a crucial juncture between a very feasible open, transparent system and the old wall of status quo. Dealing with an audience deeply penetrated by technology, openness is the best armour. The more you bare the

better. Incidentally, this debate is missing from the political table. Everybody reads downtown fiction, everybody wants to run; but no one wants to talk about unfettering the system, making talent the automatic gate pass to opportunities.

The elections next summer will decide the dimensions and direction of India. An India which boasts of the fastest growth of mobile phone users in the world cannot accommodate revivalist politics of the religious right. Nor does it have any space for yesterday's obscurantism or caste complicity. Today's Maoists

are degenerating into extortionists. A technology-driven society where every fifth person is going to have an email address in a few years from now, politics must have something to do with bringing about a clean, efficient system. Already there are indications that the Twitter and Facebook community will play a key role in deciding the outcome of the 2014 general election. The twenty-year-olds are all set to turn the elections into their own show. The winner will be the one who reads graffiti like a palimpsest. ■

Bhaskar Roy