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From Assertion to Aggression: Analysing the Complex Role of Violence in Subaltern Politics

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ABSTRACT

Subaltern groups are people in the society who constitute a class in the society that is subject to the hegemonical domination of the ruling class or the dominant class. When such groups pursue their goals and make themselves heard, the collective term for such movements is commonly known as 'subaltern political movements'. These movements challenge the existing power structures by questioning and attempting to fundamentally transform the social or political order established by the ruling elites. To achieve their goals, sometimes these groups are lured by the prospect of violence as they believe that it can help advance their goals and make themselves heard. However, the use of violence can have unintended and undesirable consequences that undermine the very purpose of the movement. Resorting to violence can lead individuals to adopt aggressive tendencies, disregarding alternative options such as dialogue or diplomacy to resolve conflicts. This inclination towards aggression can foster a culture of violence, perpetuating cycles of hostility within society. Such cycles emerge when there is a violent exchange between those employing violence to resist and the dominant class striving to maintain its power. This is drawn from the premise set by Karl Marx in the Manifesto of the Communist Party. Consequently, this disruption affects public life, straining the resources, apparatus, and harmony of society. A prominent example of this phenomenon is observed in the Naxalite movement, where the initial zeal of the movement was eroded over time due to the prolonged use of violence by both the subaltern group and the state.

Keywords: *Subaltern, violence, aggression, cycle of violence, The Communist Manifesto, The Naxalite Movement.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The term 'subaltern', commonly used in postcolonial studies, was first used by Italian Marxist scholar Antonio Gramsci to denote a group of people that constitute a class in the society that is subject to the hegemonical domination of the ruling class or the dominant class. The means of movement employed by such marginalised sects of the society is termed as 'subaltern

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movement'. These movements seek to confront the ones in positions of authority, typically the state, and aim to make their demands heard and struggles visible. However, in the pursuit of their goal, sometimes subaltern movements resort to means that paint a spectacle of success and persuade the subaltern to adopt non-conventional and non-passive means of movement. Usually, when such groups feel that their concerns are not being given any attention or solution, they sometimes resort to violent methods to disrupt the social fabric to achieve their goal and bring about a change in the hegemonical social order. While 'violence' is commonly used to define the use of force to cause harm or injury to another person or oneself, and has an interpersonal connotation, it can have various other semantics. As a multifaceted social phenomenon, and can encompass a wide range of situations and extend far beyond mere acts of physical harm.² Throughout the length of this paper, the term 'violence' is used to connote a form of collective behaviour that can be termed as 'revolutionary violence'. Revolutionary violence, by definition, is a response to the ruling class or state violence and is part of a wider strategy of people's revolution that has socio-political connotations.³ Forms of such violence that can be used by these groups include genocide, mass killings, insurgency, counterinsurgency, disruption of public life, and inter alia.⁴ Violence is often employed by subaltern groups as means of collective behaviour that is disruptive and causes significant disturbance in the societal continuum. A similar idea is articulated by Karl Marx in 'The Communist Manifesto' wherein he argues that the working class has to employ violent or disruptive means to break through the subjugation inflicted by the capitalist class and establish a communist regime. However, it is important to note that Marx acknowledges that the use of violence in social movements can have inadvertent consequences and can create a culture of aggression that is sustained on perpetual cycles of violence. These cycles are created because the use of violence is accepted as a justified means of bringing about social change, this violence propels further use of violence in response to the former and ultimately, a culture of aggressive tactics is created that causes disruption to the public discourse and thus, delegitimizes the movement because it loses genuine support in the eyes of the public. This can be understood by analysing the Naxalite movement of India which follows the Maoist ideology of armed struggle and aims to overthrow the Indian government by mobilizing peasants, the rural poor, and tribal communities. In fact, the social base of the movement is overwhelmingly comprised of landless

² Stathis N Kalyvas, *The Lord of the Violence in Civil War* 19 (2006).

³ Manoranjan Mohanty, *Challenges of Revolutionary Violence: The Naxalite Movement in Perspective*, 41 *Economic and Political Weekly* 3168 (2006). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4418463> Last accessed 10th June 2023.

⁴ Rebecca Littman & Elizabeth Levy Paluck, *The Cycle of Violence: Understanding Individual Participation in Collective Violence*, 36 *International Society of Political Psychology* 80 (2015). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43783845> Last Accessed 10th June 2023.

small peasants with marginal landholdings, and to a lesser extent middle peasants.⁵ These peasants, that can be termed the subaltern in this context, were able to draw public attention and media publicity to make themselves heard because they resorted to violence and used radical means of movement. But gradually, the violence employed by the 'Naxalites' became increasingly pervasive and disruptive to normal public discourse and took a rather unpleasant look, because of which it lost its support in the eyes of the public as a legitimate movement. This paper by no means condones the acts of violence, rather it argues that the role of violence in subaltern movements is complex, while violence may initially provide a sense of empowerment and agency to subaltern political movements, it can also create a culture of aggression that perpetuates cycles of violence and ultimately undermines the movement's legitimacy as discussed in 'The Communist Manifesto' by Karl Marx and can be examined through the case of the Naxalite movement in India.

Before embarking upon how the use of violence can manifest itself into unforeseen and inadvertent consequences, it is important to understand the logic behind the use of violence in subaltern political movements, why do these group resort to violence? Is violence the only means available to them? What lures them to the prospect of violence? These are some of the prime questions that are necessary to understand why subaltern groups choose to employ violence. The subaltern's use of violence derives its legitimacy from an experience of empowerment associated with it.⁶ According to Thomas Hansen, it offers a promise of inclusion into an empowered group and also an ephemeral sense of freedom and the license to use violence. The members of the subaltern believe that it is for a cause that they are indulging in such acts and that these acts are the only way they can achieve 'justice' or escape the oppression of the dominant class. In this way, the use of violence renders agency to the subaltern movement, thus empowering the group to challenge the dominant oppressive structures. When subaltern groups use violent means and consequently disrupt the public discourse, they can draw the attention of the public toward their struggle. This makes the movement significantly visible in the public sphere and helps generate momentum for the movement. The people who use violence or are a part of a violent movement, are driven by an experience of power, fraternity, freedom, and empowerment.⁷ In fact, Karl Marx in 'The Communist Manifesto' has advocated for something corollary to this. He argues that the working class may resort to radical means of revolt to overthrow the capitalist structure and make themselves and their demands heard.

⁵ Bela Bhatia, *The Naxalite Movement in Central Bihar*, 40 Economic and political Weekly 1537 (2005). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4416471> Last Accessed 10th June 2023.

⁶ Thomas Blam Hansen, *The Law of Force: The Violent Heart of Indian Politics* 18 (2021).

⁷*Id* at 29.

According to Marx, the violent overthrow of the bourgeoisie lays the foundation for the sway of the proletariat.⁸ Hence, he argues that the subaltern, referred to by him as the proletariat, may resort to violent means if they wish to free themselves from the subjugation of the ruling classes. Marx's theories have provided an important premise for other movements as well, such as the Russian Revolution which saw a significant amount of violence as the subaltern groups tried to emancipate themselves from the oppression of the Tsar and subsequently overthrow the Tsarist regime. The subaltern often resorts to violence when they believe that the oppressive ideologies of the dominant class are deeply entrenched in the social fabric, and that peaceful means of protest through established mechanisms do not yield results. They believe that violence and subsequent disruption of the public sphere will somehow bring attention to their struggle, making their demands heard and hopefully met.

While the use of violence can be seen as a tool of empowerment for the subaltern, it can often have inadvertent consequences and end up creating a culture of aggression and cycles of violence in the socio-political world. As enunciated earlier, subaltern groups often resort to violence when they feel that their movement is not being heard enough or that they need to assert themselves more. While initially, they may succeed in achieving those goals, in the aftermath, they may have to face strong suppression from the state. According to Weber, the state has a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence. It can be concluded that it will employ any method to try and curb such movements that disrupt the harmony of society. The state will hence take a forceful top-down approach to impose 'peace' in the society by any means necessary.⁹ The state will thus be able to retain its dominant position through ideological state apparatuses, a concept discussed by Louis Althusser. Forms of such apparatuses include, but are not limited to the police, bureaucracy, and military. This suppression by the state will again create dissatisfaction and frustration and will thus be met with further protest by subaltern groups. This will gradually transcend into a continuous cycle of violent exchange between the state and the subaltern group where one is trying to suppress the other and the public sphere becomes the battleground. The possibility of such a vicious cycle of violence is discussed by Marx in his Manifesto as well, in chapter 2 of the Manifesto, he discusses the idea of how the ruling class uses every artifice to maintain its dominant status quo and exploit the proletariat (the subaltern in this context). Hence, when violence is used by the subaltern groups, even as a

⁸ Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* 22 Samuel H. Beer (1955).

⁹ Lipika Kamra, *The Politics of Counterinsurgency and Statemaking In Modern India* 10 (2016). https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:90864e1c-250a-4fa6-8749-e9b78c939542/download_file?file_format=application%2Fpdf&safe_filename=Dissemination%2BVersion.pdf&type_of_work=Thesispg Last Accessed 10th June 2023.

last resort, it can sometimes have unforeseen consequences and create a culture of aggression and violent exchange between the state and the subaltern, where public cohesion becomes collateral damage. When the public becomes subject to continuous disruption and cycles of violent attacks, it rescinds its support for the movement, and the movement thus loses its legitimacy in the eyes of the public. This is because the public suffers multiple violations of human rights, disruption of peace, and hindrance in optimal day-to-day functioning. In the earlier stages of such a radical struggle, it may be true that the movement attracts popular support from both the media and the masses, but in the long run, if the public is subjected to such disruption for extended periods of time, it eventually frustrates the public making it rescind its support and in turn detest the movement.

This can be seen by studying the Naxalite movement in India. The Naxalite movement can be classified as a Maoist insurgency that aims to overthrow the government. During its early years, the movement amassed popular support from citizens, especially rural farmers, and poor peasants. The Naxals resorted to violent means of movement in pursuit of achieving their goals and indulge in acts such as attacking police officials, injuring innocent citizens, vandalism, and arson. Due to this, the initial support amassed by the movement was lost and the movement also simultaneously lost its legitimacy as innocent lives were at stake and social harmony was being disturbed. Furthermore, due to its continued use of violence, the movement has attracted heavy crackdowns from the state to the extent that the military was deployed in the area to take control of the situation and brutally suppressed the movement. here, a cycle of violent exchange was established because of the primacy of the state structure that failed to check the indiscriminate use of force against the Naxalites, consequently, they retained their hostile and distrustful stance towards the government and felt that it is only through violence that they can be heard.¹⁰ This has manifested itself in the form of a seemingly unending cycle of violence and counter-violence in the area between the group and the state. The violent confrontation between Naxalites and the Indian state [had] affected the political fabric of the entire society.¹¹ The public grew aversive to the movement and started seeing it as a source of chaos instead of its struggle for a cause. Further, the Naxalites as a part of their violent tactics, employed guerrilla warfare to annihilate class enemies.¹² Wherever such an annihilation took place, the region was considered 'liberated'. But it is important to note that the guerrillas did not take the village

¹⁰ Swati Parashar, *Colonial Legacies, Armed Revolts and State Violence: The Maoist Movement in India*, 40 *Third World Quarterly* (2019). <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01436597.2019.1576517> Last Accessed 10th June 2023.

¹¹ <http://www.jstor.org/stable/441846> *Supra* note 2, at 3167.

¹² Biplab Dasgupta, *Naxalite Armed Struggles and the Annihilation Campaign in Rural Areas*, 8 *Economic and Political Weekly* 174 (1973). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4362290> Last Accessed 10th June 2023.

masses into confidence in these liberated areas.¹³ They started to arbitrarily indulge in such violent acts ignoring the demands of the masses, which in turn alienated the masses, which could have been potential allies, from the movement. Thus, the initial use of violence may have provided the Naxals with an agency to assert themselves, makes themselves visible and their demands heard, it gradually transcended into aggression that further propelled the use of violence which ultimately made the movement lose legitimacy.

Revolutionary violence has been an integral part of many subaltern movements throughout history. Movements like the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution, and the aforementioned Naxalite movement have all employed violence, at least to some extent, to not only make themselves heard but also make their struggle visible. These subaltern movements challenge the status quo by questioning and attempting to overhaul the order set by the ruling classes of the society or the state. The use of violence can sometimes have inadvertent and unwanted consequences that can nullify the whole point of the movement itself. The use of violence can make people susceptible to aggressive tendencies, completely overlooking the option of sorting matters out with dialogue or diplomacy. This tendency can transcend into a culture of aggression that creates cycles of violence in society. This cycle is created because a violent exchange is established between the ones using violence to struggle and the dominant class that wants to retain its dominance. This causes a significant amount of disruption to public life and the public apparatus, resources, and harmony get caught in the crossfire. As is evident in the case of the Naxalite movement where the initial vigour of the movement got dissolved due to the prolonged use of violence by both the subaltern group and the state. The public rescinded its support that rendered the movement delegitimate. Hence, violence has a complex equation with subaltern movements, where on one hand it poses a spectacle of being a tool for liberation for the subaltern, on the other hand, it can perpetuate cycles of aggression and violence, making the movement lose its legitimacy.

¹³ *Id* at 187.