Chapter Seven

Conclusion

The efforts in recent years to explain and demarcate New Social Movements, which inevitably led to debates on the State and civil society relationship, provided the initial spark that tickled my intellectual curiosity.

As I negotiated the complex maze that constituted State-civil society relationship debate, fundamental questions cropped about what is collectively referred to as scientific paradigm of modernity.

One constant theme that underlay all the questions was the challenge that was sought to be mounted to the monolithic character of ‘dominant institutions’. These institutions invariably came to mean the State and its systems, corporations, and their inherent logic of profit, market and expansion, and the media, which have come to dominate the process of manufacturing cultural products and generating meaning.

Juxtaposed against these ‘dominant institutions’ were movements that challenged the logic of their existence. Such movements were conceived as protests against the State, located in the civil society, and as ‘resistance’ against the universalising zeal of a modernist institution.

But since most of these movements were of ‘paradigmatic’ nature -- like the environment and feminist movement -- rather than movements engaged with issues of distribution they were conceptualised as contingent upon a society ‘evolving’ to a post-industrial phase.

Politics for such movements is not, in the first instance, a matter of compensations that the corporate economy or the welfare State can provide, but concerns questions having to do with the grammar of forms of life.
While such a conceptualisation laid the foundation for the revaluation of traditional tools of analysis – like class – and led to the crafting of new tools – like gender – its inherent leaning towards developed society as the fountainhead of NSMs made me uncomfortable.

Such an intellectual position, especially in the context of the twin trends of 'globalisation' and 'retreat of the State', contrasted sharply with ongoing protests and movements that are located in the ‘third world countries’ and which fit the theoretical underpinnings of the NSMs.

While evolved theoretical frameworks were available, a closer study revealed demarcation that fundamentally divided one set of analyses from another. Theoretical positions that considered the evolution of NSMs to be contingent upon a society reaching a certain stage of development talked about the collapse of ideology and collectivity and rise of atomistic individualism. Such formulations firmly placed NSMs within the boundaries of civil society and invariably conceptualised them as anti-modernist in nature.

The other set of analyses based itself on a belief that structuralism and its monolithic theories have failed to explain the fast changing social realities. But instead of rejecting them in totality, they argued that a reorientation was necessary. Post-Marxists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe fall in this category. I am reproducing a passage from their book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, which I have quoted in Chapter Two, to reinforce my point.

Laclau argues that it is impossible to identify social groups/movements with the actors’ places in the economy. “Take the example of the worker. Is there some stable relation between his/her position in the relation of production and his/her position as a consumer, resident in a specific area, participant in the political system etc.? Evidently the relations between these different positions is far from obvious and permanent … transformations of the conditions of work in the 20th century has weakened the ties that linked the various identities of the worker … (which resulted in) the social agents becoming autonomous-it
is this autonomy which is at the root of NSMs... Further the relationship existing among these different positions (i.e. producer, consumer, political agent etc.) becomes continually more indeterminate. At any rate they cannot be derived automatically from ... categories such as ‘working class, petit-bourgeois’ etc., which becomes less and less meaningful as ways of understanding the overall identity of the social agent.” Further, “popular mobilisations are no longer based on a model of total society or...in terms...of a single conflict which divides (society) in two camps, but on a plurality of concrete demands leading to a proliferation of political spaces.”

Such a theoretical position, unlike traditional Marxism or structuralist theories for instance, allows for the complexities of Indian labour to be explained. It also admits the possibility for a person slotted in one category to have various identities. Once such logic is accepted explanations for why a monolithic conception of social reality is not completely applicable to studying contemporary social formations and movements acquires increased resonance.

A reproduction of what CWC director Kavita Ratna said is helpful in understanding the concept of multiple and variable identities. And it also provides an insight of how traditional tools of analysis prove inadequate in explaining contemporary social reality.

“Each child is a complex individual with a unique social, cultural, political, environmental identity. This identity is critical to the child and yet a dynamic one, continuously transforming through interactions with the external world as well as through internal reflections. Children constantly interact with other children and adults in a wide range of arenas. Starting with their respective families and going up to the international forums, children can and sometimes do interact and influence processes. Children who seek to participate encounter many obstacles, within their own homes and outside. They have to constantly negotiate in order to make time and space for themselves. We should also remember that when a child participates in a platform or forum that is visible to us adults, such as conferences, that child has probably negotiated at several level – home.
work, school, community, peers – in order to be there. This would mean participation in all these arenas…”

The question of the availability of theoretical frameworks challenging conceptions of social reality as structured and singularly intelligible has been adequately answered many times over. Chapter 3 also deals in part with that question. But what has not been answered adequately have been questions regarding the viability of such frameworks.

Any attempt to do that invariably leads to questions about the tools of analysis used to interpret and explain social reality. And one of the main tools that have been used quite frequently has been the concept of working class, class structure and class consciousness.

But these concepts cannot be put under the scanner unless one is willing go down the historical path to understand how working class evolved. The specific historical circumstances -- Industrial revolution in England -- which informed the development of working class gave it a particular character and politics.

The conceptualisations surrounding working class, quite obviously, were influenced by social reality of England, and later Europe, of the late 18th, full of 19th and the first half of 20th century.

But the specific reality of colonialism, its exploitative systems and the consequent pattern of development informed the evolution of working class in the countries of the south – also called the third world or developing countries.

The concept of evolutionary linearity that dominated the study of social reality assumed that all societies would pass through certain stages of growth. And as a logical corollary various components of society, including working class, were expected to replicate the pattern of development that was witnessed in Europe.
the ‘western working class’ as the only point of reference, and the structures and pattern of mobilisation that were witnessed in Europe as the beacon light, it was no surprise that working class movement in India was organised along similar lines.

But the colonial pattern of development, with its inherent logic of enriching the metropolitan centres, constructed an socio-economic and political structure that was substantially different from that of Europe. The working class in Europe, over a period of time, completely delinked itself from its rural roots acquiring an urban character. But in India the working class could never get away from its rural roots, thereby retaining multiple identities. Moreover in Europe, an emancipated working class often acted as an effective political force bringing pressure upon governments to introduce legislation regulating work and its conditions.

But colonial development, while destroying the traditional rural economy, did not absorb the redundant labour force into the industrial sector. Even those absorbed into the industrial sector continued to maintain a rural link because of the uncertain nature of their job in the industrial sector. Many authors have articulately expounded the influence of caste on working class. The colonial logic of development, while concentrating industrial development in centres such as Bombay, Calcutta and Madras, also created areas in the hinterland of these centres that became home to the informal sector.

So while a worker had multiple identities the process of mobilisation had only those theoretical frameworks to refer to that conceived of working class as having a single identity and a single consciousness. These theoretical reference points meant that the focus of mobilisation came to rest upon the organised industrial working class. This section then came to dominate the Indian trade union movement. The dominance continued after independence, leading the trade unions to ignore or to marginalise other groups.

Moreover for a colonial administration any kind of pressure brought through mobilisation always presented the danger of escalating to involve demands other than specifically
related to the working class. An iron hand, hence, greeted much of the mobilisation
during the nascent period of the Indian working class movement. As a result working
class mobilisations were often at the subaltern level and in the first half of the 20th
century enmeshed itself with the larger mobilisation for independence.

While the very nature of the fight for independence made it all encompassing, it would
not be entirely accurate to blame the lack of a broad support base of the Indian working
class movement on the freedom struggle. The inadequacies of the movement excluded
groups with which the movement could have networked. The conceptual rigidity that
came to characterise the Trade Union movement after independence prevented it from
becoming alternative fulcrum of resistance against systemic forces. More so after the
post-liberalisation phase when the trade union movement has become increasingly
marginalised.

But even as the trade union movement has been marginalised recent years have seen a
spurt in interest in new forms of labour mobilisations that do not conform to the patterns
of conventional unionism. Social scientists trying to understand and explain these new
forms of labour mobilisations conceive them as ‘resistance’ to dominant paradigm of
development, operating within the broader realm of counter-culture, ideology and
alternative politics.

Such an explanation of course lends itself to attempts at redefining conceptual categories
underlying the trade union movement, such as labour, class and culture in conjunction
with the introduction of new categories of analysis like gender.

Bhima Sangha is one such attempt. The specific patterns of mobilisation, the particular
issues articulated, its identification of the broader links to specific issues, it being a
coalition of different groups, its integration with other non-party political processes, its
internal ideological pluralism buttressed by mechanisms of participation, its means of
struggle consisting of extra-parliamentary methods, parliamentary processes, legal
activism, its kinship with formal academia, independent research and its coalition
building and networking at an international level, and its operation at the level of civil society without devaluing the role of the State clearly demarcate Bhima Sangha from the traditional trade unions.

Apart from the fact that Bhima Sangha specifically caters to the needs of working children, its articulation of other and broader issues, not specifically related to realm of child labour, distinguish it from traditional labour mobilisations.

By taking up environmental issues, being gender sensitive, demanding education suited to their needs, setting up their own panchayats and questioning the model and paradigm of development, Bhima Sangha demarcates itself as a mobilisation not exclusively directing its demands towards the State.

Bhima Sangha also stands apart from traditional movements by its initiatives at evolving an international network with working children movements of Asia, Africa and Latin America.

The initiatives of Bhima Sangha have transformed it to an organisation articulating more than the immediate concerns of working children at a local or national level. Such an articulation situates it within the framework of contemporary social movements.

Bhima Sangha is just one of many such movements in India. The traditional response to such mobilisations has been to consider them as not part of mainstream research simply because they do not conform to conceptual frameworks dominating social sciences. But to ignore such mobilisations and movements, especially when alternative theoretical frameworks suitable for such studies are available, would be akin to intellectual dishonesty.

But to start debunking traditional conceptual frameworks just because they are not able to sufficiently explain newer mobilisations would be foolhardy. Many movements and mobilisations are adequately explained by older categories. But it is essential to give academic legitimacy to newer mobilisations. After all they are social phenomenon and
social scientists, who are expected to keep a close watch on social realities, need to understand and explain it.