

India: Rosa Luxemburg and the Pedagogy of Revolution

Reflections on the current impasse facing the Indian Left

Thursday 27 May 2021, by [KUMAR Ravi](#) (Date first published: 13 April 2021).

West Bengal slipped away from the hands of the Left as it lost the elections. Tripura, another state, decided to shift to the right parliamentarily. There were questions raised by the younger generation within the Left in Bihar during the 2020 elections. The Left in India is not in the best of its moments. Yet the reason is more than the electoral defeats. It also necessitates an inquiry into left-wing politics itself, as electoral defeats do not necessarily mean diminished strength and power in terms of street-level organizing.

This paper argues that the vibrancy of the Indian Left—in terms of internal debates as well as engagements with the outside world—has changed forms and has been diminishing. Earlier, at least the internal debates were visible from the labelling of leaders and cadres as being followers of certain schools of thought. The Left is currently like the still water in a pond, falling into the liberal bourgeois trap. The paramount aim of left-wing politics is anti-capitalism, driven by its commitment to working-class politics. This article, through Rosa Luxemburg's understanding of the relations between intellectuals, a political party's leader and cadre, and the proletariat, argues that there is a serious need to discuss the organizational structure as well as the party-people relationship grounded in working-class politics. I would call this the "political pedagogy of revolution" in Luxemburg's thinking.

There might be the possibility of the replication of bourgeois forms of organization and hierarchies within the Left, which alienated it from the masses. A common theme in Luxemburg's thought was the "widening of the intellectual horizon of the proletariat", and the "sharpening of their way of thinking". [1] She believed that the distinction between the intellectual or party leadership and the party cadre could be dangerous, as the "intellectual ... stemming from the bourgeoisie, is by origin alien to the proletariat". [2] Has the Left institutionalized itself through replications of bourgeois notions of hierarchy, which make it less and less discernible from the bourgeois formations? Is there a need to re-examine these relationships in the context of left-wing political formations? Luxemburg had an extremely sharp understanding of the political pedagogy of revolution that could have resolved these issues. However, there appears to be a virtual rejection of her ideas within the dominant Left. These are some of the questions that this article seeks to raise.

Pedagogy as Politics and Politics as Pedagogy

Pedagogy is always political—whether it is carried through the work of formal state institutions or through informal institutions that profess different kinds of ideologies. Pedagogy, conceptually, encompasses a vast spectrum due to the role played by each and every act and idea as a source of teaching-learning. Every act or idea of the state, of the party, or of grassroots movements bases itself on the aim to reach out to as many people as possible. This *reaching out* is, in fact, pedagogy. It is in this context that the work of someone like Rosa Luxemburg needs to be read. Socio-political

movements are significant sources of pedagogy in themselves as carriers of ideas as well as through their actions aimed at mobilizing the masses through a process of consensualization. Quite tragically, not much attention is paid by the leadership of the Indian Left parties to this aspect of *pedagogy as politics* and *politics as pedagogy*. If it was considered important, there would have been much more time dedicated to self-scrutiny as well as to changes in the relationships between party and movement or between cadre and the masses. Rosa Luxemburg becomes significant in such a situation because, unlike many intellectuals who have influenced the Left, she dwells at length on the roles of theorization and intellect in relationship to the working class movement.

Recent events in the context of the Left in India [3] have necessitated a look at the how left-wing parties function in terms of organization. These workings are reflective of the relationship between the cadres and leaders, or between the party and the masses in the context of the idea of the teaching-learning of ideologies.

It was in the month of October 2020 that the members of the All India Students' Federation and the All India Youth Federation, who were also members of the Communist Party of India (CPI), conducted a sit-in protest during the meeting of the state executive committee of Bihar State Unit. Videos of the protest went viral on social media, and print media also reported on it. The student and youth demonstrators were protesting against the way the electoral alliance with a regional political formation was undertaken, and the way the youth were ignored while deciding on candidature in elections. Some of the youth leaders defied the party and decided to contest elections independently. They also filed nominations from a few constituencies to express their discontent.

Similar developments, albeit without a formal protest, happened when candidates for the Bihar State Legislative Council were decided. At least two party leaders contested elections, but the party decided not to support them, instead supporting other bourgeois political formations. In these two instances it appeared that the hierarchy of the party prevailed, as it never followed the dialogic process of interaction with cadres prior to taking decisions on elections. For instance, did the party go through the State Council and other necessary bodies and make a decision to field only a certain number of candidates, or did any bargaining with the bourgeois political formations take place beforehand? Was there a debate within the party on which assembly seats to contest?

Such debates did not take place prior to negotiations with the regional bourgeois formations. Leaders decided and cadres remained "followers". The party cadres and leaders appeared as two separate non-dialogic categories distanced by "power" attributed to people and bodies within the party through their positions in the institutional hierarchy of the party. These developments happened in Bihar in 2020 and many cadres and leaders were issued show-cause notices as per the practice rather than there being time for deep ideological or theoretical contemplation and engagement to take place on the issues that were being raised.

If we rewind back to the 2011 West Bengal elections, when the Left Front lost power after a long rule of 34 years, we find the bourgeois press, as usual, portraying this loss as "the fall of communism". Meanwhile, there was a sense of despair among the parliamentary Left. The Communist Party of India (Marxist), which had lost the elections, went through a process of self-reflection and admitted through its Central Committee Resolution of 11-12 June 2011 that:

The organisational aspect is also an important factor. The image of the Party amongst the people has been dented by manifestations of highhandedness, bureaucratism and refusal to hear the views of the people (emphasis mine). The existence of corruption and wrong-doing among a small strata of Party leaders and cadres due to the corrosive influence of being a "ruling party" and running the government for a prolonged period was also resented by the people. All these have affected the Party in the elections.

The erosion of support amongst the working class and the rural and urban poor indicates the failing to consistently take up the class issues. The independent role of the Party and the mass organisations was impaired due to the dependence on the administration. [4]

The above realization indicates a trend not only towards an increasing substitution of party by the state (through dependence on the administration), but also that the workings of the CPI(M) had developed tendencies of an undemocratic nature when it came to its interaction with the masses. The Central Committee review is also a reflection of the same. Built into the above understanding is a certain idea of the relationship between the party and the masses, the institutionalization of the party, and the relationships within different structural units of the party. It is not that questions about these relationships were not raised earlier. Whether democratic centralism was a suitable institutional form was raised by many. [5] However, these debates did not develop as intraparty ideological struggles in a way that would supplement the larger revolutionary politics.

There is an understanding that remains entrenched within the liberal intellectual tradition that privileges the institutional form of knowledge production over non-institutional forms of knowledge. This gained ground over a period of time as a distinct category of intellectuals claiming expertise over different aspects of life emerged through institutions. In other words, this privileging not only creates, knowingly or unknowingly, a hierarchization of knowledge—classes afforded institutional accessibility in a commodified economy have a better understanding compared to the masses who toil and face the everyday realities. This hierarchization could not be dismantled despite all the rhetoric of the democratization of knowledge because it is, in fact, rooted in the very design of how capital creates and retains spaces that can be useful to it.

This can be understood as similar to a liberal avatar sounding off that capitalism is not necessarily bad because it has a friendly, dissenting, dialogic, liberal face as well. To exit from the rule of capitalism is hence gradually made to appear as unnecessary. The hierarchization of knowledge has become apparent in recent times as well, as we can see for instance in the following explanation by writer and respected intellectual Apoorvanand:

In democracies, people take decisions. But they do not have the intellectual wherewithal to examine the claims of the “powers” which seek their consent to rule them. Academics with their long engagement with knowledge have the tools to test the political and policy promises offered to people. They must share it with the public to help them take informed decisions. [6]

This understanding of “people” who lack the ability to comprehend society has permeated even organizations where the participation of people has been “passivized” through turning them into “masses” led by the “intellectual/leaders”. Hence, there is a decision taken in a higher body of the party, [7] which is then transmitted down to the lowest level as a circular for an activity. What this does is similar to what Paulo Freire called “banking education”. He writes that:

In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry. [8]

The teacher (read “leader”) does not want to communicate (which is a dialogic process) but “issues communiqués”. Dialogue is about transforming the world. It happens between or among humans in the concrete material conditions. The basic instrument of a dialogue is the word itself, to which Freire attributes multiple meanings:

Within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed—even in part—the other immediately suffers. There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world. [9]

It is a critical process because “dialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one person’s ‘depositing’ ideas in another, nor can it become a simple exchange of ideas to be ‘consumed’ by the discussants”. [10] There are elements limiting the ability of humans to be dialogical. Being dialogical also implies being critical, and it is within the “power of humans to create and transform”, but they “may be impaired” due to the “concrete situation of alienation” that individuals find themselves in. [11] The critical thinking that is essential for “true dialogue” believes in “an indivisible solidarity between the world and the people” and it looks at “reality as process, as transformation, rather than as a static entity”. [12]

In this process of understanding dialogue, Freire was concerned with the way “revolutionary leaders”, in order to widen their support base or bring people together, “fall for the banking line of planning program content from the top down”. [13] The effort is, then, to ensure that the views of the masses fall in line with that of the leaders. One may not be convinced by Freire here, because he does not look at the fact that a dialogue has the possibility to ensure that either of the views become the view of the movement. While he is right in saying that the whole process has the possibility of becoming a top-down approach, which is what appears from the two Indian examples above, there is nevertheless always the possibility of the masses following the understanding of the leaders, and there should be the provision of leaders accepting the views of the masses.

Luxemburg and the Pedagogy of Revolution

The Left in India has not shown its orientation towards a dialogic politics—neither within the party nor between the party and the masses. This absence of orientation has led to an instance wherein (1) the cadres do not have the possibility to present their views to the party, (2) the party does not know what people are thinking (hence its political decimation in recent times), and (3) leftist parties are compelled to develop a framework and practice a politics which seeks to conscientize the masses in the ideology that the parties believe in. In recent times, we have not only seen a popular shift from the left to the right, but also inertia within the Left. This politics has its root in the inability to understanding the relationship between the working class and the political apparatus.

Rosa Luxemburg understood that theoretical knowledge was an important basis for the modern workers’ movement, and that it “is doubly important for the workers”. [14] While dealing with the opportunism of Eduard Bernstein, she was clear that the working class needs to understand this aspect of politics, “the present theoretical controversy with opportunism”. [15] Yet it was not only in the context of countering Bernstein’s opportunism that Luxemburg spoke about the theoretical knowledge of the working class. She emphasizes that:

as long as theoretical knowledge remains the privilege of a handful of “intellectuals” in the Party, it will face the danger of going astray. Only when the great mass of workers take in their own hands the keen and dependable weapons of scientific socialism will all the petty-bourgeois inclinations, all the opportunist currents, come to naught. [16]

Luxemburg links the struggle for democracy with the struggle for the emancipation of the working class. Unless the two are linked, democracy cannot be attained. When one looks at the contemporary situation there seems a gradual disconnection between the two—wherein the struggle for the emancipation of the working class appears to have no connection with the struggle for democracy. Hence, a close look at the discourse on state repression and attacks on dissenting voices reveals a

severed connection between the discourse and the working class struggle. It is rather a discourse for saving bourgeois liberal democracy. Luxemburg believed that:

democracy acquires greater chances of survival as the socialist movement becomes sufficiently strong to struggle against the reactionary consequences of world politics and the bourgeois desertion of democracy. He who would strengthen democracy must also want to strengthen and not weaken the socialist movement; and with the renunciation of the struggle for socialism goes that of both the labor movement and democracy. [17]

It is necessary to communicate the fact that the struggles of the working class, struggles within the university campuses, or in the streets are all struggles against the bourgeoisie, which acquires different forms in the course of history. This struggle is also about equipping the working class with the tools of dialectics, with an understanding that there is a relationship between the different struggles that the workers wage, as all of them are battles against the rule of capital. It is with the “sword” of dialectics that:

the proletariat pierce the darkness of its historical future, the intellectual weapon with which the proletariat, though materially still in the yoke, triumphs over the bourgeoisie, proving to the bourgeoisie its transitory character, showing it the inevitability of the proletarian victory. [18]

The insistence in the works of Luxemburg to intellectually engage the workers with the developments taking place around them, or with the questions that they are confronted with, is omnipresent. While talking of mass strikes, she observes that it is only through the discussions on the mass strike happening through the Russian Revolution and in Western Europe that “the widening of the intellectual horizon of the proletariat” and “the sharpening of their way of thinking, and to the steeling of their energy” would take place. [19]

The segmentation of the movement between intellectuals and the cadres—between “the intellectual branch” or the “central branch” of the party and those who are without any place in the party hierarchy—destroys the possibility of providing longevity to the movement. It takes away the life-source of the movement: conviction about what one struggles for. This building up of the life-source is purely pedagogical. It is a “precious” thing due to its “lasting” nature because it is “the intellectual, cultural growth of the proletariat, which proceeds by fits and starts, and which offers an inviolable guarantee of their further irresistible progress in the economic as in the political struggle”. [20] It is a failure to recognize this dimension that leads to the formation of a party and its ascension to power, but that also simultaneously prepares a “temporary” base which switches sides based on the shifting results of the bourgeois democratic instruments of electoral battles, at which the bourgeoisie is itself more adept.

The views of the “intellectuals” of revolution, the all-enlightened creatures, have ensured a strong disconnect between the experiences of the intellectuals and the masses, outside of the walled-off intellectual realm. Hence, despite so much state repression of any form of dissent, vocalized by a select crowd which have virtually no access to the masses owing to their language, discursive content, and approach to the manifestations of contemporary capitalism, there is an absence of mass resistance. It is these moments which throw up incomprehensible situations such as protests by farmers (outside of a party framework), and people resisting the Citizenship Amendment Act and National Register of Citizenship (again outside of a party framework). And these are spontaneous eruptions. They may not be working-class struggles—and miss the larger point of their oppressor being capital—but they are also an expression that they will not “allow anyone to play the schoolmaster with them”. [21]

Educating and Empowering the Class

The pedagogical aspect finds itself concretely in a movement or a politics wherein the question of theory and practice is addressed through the shaping of revolutionary politics. It manifests itself in the way political organizations or parties are designed and in the way relationships within the organization as well as between the organization and the masses are forged. This relationship needs to be a relationship of dialogue, a relationship which rejects the hierarchization of the leader and cadres, a relationship that grounds itself in the active engagement of ideas and politics among them.

The contemporary political situation believes in “communiqués”. It fears dissent within the organization because it fears dismantling the organization, but as Luxemburg delineates, the longevity of revolutionary politics lies in the theoretical intellectual growth of the working class, which does not seem to have happened. There is a process of learning which happens within movements on account of experience, but this experiential learning must find a place in the everyday workings of revolutionary politics in the “central” and “intellectual” branches. Such distinctions between “intellectuals” and “non-intellectuals” are indicators of a revolutionary politics wherein the leadership is the depositor of ideas, and the cadres and the masses are passive recipients. Rosa Luxemburg’s emphasis on doing away with these distinctions are significant if we are to imagine any kind of revival of anti-capitalist politics.

Ravi Kumar works on the political economy of identity politics, social movements, neoliberalism’s impact on education, and processes of knowledge production. His works include *Organising Against Capitalism: Remembering Rosa Luxemburg* (Aakar Books, 2020), *Contemporary Readings in Marxism: A Critical Introduction* (Aakar Books, 2016), and *Neoliberalism, Critical Pedagogy and Education* (Routledge, 2015). He is also the co-editor of the series *Social Movements, Dissent and Transformative Action*. This article is based on his presentation at “[Rosa Luxemburg at 150: Revisiting Her Life and Legacy](#)”, a conference hosted by the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung and the International Rosa Luxemburg Society on 4-5 March 2021.

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and/or French.

P.S.

Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung

<https://www.rosalux.de/en/news/id/44095/rosa-luxemburg-and-the-pedagogy-of-revolution?cHash=d5fab3111924c04c34f3bcdd30ebbfd>

Footnotes

[1] Rosa Luxemburg, “The Mass Strike, the Political Party, and the Trade Unions”, *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, edited by Peter Hudis and Kevin B. Anderson, New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004, p. 171.

[2] Luxemburg, “Organizational Questions of the Russian Social Democracy”, *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, p. 258.

[3] The author is here taking the Communist Party of India and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) as examples only to illustrate the larger point. Other left-wing organizations may also be included in this analysis.

[4] [“Review Report of the Assembly Elections \(Adopted by the Central Committee at its June 11-12, 2011 Meeting\)”](#), *Communist Party of India (Marxist)*, 30 June 2011, p.

[5] Javeed Alam, “Can Democratic Centralism Be Conducive to Democracy?” *Economic & Political Weekly*, vol. 44, no. 38; Prakash Karat, [“On Democratic Centralism”](#), *The Marxist*, vol. 26, no. 1, pp. 3-20; Prabir Purkayastha, “The 2009 elections and the challenges from the Left”, *The Journal*, vol. 1, Centre for Policy Analysis.

[6] Apoorvanand, [““Killing JNU: Throttling of academic freedoms will also affect campuses elsewhere”](#)”, *Indian Express*, 2 August 2019.

[7] The reason I am emphasizing the political party as an institution is because “institutionalization” begins by replicating the bourgeois socio-political and pedagogical order and therefore fails to create an alternative to the dominant, hegemonic bourgeois political order.

[8] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York, London: Continuum, 2005, p. 72.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 87.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 89.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 91.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 92.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 95.

[14] Luxemburg, “Social Reform or Revolution”, *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, p. 130.

[15] *Ibid.*

[16] *Ibid.*

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 155.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 162.

[19] Luxemburg, “The Mass Strike, the Political Party, and the Trade Unions”, *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, p. 171.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 186.

[21] *Ibid.*, p. 198.