

Shibboleths, Shenanigans and Shamans

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Shibboleths, Shenanigans and Shamans

Dunu Roy

If there is to be a genuine and mutually useful dialogue between the activist and academic roles, those performing the academic role will also have to adopt partisan and committed attitudes.

THERE appears to be a general air of happiness these days regarding the usefulness of an interaction, a meeting-point between academics and activists. But the distinction between the two itself seems to be somewhat arbitrary. If, by an activist is meant a person who works in an organisational capacity with mass organisations, and an academic is one who does intellectual labour, then there should be no problem in accepting that an 'activist' also does intellectual labour, and that an 'academic' can also participate in the work of a mass organisation (say, a Teachers Association). Thus, the distinction becomes somewhat blurred. Perhaps the differences may become more useful if we accept that these are *roles* rather than *individuals* i.e., there is an academic role, and there is an activist role, and both may be incorporated in the same person.

Since both these roles have to function in the same real society, it becomes important to understand what that society is. Nobody will deny that it is a complex reality. There are factors of caste, class, race, religion, gender, and so on. One could go on describing this complexity by resorting to more complex terminologies like 'tribal identity', 'vernacular space' and 'multi-dimensional personality cultures'. But the point is that description is not comprehension; it merely adds more information without any common theme to link that information together. It would be akin to Mendeleef expanding the list of elements without coming up with the Periodic Table. Such intellectual labour for codification and theorising is necessary for both comprehending and transforming the reality. The nexus between academic and activist roles is hardly possible without comprehension accompanying description.

Nothing illustrates this point better than the various attempts to answer the question: What is development? One common tendency is to reply by spelling out a vision of a future and say, this is what development *should* be. This is a normative exercise—a description of what ought to be, but little or no comprehension of how to get there from what *is*.

A second tendency is to forward a

notion of 'modernisation' and make assessments of why it is not taking place, thus arriving at a strategy for getting to it. The 'poverty-is-caused-by-over-population' or 'good-plans-are-badly-implemented' and other such schools of thought belong to this tendency. Here, description is accompanied by some comprehension—because a limited theory (say, of population or administration) is (advanced—but the analysis is severely restricted since it does not take into account why or how the 'causal' factor emerged in the first place.

An advance over this tendency is the one of 'technological fix': a faith in the ability of human beings to come up with technological solutions to all the problems of development. Over a limited time span this appears to be a comprehensive statement, but now, with over two centuries of developmental experience, such a position is no longer tenable. Indeed, whether it is a question of non-renewable fossil fuels or nuclear wastes or non-biodegradable plastics, it is clear that technological solutions tend to create more problems in the long run than they solve.

This leaves only one other major tendency in view. It attempts to describe what development is *now* and then draws out theoretical generalisations of *why* it is what it is. A further elaboration is to spell out how it gives birth to its own opposition through its failures to achieve a desirable society. Such a tendency, which relates development to real happenings in a real productive society, is the only one which both describes as well as offers an explanation which is useful for action.

From the point of view of this last tendency, 'development' may now be defined as the *production, appropriation and reinvestment of surplus*. In the present capitalist mode of development in India it essentially describes the production of surplus by a vast mass of working people, the appropriation of that surplus by a small section of society, which either owns or controls the resources on which production is based, and the subsequent reinvestment by this small section into further production of surplus—which it once again appropriates—and so the cycle

continues. The principal mode of appropriation is through the market, in which even labourers can be bought and sold. Overall control is exercised through the mechanism of the State (not to be confused with the nation-state).

This answer to the question of 'what is development?' also defines what the academic and activist roles can be. Any individual who organises, mobilises, and otherwise supports efforts to challenge the appropriation by a few and attempts to redistribute the surplus amongst the real producers is performing an 'activist' role. Any individual who analyses real society to show how the process of development is connected with the manifold production and appropriation of surplus, and how this gives rise to its opposite—viz, the challenge by the many to appropriation by the few, may be said to be performing an 'academic' role.

However, it is important to consider here that while these roles may be desirable, how far are they *real* and *possible*? What will be generally accepted is that the 'activist' mode calls for a degree of commitment, a partisan position, and an identification with the cause of the mass of working people. Thus, this is a political role, an active mode of intervention in society to challenge and change the relations between social classes. Such political activism, therefore, calls for a change in the activist—socially, culturally, and politically. Consequently, such a role can be performed only by those who can break away from social conventions and rebel against the existing order. It is also important to note that this kind of rebellion is instigated by the failure of the existing social order itself. In many senses, there is a legitimacy for rebellion.

What is not so easily granted is that the role of 'academic' also calls for a degree of political commitment and partisanship. This is made more difficult by the fact that all academic institutions are virtually controlled by the State, through financial grants and administrative measures. Furthermore, the purpose of this control is to make available knowledge in order to further the appropriation of surplus, whether through greater utilisation of resources, or more efficient production, or increased control over the working population. This does not mean that 'new' knowledge is created in academic institutions. On the contrary, a historical review will reveal that the basis for new knowledge emerges through the practical experience of working people. It is the task of the institutions to collect data on these experiences, collate it, codify it, and generalise it as 'new' knowledge. (This is

a valuable example of how multitudinal facets of a complex reality are theorised to provide a clear path of action by the ruling class—those who appropriate the surplus.) Thus, it may be seen that the appropriation of surplus is accompanied and supplemented by an appropriation of knowledge also.

From the above it follows that, if there is to be a genuine and mutually valuable dialogue between the activist and academic roles, then those performing the academic role will also have to adopt partisan and committed attitudes. Only then can they do the intellectual labour which is required to collect, collate, and codify information and to return the knowledge to the people. This is a critical aspect of the academic/activist interface. Without a return of knowledge to the source from whence it sprang, activities like 'action-research' will denote no more than a further advance in the appropriation of knowledge. For then, the researcher will merely observe 'social action' (even as a somewhat mythical 'participant'), document it and offer it on the market as a commodity (through articles in journals, for instance). This is not a return of knowledge to the people—most of whom have no access to journals.

The reappropriation, and political use, of knowledge by the working people therefore, has three corollaries attached to it. Firstly, it requires that the *codification* of information be in codes that are comprehensible by the people. This represents a radical departure from what exists as intellectual labour in academic institutions today. In other words, a complex reality cannot be described and comprehended in ever-more complex terms without a clear thread of generalisation linking it all together to provide firm guidelines for social action.

Secondly, reappropriation of knowledge is not possible if the language and fora where the knowledge is available are inaccessible to the people. New modes of information dissemination, new styles, new formats of presentation, new organisations for review and analysis, new avenues of learning have to be discovered, but based on forms already accessible to the people.

Thirdly, the *academic* role can no longer be that of a neutral and objective *observer*. In the political language of social conflict, no 'objectivity' is possible. Partisanship has to be explicit and recognised. This should not be taken to mean that the academic activity is thereby rendered 'unscientific'. On the contrary, the whole purpose of such intellectual labour is to challenge and overthrow the Cartesian basis of 'science' itself; to

challenge the notion that the 'observer' can be separated from the 'observed' and that the 'observation' is merely a value-free transaction which does not in any way change or affect both parties. This is a notion which is in severe distress even in the hard core of natural sciences, so there is no 'scientific' reason why it should continue as a shibboleth in academics.

There are many shibboleths which need to be overturned if the interface between academics and activism is to become a vital contribution to the restructuring of social relations and production. This paper tries to indicate some of those shibboleths. The more these are identified and

broken up, the less will be the scope for those shamans whose shenanigans support the dominance of the appropriators over the working people!

(Needless to say, this note has been written in a language that may be more familiar—and acceptable—to those who consider themselves more suitable for the 'academic' role. It should, therefore, provide additional food for thought regarding how a similar note may be written for 'activist' roles—in a language and style familiar, acceptable, and comprehensible to the working people! This is the *crucial* element of the return of knowledge to the people.)

Koraput: Perceptions in a Changing Society

Biswamoy Pati

The tribals of Koraput rarely sing and dance. They struggle merely to survive. What are their problems and perceptions of life?

KORAPUT district in the western-most part of Orissa has a very large tribal population; according to the 1981 *Census Report* they constitute 55 per cent of the population of the district. The district has undergone some industrial development centred around the mining of bauxite on a large scale. Damanjodi, the chief bauxite zone, has awakened the people of coastal Orissa to the existence of this remote district. *Chalila Gadi Damanjodi* (the vehicle moves to Damanjodi)—a slogan popular in the early eighties in coastal Orissa perhaps best expresses this phenomenon.

An attempt has been made here, through interviews with some tribals like Bondas, Bhuyans, Khonds, Juangs and Parojas, as well as non-tribals, including outcastes and refugees from Bangladesh, to project their concepts and problems, as well as the ways in which they relate to the world. The limitations of such an exercise is obvious—a gap did exist between me and the people I interviewed, not only in terms of perceptions, but also because the Oriya I speak is different from theirs. Moreover, concentration on oral evidence also implies a certain degree of distortion. Nevertheless, I have tried my best to narrow down this gap as far as possible.

The tribal folk of Koraput rarely sing and dance, in contrast to what one normally imagines. Life is extremely hard for them; they not only have to fight the vagaries of nature and wild animals, but also human beings in order to survive.

This sense of struggle has more or less been accepted as a part of their existence. Moreover, one seldom finds a spirit of struggles or protest in them. The opposite, in fact, seems to obtain. The only break from their miseries and hardships seems to be cynicism, liquor and reproduction. In this tract poverty seems to be the general theme.

Certain commonalities emerge when one attempts to reconstruct perceptions in this district. Certain basic concepts related to time seem to be the same everywhere in this tract. A working day is measured from sunrise to sunset. Seasons determine what seeds are to be sown or that the harvests have to be reaped. Most festivals are linked to either sowing or harvesting. What is interesting is that the spell continuity has cast only gets reinforced in their interaction with the 'world'. For example, during the emergency when 'socialism' made its appearance in the district through the 'old' 20-Point Programme the maximum wage was Re 1 and the length of the working day remained constant. Similarly, when the Food for Work Programme percolated into the district the span of the working day, as enforced by the PWD contractors, remained the same.

One also observed that the tribals' sense of time was quite different. They seemed to view the past as indistinct from the present. This reflects the static nature of things, as well as a difficulty, in relating to time in general. The question of one's