

Styles in articulation of a radical discourse on globalization

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ABSTRACT

Discourse is vital in both deliberate political education and mobilization of people in contentious politics. Globalization, particularly its contemporary escalated form, has provoked critics and popular movements in liberal democratic systems in the global south. Political parties founded on some reading of Marxism-Leninism have been engaged in creation of a radical understanding of the neo-liberal turn in the wake of globalization. They use both print and oral exhortation to motivate victims of such regime change in economic policy. This paper examines the articulation of anti-globalization discourse by the State Coordination Committee of West Bengal Government Employees' Associations, a union of unions of service sector middle class white-collar employees in West Bengal. Despite its electoral marginality, it is worthwhile to do so because it exemplifies the interface between labour union intellectualism and pragmatics of political indoctrination and political mobilization. This would be true for any political formation irrespective of its ideological moorings, and in any incidence of contentious politics. Articulation of the discourse by the union leadership and the associated political pundits requires an appropriate choice of style in political communication -the paper focuses on two such styles.

Key Words : Globalization, Radical discourse, Political mobilization, Articulation

INTRODUCTION

Preliminary observations :

In West Bengal, the union of below-officer level state government employees – known as the State Coordination Committee of West Bengal Government Employees' Associations, (usually referred to as the Coordination Committee) had been ideologically, organizationally and politically linked with the Communist Party of India (Marxist) which was founded in 1964. The Coordination Committee had its inception in 1956. With various shifts and turns, the Committee had undergone various stages of growth, but from 1977 onwards, it had consolidated trade union and democratic rights, ensured fulfillment of a wide range of demands, and had taken care of expansion in both organizations and movements (Gupta, 2001:04).

The Committee's discourse was generally the global socialist discourse against capitalism, and the present phase of its accelerated growth, namely globalization. It must be admitted that

there is no single counter-discourse in the socialist world for the simple reason that the response on the part of the socialist parties, whether in state power or not, varies. One even notices some dissension between parliamentary socialists and left extremists who advocate violent confrontation. By this measure the Coordination Committee discourse was in a sense derivative of the liberal socialist discourse.

As a precursor, it is seen that ever since it was formed, the Committee had been engaged in persistent articulation of a discourse on capitalism which anticipated the contemporary turn to globalization. This discourse was essentially Marxist. Marx and Engels wrote in the *Communist Manifesto*: “The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the entire surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere. The bourgeoisie has, through its exploitation of the world market, given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country...” (Taylor, 1967:81).

Understandably, the Coordination Committee had been very straightforward in expressing its misgivings about the ruling Left Front government’s attitude in its closing years to globalization.¹ This understanding was widely reproduced by the communist movements and the various communist parties all over the world. Born in the midst of struggle between the government and its employees, which spilled over into the process of class struggle, the Committee remained an instrument of struggle in the days of globalization. The first discernible statement on globalization by the Committee was during the Congress rule under the Prime Minister of Mr. Rajiv Gandhi (1984-1989). An escalation of the policy and a certain hastening of globalization, particularly economic globalization, during the rule by the Bharatiya Janata Party-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA, 1999-2004) provoked the Committee to begin a concerted struggle against the process and its mediating agency, the Indian state under the NDA rule. The Committee’s persistence with a critical anti-globalization discourse and protest activities indicated its struggles against the forces of globalization and their agents.

This critical anti-globalization discourse and narratives on protests were articulated in various writings in *Sangrami Hatiyar* (meaning weapon of struggle), the mouthpiece journal of the Coordination Committee. This analysis focuses on the ‘discrete versions’ of the discourse: it is discrete because the discourse statements were expressed tersely. But the discreteness is apparent because these versions were embedded in the total expression represented in the large thematic essays and the Editorials of *Sangrami Hatiyar*. The articulation of the discourse on globalization and its adverse effects started finding a place in the pages of *Sangrami Hatiyar* from the 1990s.

Mobilizing its members for participation in the process of protests had been one of the major organizational tasks of the Committee. This needed continuous political socialization of the members, particularly the new cohort of employees. However this had not been for securing loyalty only. Mobilization was intended to help them cognize the implications of public policy, be it the recent

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1. “Innumerable dimensions of structural reforms due to globalization of finance capital are now coming to light. Its (the Left Front government’s) principal philosophy is of downsizing. ... The first and the foremost policy of West Bengal government is e-governance.... But, the first and the principal contribution of e-governance in the lives of administrative workers and employees is the removal of not only labour from production and services, but also of the worker himself. The impact for the employees in West Bengal will be as bad as those in Central employment or employed in the government of N. Chandra Babu Naidu, the then Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh. It would be the death of job... Hence, there is an apprehension of crisis in state government employees’ associations” (Gupta, 2001:03-04).

neo-liberal shift in economic policy, or a foreign policy tilt towards the US, or re-structuring of the public sector, for their own location in society, economy and politics. It had been showing how capitalist globalization touches or likely to touch their professional and personal lives. The ability of the Coordination Committee to orchestrate various struggles and to maintain an organizational hold over so many constituting associations of various categories of state government employees had been remarkable.

The economic question was the kingpin of the Coordination Committee discourse. But this was not exclusive to it. As Catherine Eschle reported "...most activist accounts in recent years have focused more centrally on phenomena associated with *economic* globalization: the increasing power of corporations, the growing role of the international financial institutions, and the neo-liberal policies of trade liberalization and privatization propounded by the latter and from which the former benefit. These are seen to produce economic inequality, social and environmental destruction and cultural homogenization" (Eschle, 2005:27). Thus, the immediate context for the Coordination Committee discourse was the neo-liberal shift in economic policy of the Indian state with adverse impact on employment and income security (Dasgupta, 2005:213-217).

The intellectual tenor of the Coordination Committee's discourse helped the process of what could be for many of its members, political re-socialization. But the intellectual framing was coupled with emotional framing. As we know, emotions play a critical part in provoking an individual to cross the threshold of political inertia, to secure his commitment to a particular discourse, and motive him for appropriate political participation. Helena Flam observed: "Every cognitive framing implies emotional framing. Diagnosis involves not only telling people that there is a problem and who is responsible for it but also that they should feel angry about it. Prognosis tells people what action they should take and what the future prospects are, but it also implies that hope for change or destructive hate is called for" (Flam, 2005: 24). Such 'feeling rules' were not only set up but are also duly communicated to the members of the Coordination Committee.

This communicative role was performed by the Coordination Committee leadership (government employees, belonging to any of the constituent associations of the Committee) which was very effective in providing a political roadmap and in maintaining linkages with a network of allies within the nation-state and in the world. As Max Weber suggested in a different context, one has to look at movement leaders and the intellectual careers of movements to understand movement dynamics and their trajectories. Not only do they diffuse the global orientation to the other movement participants, but such core activists link movements in different parts of the world where they have established personal contacts (Maiba, 2003).

Like elsewhere, here too, plan of collective action by the leaders of the Coordination Committee can be understood as relational sequences, modelled by Laclau and Mouffe through the twin logics of difference and equivalence (2001: 127-145). Logic of difference says, protest movements are understood to be made up of a series of different 'demands', e.g. 'Third World poverty', 'better labour conditions', 'decentralize government' etc. Within any protest movement, these demands are the embodiment of a string of different subject positions, such as 'trade union', 'worker's association', 'environmental group'. The collective action of a protest movement is dependent upon a logic of difference. Though these demands may develop a collective demand - that collective action is only possible through the incorporation of difference. It has to be remembered, in order for those various demands to collectively constitute a focalunifying demand for the movement, it is necessary to have 'equivalence'. The unifying demand provides the identity of the collective action, constructing a series of 'equivalential' chains between each of the particular demands. Under the

unifying demand – though they remain different – the particular demands are temporarily and momentarily equivalent to one another – being dependent upon the unifying demand. The moment in which those differences constitute a single campaign, they are momentarily cancelled out ‘insofar as they are used to express something identical underlying them all.’ This is known as the Logic of Equivalence (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: 127).

But how do the leaders make this language of protests intelligible and put this across their followers? This is where the question of articulation steps in. As Laclau and Mouffe put it: an articulation is “any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice” (2001:116). It is therefore a process that changes relations between objects so that their meaning and identity are changed, and fixed in a particular way. A discourse is the product of such articulation, that which establishes a chain of relationships between social practices/objects such that their identity is modified as a result (2001: 105).

Styles :

Political discourse is the use of language in ways that humans, being political animals, tend to recognize as ‘political’. It operates ‘indexically’, which means one’s choice of language, features of it can implicitly signal political distinctions. Examples would be – choosing to speak one language rather than another, choosing a regional accent, or accent associated with a social class, choosing words associated with particular political ideologies, choosing forms of address (and in some languages, pronouns) that express distance or solidarity. Group boundaries and bonding can thus be expressed indexically (Chilton, 2004). Different actors have different views of the significance of phrasing and wording, although the referent is constant. This is where the question of styles becomes pertinent.

Articulation of a critical discourse by the leaders of state employees’ organizations and movements took a form typical of intellectual make-up of the leaders concerned. Some of them argued rationally and empirically against capitalist globalization and the policies of the nation-state, which mediated the process itself. Others were apparently more literary and emotive because they tried to rouse the employees by making an appeal to their beliefs and values. Needless to say, they concurred on the core critical discourse on capitalist globalization and the neo-liberal economic policy.

Let us first illustrate the style that invoked the capacity for rationality and objectivity on the part of the fellow members of the Coordination Committee. In a statement titled ‘People’s Movement and Alternative’ the author, Sukomal Sen, a veteran trade union leader and historian wrote: “For the last one and half decades the world is witnessing the disastrous result of imperialist-led neo-liberal globalization on the common people of all capitalist countries. During these last few years, the offensives of globalization on the working people were further intensified. Now, World Bank, IMF and WTO are putting enormous pressure on different countries particularly the developing countries, for strictly following the notorious formula of globalization” (Sen, 2001).

With a strong ideological commitment to Marxism and as a member of Communist Party of India (Marxist) — the author was a Member of Parliament on CPI (M) ticket — he naturally wrote with reference to inequality in the emergent post-globalization world order: “During this period, the world witnessed sharpening division between the rich and poor countries and conspicuous inequality in wealth and living standards between different countries – the rich capitalist countries on the one side and the poorer developing countries on the other. The former were getting richer while the latter being rendered poorer. Besides, this international inequality between nations, each nation was

also getting more sharply divided between two sections of people, one growing rich and richer every day and the other sliding into more and more poverty, hunger, unemployment, loss of jobs, lack of basic facilities for human living, primary education, medical care. Their destitution and impoverishment was increasing by each passing day” (Sen, 2001).

Sen also explained the emergence of inequality: “The Western imperialist countries ... have pushed the poor countries to eliminate trade barriers, but kept up their own barriers, preventing developing countries from exporting their agricultural products, thus depriving them from desperately needed income from export. And in this respect United States is one of the prime culprits. They are also guilty of hypocrisy, as the West has driven globalization agenda, ensuring to garner disproportionate share of the benefit at the expense of the developing world. It was not just that more advanced industrial countries decline to open up their market for the goods from the developing countries – for instance, keeping their export quotas of multitude of goods from textiles to sugar – while insisting that those countries open up their market for the goods from the Western countries. It was not just that the more advanced industrial countries continued to subsidize agriculture, making it difficult for the developing countries to compete, but insisting on the developing countries to eliminate their subsidies for agriculture and industries” (Sen, 1997).

The author distinguished the contemporary anti-globalization struggles as global in nature: “Riots and protests against the policies of and actions by institutions of globalization are hardly new. For decades, people in the developing world have rioted when the austerity programmes imposed on their countries proved to be too harsh, but their protests were largely unheard in the West. What is new is the wave of protests in the developed countries as well as the wave of protest globally everywhere” (Sen, 1997).

Sen made a specific reference to India and to state employees: “India is one of the worst victims of this imperialist driven neo-liberal globalization and along with the Indian workers, employees community including government employees are also joining the battle everywhere. This feature has to be further accelerated as offensive of globalization in India is becoming sharper” (Sen, 2001).

Radicals always point to success of struggles they approve of. The successful protests in Argentina, Brazil and Venezuela in 2002 were cited as appropriate rebuff to US-led globalization. This was in fact a ploy to instill confidence in the struggling workers and employees about the efficacy of their collective action.

The author’s categorical prose both in narration and in explanation starkly compares with the metaphor-ridden, emotive style of discourse articulation by Debu Datta Gupta, another important member of the Coordination Committee. In his narrative on how capitalist industrialization and consumerism had destroyed ecology in an article *Basundhara’s Eptitaph* (An Epitaph of the Earth), he wrote:

“Alas I have failed to let my ten-year-old daughter listen to the song of magpie robin of Bengal despite living in the vicinity of Kolkata. I have failed to give her a taste of the amazing grace of vocal music of *finge* (fork-tailed passerine bird), *moyna* (mynah), and other local birds! Or, how a kite’s call makes the afternoon loneliness solemn! Not a single cuckoo flies into the locality; hence children today cannot appreciate how eloquent spring time becomes by its cooing” (Datta Gupta, 1999:07). The allegation is evidently against globalization interfering with the natural habitat of common birds and thereby the joy of living.

He introduced an article titled ‘Sports Imperialism’ in the following way:

“Right now, Sonia (a thirteen year old blind girl from Punjab) is stitching pieces of leather

together to make a football that will be photographed hand-held by Eric Koston or Alessandro Del Piero on behalf of Reebok, Nike or Adidas. There must be the signature of the two popular footballers or slogans like 'Eric the King' or 'Del Piero the Prince' on the multi-colour blow up of the football. Fifty to sixty lakh posters will be distributed all over the world... But nobody would come to know that Sonia stitched the football in a dark factory in Punjab in India (in order to earn a miserable pittance)" (DattaGupta, 1999:33).

The author brought out the attitude of mafia capitalism in the article titled 'Mafia Capitalism': "Whether your youth will be patriots or in drug traffic, whether your earth will be covered by forests or will become deserts — these are your problems. Not ours. We have given you loans, which you will have to repay. You have got loans for meeting the cost of loan re-payment. How you would pay back the loan is your problem, not ours" (DattaGupta, 1999:97).

He pointed out the difficulty of comprehending globalization in an article 'Illusion of Globalization'. "We are observing the global form of economy. It is an amazing experience. It is not intelligible to the science of economics as developed in last three hundred or three hundred and fifty years; (not even to the great minds): (ranging) from Kautilya, through Adam Smith to Marx. Even if we glean from the knowledge created by the stalwarts, this plain illusionism will remain unintelligible. The global image of globalization is like that of an elusive god. It is not attached to anything. Neither value, nor creation. This globalization did not have a normal birth" (DattaGupta, 2001:111).

About corruption of youth as a part of the capitalist globalization design, the author observed: "The urban middle class adolescents are the target group for induction into culture of consumerism right from the adolescence, besotted by a temptation for a life alienated from reality. For this purpose, one hundred and fifty crores of adolescents of seventy crores of families of one hundred and ten countries are hypnotized by the pleasures of popular MTV rock, disco, brake and rap, of multi-colour kaleidoscopic images. Entertainment network is the most effective medium of creating consumer culture or 'culture of desire' among the teens to day" (DattaGupta, 2001:92).

The central position in this discourse was that capitalist globalization under the aegis of the United States of America was exploitative and domineering. It produced a new order of inequality. It denigrated the nation-state, particularly its economic sovereignty. The ideological identity of the discourse was evident: it was socialist, in fact, Marxist-Leninist.

It must be noted that the discourse of the mainstream parliamentary Marxist parties, particularly CPI (M) was not the only influence on the Coordination Committee discourse. It also drew from Marxism inspired radical critique of contemporary capitalism by academicians. This is testified by the fact that a few scholars wrote essays on globalization for *Sangrami Hatiyar*. The post-1990 anti-globalization struggles by the Coordination Committee of state government employees in West Bengal were rooted in earlier struggles by Left parties against foreign investment. This is relevant because the Coordination Committee has been a political ally in all such movements. It appears that those in the Left movements in the early years of independent India were aware of increasing significance accorded to foreign capital by the fledging post-colonial state and its ruling regime. As Professor Amiya Kumar Bagchi pointed out: "An impression has been sedulously cultivated that Indian statesmen were thoroughly nationalist in their attitude, and did not want to encourage foreign investment in the country. Nothing could be further from the truth. When the Indian government came to power it did not nationalize a single enterprise which the British Indian government had not already acquired. When it was feared that the Industrial Policy Resolution of 1948 might hurt the sentiments of foreign capital, a separate statement was issued by Prime Minister Nehru to allay such fears. India had enough sterling balances at the time to acquire a major part of the holdings of

foreign capital” (Bagchi, 2002:03).

The Coordination Committee’s policy of rallying the employees for massive joint political struggles found endorsement in academic analysis also. As Professor Bagchi forecast: “The wresting of political power from them (the neo-liberals) rather than trying to convince by reasoned arguments, even if they are based on mainstream economics, will be the agenda of students of political economy in the foreseeable future” (Bagchi, 2002:09).

Professor Bagchi’s forecast finds resonance in historical optimism of Noam Chomsky, who observed: “... they (decisions on economy) are human decisions subject to challenge, revision and reversal. They are also decisions made within institutions, state and private. These have to face the test of legitimacy as always; and if they do not meet that test they can be replaced by others that are more free and more just, exactly as has happened throughout history” (Chomsky, 1998:25).

The anti-globalization discourse had an unambiguous understanding of the role of the state. According to Chomsky, the state socializes risk and cost but privatizes power and profit. The Coordination Committee and the communists also perceived globalization in the same way. The most tragic cost borne by society is illustrated by what the Koreans call ‘IMF suicides’ that is comparable to ‘farmers’ suicide’ in India (Bello, 1999: 133-143).

The adverse consequences of globalization² were no longer Marxist apprehensions only. In ‘The Scorecard on Globalization 1980-2000, Twenty Years of Diminished Progress’, Mark Weisbrot and his co-researchers had graphically shown how progress in the last twenty years has suffered a setback (Weisbrot *et al.*, 2003). The styles of articulation of the discourse were designed to inculcate in the members of the Coordination Committee a capacity for political reasoning, so vital for their participation in many forms of collective action; as well as, induce them to develop an emotional commitment to interrogate neo-liberal practices. Two complementary languages of rational and empirical analysis and of moral analysis of adverse consequences of contemporary globalization were consciously used to convey a global socialist discourse on finance capitalism.

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2. There is another line of argument which seeks to establish that there was erosion of India’s economic autonomy before globalization and India’s autonomy grew, relatively speaking, after globalization because of the consequent strengthening of its economic capabilities (Nayar, 2003).

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