



Asif Currimbhoy's *Inquilab*: A Critique of Social Problems of Contemporary India

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Abstract— In the present scenario, in perspectives on Naxalism, Asif Currimbhoy's play *Inquilab* reflects the complexity of underlying issues in the social, economic and political institutions of our country which expose India to even greater and bigger challenges and dangers than the external forces. Here, the playwright not only condemns the Naxalite cult of violence strongly but also comes down heavily on the political leaders who have been in power as rulers of our nation over the tardy implementation of constitutional provisions in the realization of the lofty ideals of our forefathers. In this regard, *Inquilab* is not only about the problem of Naxalism in some states of India; it is also an account of the violent ideology of terrorists throughout the world. The present research paper highlights the social problems of contemporary India in the play *Inquilab* by Asif Currimbhoy.



Keywords— social problems, naxalism, power, tribal, poor and rich, preamble.

Faubion Bowers, an influential American drama critic, rightly observes that very few Indians “have been able to [become] prophets both at home and overseas, especially in theatre” (Afterword, *An Experiment with Truth* 68). It certainly goes to the versatility and maturity of Currimbhoy's dramatic art and vision that he finds mention in Bowers's appreciation when he observes that apart from Rabindra Nath Tagore, “another exception is Asif Currimbhoy who has now begun to emerge more and more clearly as a playwright of international stature” (Afterword, *An Experiment with Truth* 68). We always debunk the West in the name of post colonialism but we always look to it for the discovery of our writers and scholars. What can be more telling than the comment that Currimbhoy, now being hailed as “first authentic voice of India” (Bowers 71) was hardly recognized as a dramatist of some calibre. America came to his rescue and we discovered Asif Currimbhoy, a great Indian playwright. Bowers tersely observes that Currimbhoy did get his start in 1965 when after nearly 15 years of writing without ever seeing a single one of plays produced, the University of Michigan staged *Goa* and the Dallas theatre centre put on *Monsoon* (Afterword, 68). Satyajit Ray had also met the same fate as he could not raise

a rupee from his fellow Bengalis until his play the *World of Apu* struck it rich in London and New York.

L.M. Joshi rightly observes that time was “out of joint” when Asif Currimbhoy started writing. The political upheavals, the ill-fated partition of the country causing deepest struggle and anguish in Bengal and Panjab, the loss of fraternal background, people's indifference to communal harmony, the topsy turvydom of human values, the poor execution of land reformation acts and bills, the resurgence of undemocratic measures to seize power, irrelevant education policies, the mediocracy in the rank of teachers and the student unrest were, therefore, treated as some material for his playwriting” (256). Asif Currimbhoy's beauty as a playwright lies in imparting Shakespearean universality to the topical, historical, social and political events he takes up for his dramatic material. Thus, the refugee of his play *The Refugee* is not only a Bangladeshi refugee; he can be a refugee from Rwanda, Uganda, Pakistan or Sri Lanka. Iyengar rightly observes that he is “any refugee, he is all refugees” (12). Similarly in *Inquilab*, he views the naxalite violence that rocked Bengal in the 60s from different perspectives to impart to it “balm of universality”. Currimbhoy's treatment of Naxalite violence

transcends the boundaries of tropicality and Naxal violence of Bengal of the 60s assumes the dimensions of choice of violence as a weapon to redress one's grievances. This he does by viewing Naxalism from different perspectives with the Naxalites espousing their cause of violence, the Gandhians clamouring for peaceful and constitutional methods to establish a secular and socialistic Indian State, the landlords advocating their legal and constitutional rights relating to their life and property, the landless clamouring for a right to a decent life, the students crying themselves hoarse over dysfunctional and rotten educational system, the politicians playing their favourite game of vote politics and the police defending its use of force in the name of country's unity and stability. Thus, it goes to "Currimbhoy's credit that he uses this only too common word (of *Inquilab*) to charge it afresh with a new dynamic explosive urgency" (Iyengar 12). P. Bayapa Reddy succinctly brings out Currimbhoy's achievement as a dramatist which, according to him, lies in an interplay between "realism and fantasy" (146) which imparts his plays unity and universality of great dramatic art. Reddy rightly opines:

"Currimbhoy never forgets that he is more a dramatist than a moralist or a philosopher. His plays are meant for the stage and they demonstrate his fine sense of the theatre and his skill as a dramatist. The dramatist's concepts and ideas are integrated with the central concern of exploring certain human situations and predicaments. More than any contemporary Indian dramatists in English, he brilliantly succeeds in projecting an image of the time. While his vigorous imaginative grasp of the pageant of life is reinforced by a dramatic use of colloquial idiom and imagery, his control of dramatic form makes his plays artistic and universal. He works his satire into the character, and the character into the plot ingeniously. His relentlessness is born out of his intellectual uprightness as well as of his artistic integrity" (151).

What started as a local violent skirmish in a remote and unknown village of Naxalbadi in West Bengal between a particular landlord and a landless peasant when the latter had gone to take possession of his land on the orders of a court has now attained monstrous proportions. From Bengal, the Naxal violence has snaked its way to many Indian States including Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Bihar, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka forcing Dr. Manmohan Singh the Prime Minister of India to declare from the ramparts of the Red Fort that Naxal violence is the single largest threat to India. Increasing its scope and violence, the red terror movement has even started showing its ominous presence in such peaceful states as Haryana. According to a report in the Tribune, the brick-kiln workers

attacked the owners with lathis, axes and spades under the banner of Lal Jhanda Union forcing the closure of 175 out of 200 brick-kilns in Sirsa District alone. Amar, one of the millions of disillusioned and disgruntled educated youth, sums up the reasons for the spread of the cult of violence. He speaks for Asif Currimbhoy when he tells his father

Look around, father, open your eyes: the poverty, the terrible poverty. People dying of hunger, father. Look at the gap between rich and poor. It's true the city's dying, your old beloved city of the privileged. Do you feel the stranglehold? The busyness grows, enveloping the city with the stench of faeces and dirt. Trams coming to a halt, burning, burning, the extra 2 paise increase in fare more than the dying man can bear. Not logical, is it? Not the game of agree to disagree. There's no time for that. We're drowning under the Hooghly, silting up with doomed humanity. The processions will grow, like nightmares, death processions of the 10 million around the funeral pyre of the burning city (*Inquilab* 13).

The Indian education system has no objective, no direction, no purpose. Educational institutions have become factories which roll out millions of unemployed and unemployable youth providing grist to the mill of the Naxal ideology. Amar exposes the futility of the present education system when he tells his father who is a College Professor: "And you talk of EDUCATION, father! Institutes of education that have now shackled us for generations and generations. What for? WHAT FOR, I ASK? So that there can be more unemployed millions? So that your bourgeois hierarchy remains intact! So that you've doped the masses sufficiently into complacency and resignation? You can have it, father, you can have it, but don't stuff it down our throat. You were the Gods that Failed, father! (*Inquilab* 14)

Amar's voice is not an individual voice. It is the voice of the millions of disgruntled youth who are crying themselves hoarse at the immovable system and society around. Anna Hazare's movement, the rise of Aam Aadmi Party and the anguished cries of the youth all over India over Nirbhaya's fiendish murder and rape reflect the mood of disenchantment and disillusionment in our country. The same kind of disillusionment and disappointment with the "corrupt and corroded" (Guha) system of Indian State has forced the landless peasants and the dispossessed and deprived tribals to actively adopt and practice naxalite ideology which propagates that "power flows from the barrel of the gun" (Mao). Shomik, the young peasant leader, presents the perspective of the landless peasants. He tells his fellow peasants how the delivery system of the State has failed and the benefits of the shining India have consistently eluded them as:

You get what you deserve; disease, hunger, want and death. You give your children an even larger share; scurvy, slavery, deprivation and death. Even bigha of zamin you toil for, you'll make them toll harder, For whom? For whom, I ask? (rustle of discontent amongst peasants; shouting) For the damned, bloody, greedy zamindar! Who never worked a day in his life! Who sucks your blood like a leech, grovels in food and luxury: What gives him the right to own, and you to suffer! Peasants! (spitting) Peasants! (protest noise; all want to speak together, but one of the older peasants holds up his hand.) (*Inquilab* 15).

He holds the failure of the system to effect land reforms responsible for the plight of the landless farmers:

How long have we heard the political workers come here and tell us about land reforms? Our fathers were serfs, and even if we're not, we're not free either!..... No... No... No more waiting. The law cannot work equally for both of us. It's either ours or theirs. At the moment it's theirs, so we have to reject it. But the only means we know: fight, FIGHT(26). And his grievances are genuine. E.N. Ram Mohan, a former Director General of the BSF in his article "Unleash the Good Force" exposes the apathetic and callous attitude of the successive governments towards the upliftment of the landless peasants and tribals. He tells them how the founding fathers of our constitution had incorporated constitutional provisions to ameliorate the lot of landless, the marginal peasants and the tribals. The fifth schedule of Indian Constitution calls upon the Governor of a State to constitute a tribal advisory council to administer the forest reserve or a scheduled area. The ninth schedule of the constitution provides for the distribution of the cultivable land to the landless. No Governor of a State till today has constituted the tribal advisory councils and how the land reforms have been implemented is known to everybody. The story of India's economic development is the story of the poor getting poorer and the rich becoming richer. The Naxalites find it easy to analyse them in their cadre by exploiting the poverty, sufferings and deprivation and promising land to the landless.

Ram Chander Guha laments that constitutional provisions for the upliftment of the dispossessed and unprivileged sections of the Indian society have been "honoured only in breach" with the result that these sections of the society have "gained least and lost most" (Web). The tribal areas have become the killing fields for the Naxalites where they kill at will their class enemies. The tribals and the landless peasants are the backbone of the Naxalites as is told by Ahmed, the Naxal guru: "Without the poor peasant, there can be no revolution" (25). He, therefore, advises the cadre Naxalites to "go among the masses" and concern themselves with their "weal and woe" (25). The strategy

of Naxalites to enlist the poor peasants and the tribals by exploiting their poverty and hunger has resulted in the creation of the red corridor where 160 districts out of 604 administrative units of India are governed by the Naxalites. A report in the Economist tells that "Indian State is almost invisible" in these areas. The report further states:

In one village there is a handpump installed by the local government; but the well is dry. There are no roads, water-pipes, electricity or telephone lines. In another village a teacher does come but in the absence of a school holds classes outdoors. Policemen, health workers and officials are never seen. The vacuum is filled by Naxalites committees running village affairs and providing logistic support to the fighters campaigning in the forest.(Web)

The report is appropriately given a headline "A spectre haunting India". Though the landless peasants and the tribals have never read Maoism or Charu Majumdar's historic eight documents, they are drawn to Naxalism because it seeks to redress their sufferings and grievances. The Naxalites sell them the utopia of "land to the landless. Collective farming Community holdings. A distribution of surplus land to be done immediately." (18) and these deprived peasants and tribals are attracted to the Naxal ideology as moths are drawn to fire. Ahmed, the Naxal top leader, exhorts the peasants to use their agricultural implements of "spears, knives and sickles" as tools of violent force to grab the land of Zamindars. Shomik justifies the use of violence when he says: "How long are we going to wait, huh? Till we grow old and infirm (nod of consent and approval). ... Let's not fool ourselves. We are taking laws into our own hands...because this is the only law that produces results ! (50). Asif Currimbhoy claims that the essence of theatre is conflict and he presents conflicting perspectives on the issue of land grab by bringing Zamindars and Naxalites face to face. Amar justifies land grab when he tells the Zamindars that they have used the laws relating to distribution of surplus land to their advantage. He says, "You have flouted the law, laws that well-intentioned men like my father made. It's too late now... (with deadly earnestness) We'll grab the land, old man, because the young like me are impatient and hungry. Then there'll be no distinction between the good and the bad landlord, because being landlord is bad enough! " (19). Amar tells him that the only option left with them i.e. the Naxalites is to grab land forcibly. He tells Jain, "We will grab the land". When he further says that the land belongs to the tiller, Jain, the landlord explodes :

It belongs to me! Me! Me! My father, my grandfather, my son, my grandson! No one's going to grab it from me! I've worked as hard, harder than my labourers... Look at my hands, son! Look at the callouses! Just because I'm fat and

rich doesn't mean I don't work. I work harder than you... you idler! I don't sprout theories like you, nor write law books like your father. I work with my hands. (passionate). That land's mine, son. I've tilled it and I shall reap its harvest till I die. (his teeth clenched, this man who grows in stature till he's a giant) And I shall kill anyone who lays a hand to grab it. Even my friend's son, be he the labourers or men with whom I break my bread! (19-20).

Violence breeds violence and Jain's threat to use it to safeguard his property is his natural response. Asif Currimbhoy, who himself was in Calcutta during these violent times in connection with his job, tells us about these turbulent times: "The City was under a cloud of palpable fear. There were bombs, burnings, killing of policeman, retribution, decapitation of statues, assassination of professors and Vice-Chancellors or just innocent people dying who happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time" (*The Bengal Trilogy* iv) Professor Datta gives vent to his anger and frustration over the turn of the events. He grieves: "Calcutta, my Calcutta, a dying city? Processions? Strikes? Gheraos? Violence? Bandhs? Breakdown of law-and order? Revolt? Naxal revolt, my friends?" (10). There was murder in the air as Majumdar had declared an "assassination line" a dictum that tells the Naxalites to assassinate individual "class enemies" such as landlords, businessmen, University teachers, police officers and politicians. Ahmad justifies the use of violence by quoting Mao that "it is necessary to bring about a brief reign of terror" to translate Naxal agenda into reality. The assassination of innocent individuals in the name of class enemies is an agreed practice of the Naxalites who believe, according to a report in *The Economist* that "manner of killing should frighten more than the killing" ("A Spectre Haunting India", Web). They have their own laws and councils of justice. The accused are given no chance or opportunity to defend themselves. Jain, the Zamindar and Amar's would have been father in law, is awarded death penalty even though he has been fair in his dealings with the tillers and a hard-worker. When Amar pleads to try Jain as an individual and not as a class enemy because he had always provided help and succour to the landless peasants working on his fields, Shomik, the Naxalite peasant leader warns him "every time you make excuses for the individual you weaken the cause" (61). Currimbhoy's description of Jain's killing with "his severed head hung on two poles, eyes dilated into death, hair dripping with blood" (66) reveals the blood thirsty nature of the Naxalite ideology.

Asif Currimbhoy's visceral antipathy for the politicians far exceeds his strong condemnation and rejection of the cult of violence practiced by the Naxalites. He holds the self seeking politicians responsible for all the ills afflicting India. It is they who have inflicted festering wounds on the

body fabric of our country. They create Bhindrawalas just to keep their seats of power intact. Asif Currimbhoy reveals in the play how these power hungry politicians indulge in immoral and divisive politics rather than taking measures to douse the flames of violence engulfing the whole of Bengal. They practiced the only game they are adept at ----game of deceit, bribery, chicanery. In the play, Devdas, the State leader and Big Wheel politician from the Centre are the embodiments of immoral and corrupt politics of post-independence India. Even when the innocent people were being killed and their property was being looted and destroyed, even when the spectre of violence was enacting its naked dance in the cities and villages of Bengal, the politicians in power thought of no other solution than alluring the Naxalites through bribery and allurements. Devdas, the State politicians from the ruling party offers money and enticements to Shomik the peasant leader:

DEVDA: Look, Shomik, let's be practical. I'm not here to bribe you, or threaten...unless I have to. You want more wages, better conditions of work, I'll give them to you.

SHOMIK: I want land of my own.

DEVDA: If you work for my party, even that is possible. There's going to be a distribution of waste.

SHOMIK: No! Productive!

DEVDA: Productive land. I'll see to it that your name comes up. Your father is the oldest tiller here. It may take time, but I'll arrange it.

SHOMIK: (equally) I want this land...

DEVDA: ... This...?

SHOMIK: ...now! (fractional pause).

DEVDA: (angrily) Oh come now, Shomik! You want too much, too soon! (36).

The politicians are caught, to use a clichéd phrase, between the devil and the deep sea. If they use police force to bring back semblance of normalcy in the burning streets of Bengal, they lose the votes of the peasants and tribals and if they do not, they lose their biggest benefactors – the rich and the powerful landlords who provide them money and muscle power during elections. Jain, the moneyed Zamindars, tells Devdas:

JAIN: Why are you telling the police to soft-pedal them! Are you afraid of losing your peasant votes? You're under-estimating me... (laughing unlu morously) My good friend, (Devdas stockstill) Do you know what I carry in my pockets? (*removes from one a purse with coins, and removes from the other a revolver*) Power? From the barrel of the gun? Or from the purse of gold? (*Inquilab* 33).

On the other hand, Ahmad, the Naxalite leader championing the cause of the peasants, tears into Devdas's immoral game of vote politics:

AHMED: In order to get votes you are following the same old dirty path, having to pander to people like the landlord, who in the last analysis still controls the Government (*Inquilab* 38).

When the going gets too tough for the state government to handle the law and order problem, the Central Government sends its representative euphemistically called the Big Wheel to assess the situation. The police inspector briefs him about the almost irretrievable situation and demands special powers like Preventive Detention Act to handle the situation. When the Big Wheel rules out the possibility that the coalition partners will pull down the Government if he does so, the Inspector tersely tells him: "Then how can you expect me to stabilize things? (pensively). Behind every garbage-dump there's a goonda, and behind every College desk is a potential Naxal. I'm no magician" (63). Devdas tells the Inspector how his hands are tied by his vote bank politics: "Everyone's vying for a vote here. And everyone's climbing on each other's back. We're jockeying ...with the lead now, but there is a pack of wolves behind me. I handle the situation too tough, and the political doves flutter, handle it too soft, and the hawks start pecking. (laughing bitterly too) So you see. I'm no better off than you" (64).

However, the reaction of the politicians like Devdas and Big Wheel does not come as a shock to the readers because they have known for sure that the politicians have always been more concerned with the stability of their Governments rather than the stability of the country.

Against the backdrop of mechanics of dirty politics played by politicians comes a rather pleasant and unexpected perspective on Naxalism from the much maligned police force. The police inspector who has been called to brief the Big Wheel politician hits the bull's eyes when he tells the politician that the Naxal problem is not a law and order problem. He says candidly: "Not one of law and order. It's...(coughing)...one of administration". He musters his courage to speak about what he and his fellow policemen have known and felt during these turbulent times. He tells them that the real cause of Naxalite violence is "Poverty, Unemployment, Injustice, Refugees, Corruption, Filth (opening his eyes to see them both) Politics" (64). Taken aback at the temerity of the policemen, both the politicians "stare at him---murderously" (64). Ultimately the Centre has to intervene, President's rule is imposed, CRPF is called in and given special powers including the Preventive Detention Act to bring the situation under control.

It is significant to note that there are two gurus in the play – Ahmad, the Naxal guru, advocating the cult of violence, terror and tyranny and Prof. Datta teaching, preaching and practicing the rule of law enshrined in the Indian Constitution and Gandhian's philosophy. Thus, Asif Currimbhoy juxtaposes the rule of law espoused by Mr.Datta and the rule of jungle espoused by Ahmad, the passive majority and the violent minority, participatory democracy and totalitarianism.

Prof. Datta invokes various constitutional provisions which have been drafted by our constitutional assembly to address and redress the grievances of various sections of our country like the peasants and the landless labourers. He is an old timer who swears by Gandhian philosophy of peace, non-violence and passive resistance. He is aghast to see violence and lawlessness in the streets of his beloved city of Calcutta. He does realize that the system has not worked but the solution does not lie in the violent overthrow of the system. He tells his students that even Gandhiji had broken the British law but that was a non-violent act :

Prof. Datta: (either sound of tape voicing memory, or articulated through whispers (Gandhiji...Gandhiji.. how to make them understand? That when you broke the law, the old British law that you respected so much, it was because it came in conflict with your natural law of justice. The Divine Law, Gandhiji... with whom I fought for our freedom... how to make them understand that when you broke the law, you asked for punishment! Yes, your own punishment because you still recognized that the law of civilized society could have no exception! Gandhiji... whom I worshipped as my own father... how to make them understand that nonviolence is an active philosophy? That it was used by you to fight violence. Remember... Our Noakhali pilgrimage? What happened then? You didn't die a disillusioned man, did you, Bapu?" (13).

For Prof. Datta, the Constitution of India is sacrosanct and Gandhian philosophy the ideal weapon to redress grievances. He advocates "principles founded on freedom of thought and speech by Gandhiji, the Father of our nation!" to establish a system based on "free economy, socialistically oriented ownership of private property, a fundamental right, protected by law, enforced by law, enforced by police, and if necessary, by the army"! (11). The preamble to Indian Constitution clearly spells out its objective to establish: "Sovereign, Socialist, Secular, Democratic, Republic which will aim to secure to all its citizens, Justice, Social, Economic and Political Liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship. Equality of status and opportunity and to promote among them all fraternity assuring the dignity of the individual and unity and integrity of the nation ("Web").

Through Prof. Datta's invocation of the constitutional provisions, Asif Currimbhoy emphasizes that the ideals enshrined in the constitution have been belied and thwarted by those who control the levers of powers. Asif Currimbhoy's heart bleeds for the poor and the deprived but his heart also bleeds for those who are killed by the senseless violence of the Naxalites. He clearly brings out the futility of the violence as a means to eradicate poverty, hunger and unemployment. This he does by making Amar, Prof. Datta's rebellious son, realize that the cult of violence is no substitute to the rule of law and Maoist philosophy of terror and intimidation no substitute to Gandhian philosophy of universal love, compassion and non-violence. Amar is soon disillusioned by the senseless killings of the individuals in the name of class enemies and their lawless councils of justice. When Amar advocates "peaceful change through opposition" by asserting that "once you use a revolt to your own ends, it destroys what could be most meaningful" (11), he is dubbed as a traitor to the Naxal cause and is ordered to prove his loyalty to the cause by ransacking his father's library containing books on Indian Constitution and Gandhi. He disowns the Naxalites methods of hate, terror and violence but only after the senseless violence has claimed the lives of his father and would have been father-in-law: "I think.. my father was right I mean... his approach was right. That... that change should come through the will of the majority... expressed through a free vote... That society... such as we live in, must follow certain norms ..of law and order... to make such democratic expression possible" (80).

Violence, in Asif Currimbhoy's ultimate analysis, knows no friends, no enemies and no stops. One of the students raises a pertinent question: "Where to stop"? (43). When Sarla, Shomik's wife, tells her husband that earlier he wanted only a small piece of land and now he wanted to lead the whole nation into revolution, Shomik the peasant leader tells her nonchalantly that there is power in the name and game of revolution. Now the Naxalite agenda is to hoist the red flag over Red Fort and replace Jai Hind with Lal Salaam.

CONCLUSION

Thus by offering multiple perspectives on Naxalism Asif Currimbhoy's play reflects the complexity of underlying issues in the social, economic and political institutions of our country which expose India to even greater and bigger challenges and dangers than the external forces. Asif Currimbhoy not only condemns the Naxalite cult of violence strongly but also comes down heavily on the rulers of our nation over the tardy implementation of constitutional provisions in the realization of the lofty ideals of our forefathers. Actually, *Inquilab* is not only about

Naxal violence; Taliban and ISIS which have a spirit about the ideology of violence of terror groups like Al Qaeda lead their tentacles in different parts of the World. Truly the only solution to the problem of violence lies in Gandhian philosophy of love, compassion and sympathy.

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