

## Rethinking the role of the Story in Resistance

**Karthick Ram Manoharan**

**Abstract:** *This paper deals with the role texts play in a resistance movement. Looking at the legacies of Marxist-Leninist movements in India, I argue that after a point it is hard to differentiate whether the text is taken as a guideline for praxis or an unshakeable dogma that is bound by its inherent will to knowledge and power. The praxis of liberation that is centered on a text often leads to situations when that very text becomes a monopoly of the powerful elite and they, with their knowledge and with their interpretation(s) of the text, hijack the potential for liberation in it and turn it into an instrument of repression. My paper, besides attempting to critique the Indian elitist appropriation of Marxism, seeks to emphasize the need to look beyond a rigidly defined set of texts and interpretations for a successful praxis of liberation-centered resistance. The paper also argues for thinking beyond the text to other forms of the word, the story especially, as a form of popular democratic resistance.*

*“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”  
-John 1:1, The Bible*

*“Not so long ago the Earth numbered 2 billion inhabitants, i.e., 500 million men and 1.5 billion “natives.” The first possessed the Word, the others borrowed it.”  
-Jean-Paul Sartre, Preface to *The Wretched of the Earth**

We in the academia are familiar with the Foucauldian discourse on power-knowledge relations. Knowledge engenders power and power requires knowledge to sustain itself. Knowledge is not just a body of facts, facts that have been selected by a group of people as worthy of knowing, it is also a system of words, and a system of ascribing meaning to words. Combined with power, it is a system of discriminating interpretations of words and texts - it determines which interpretation is right and which is wrong. What about the word of our focus, ‘resistance’? Does it have any inherent universal meaning or value? Sartre argued that “The word is a certain particular moment of action and has no meaning outside it” (Sartre, 2009, p. 12).



Karthick Ram Manoharan: [karthickjnu@gmail.com](mailto:karthickjnu@gmail.com)

Karthick Ram Manoharan is Assistant Professor of Political Science at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta (CSSSC). He is the author of *Frantz Fanon: Identity and Resistance* (Orient BlackSwan 2019) and the co-editor of the volume *Rethinking Social Justice* (Orient BlackSwan 2019). He is currently working on the political thought of Periyar E.V. Ramasamy.

Let us take a case - the white slave-owners in erstwhile Southern America opposing the abolition of slavery and the black slaves opposing slavery both deployed the term 'resistance' to their respective demands. A word or a collection of words i.e., a text, has no meaning, no value in itself but that which is given to it by humans in particular scenarios and in particular power relations. A logocentric approach to a text is almost always connected to systems of power and domination.

Of course, there is great subversive potential in a text. "Texts can say more than one supposes, they can always say something new, precisely because signs are the starting point of a process of interpretation which leads to an infinite series of progressive consequences. Signs are open devices, not stiff armors prescribing a bi-conditional identity" (Eco, 1981, p. 11). But there arises a situation when that very text becomes a monopoly of powerful elite and they, with their knowledge and with their interpretation(s) of the text, hijack the potential for liberation in it and turn it into an instrument of repression. An old example of this is Christianity as interpreted by Anglo-Saxon White supremacists or Islam as interpreted by the Wahabbis. A more recent one is Marxism of the Leninist variant, as interpreted by Indian communists from elite castes. My paper, besides attempting to critique the Leninist view of Marxism<sup>1</sup>, especially as it has been practiced in India, seeks to emphasize on the need to look beyond a rigidly defined set of texts and interpretations for a successful praxis of liberation-centered resistance.

### **Problems of 'Fundamentalism'**

The fundamental problem of a resistance movement that relies greatly on a text for its worldview and political action is that after a point, the emancipatory essence of the movement is lost and the text, and those who control it, takes over. Yet, it is hard to envision a liberation movement without a body of writing that has a deep understanding of existing conditions in the society that it seeks to transform. As many Leninists would argue, it is necessary for a revolution to have a revolutionary theory. But the priority has to be set here - it is liberation that is central to a revolutionary, not the text. This, then calls for a democratic, free for all criticism and critical inquiry of the concerned text by those involved in the revolutionary struggle and especially with participants from the target group. This is what Paulo Freire termed as 'problem-posing' pedagogy where "people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation" (Freire, 1996, p. 64).

But how far is Leninism, and its conception of a rigid party apparatus, reconcilable with free and fair criticism? From a text which is considered to contain Leninism's central tenets, "freedom of criticism' means freedom for an opportunist trend in Social-Democracy, freedom to convert Social-Democracy into a democratic party of reform, freedom to introduce bourgeois ideas and bourgeois elements into socialism" (Lenin, 1979, p. 111). Blind, uncritical faith in a text without

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<sup>1</sup> Zizek questions the root of the term Leninism in his essay 'A Plea for Leninist Intolerance': "Is it not that it was invented under Stalin? And does the same not go for Marxism (as a teaching) which was basically a Leninist invention, so that Marxism is a Leninist notion and Leninism a Stalinist one?" (Zizek, 2002, p. 23) Zizek also convincingly points out that "To repeat Lenin is to repeat not what Lenin did, but what he failed to do, his missed opportunities." (Zizek, 2002, p. 26)

taking into account of the subtleties of the context is criticized as dogmatism by most Marxist-Leninists, including that one leader who is blamed for most ills of socialist praxis and who is accused of himself following a ‘mechanical Marxism’, Josef Stalin. I would however argue that the foundation for a dogmatic reading of Marxism was laid by Lenin himself. Stalin just walked into the fortress that Lenin built. The leftist writer Vasily Grossman argues that it was Lenin who theoretically linked the concept of progress with the absence of freedom (Grossman, 2011, p. 199).

For it was Lenin, who interpreted Marx’s concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat as “the organization of the vanguard of the oppressed as the ruling class” (Lenin, 1977, p. 324) and relentlessly opposed, even persecuted, those who held different views on the same.<sup>2</sup> In practice, only the Leninist interpretation of the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ was recognized as the legitimate one. This gave absolute power to the party, power to read, interpret, and give meaning to Marxian concepts and frameworks. The Leninist party-state was the perfect resort where power and knowledge enjoyed an enduring tryst.

What happened eventually in the Soviet Union is, of course, a sad (hi)story. One is indeed compelled to draw a parallel with religious dogma. I would like to make reference to Umberto Eco’s *Name of the Rose*. The critically acclaimed novel, besides a fantastic exercise in semiotics, is also a critique of a closed-ended reading of texts, of restriction of thought to a particular reading of text and the abuse of power that flows with it. At one level, it appears to target the dogmatism of the medieval church. At another level, the critical reader can read into the novel a general critique of totalitarian regimes that base a text, an interpretation of that text as their foundation. The villain of the novel, Burgos, murders people who access a rare text (in the monastery’s library, an exclusive sphere of knowledge) as he finds the knowledge of the text dangerous - it eulogizes laughter, which Burgos believes, will make people fearless of God. God is Word, God as the Text, but to laugh at texts will make The Word as a word. Once power over Word ceases, power over people ceases. This fear sparks off a killing spree, the totalitarian extinguishing of other voices. Burgos, poignantly, is a visually impaired character in the novel.

Is this Eco’s portrayal of the blindness of dogmatism? One can ponder. The message of the novel’s protagonist, William of Baskerville<sup>3</sup> is relevant to the paper’s contention that no text, or no ‘truth’ of/in the text is to be held sacred; “Perhaps the mission of those who love mankind is to make people laugh at the truth, to make truth laugh, because the only truth lies in learning to free ourselves from the insane passion for truth.” To laugh is to trivialize, to deconstruct, to make common, to make low. When it is directed at a power source, like the text, it no longer is

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<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, Marx’s vision of the proletariat winning power was “to centralize all instruments of production in the hands of the State, i.e., of the proletariat organized as the ruling class.” (Marx and Engels, 1981, p. 75) Marx was always ambiguous about the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat.’ An interpretation would be to look at the proletariat as a class for itself that seizes power - not as the proletariat represented by a party which takes power and rules in the name of the proletariat, which is the Leninist interpretation.

<sup>3</sup> The protagonist of the novel also explores how Biblical stories and tales of Christian heretics can be interpreted in a manner that breaks from the rigid orthodoxy of the church towards a more democratic formulation.

something sacrosanct as it is laughed at. The Word ceases to be with God, it ceases to be God as it explodes as laughter on the lips of the commoner.

### **Marxism in India – A Fifth Veda?**

Let us briefly consider the two major parties that claim to represent the communist movement in India - the CPI(M) and the CPI(Maoist). The CPI(M) had been in rule in West Bengal for over 30 years. And all its (mis)deeds in the state, right from the massacre of Dalits in Marichjhapi in 1979, as soon as they came into power, to their recent brutal suppression of the tribal agitation in Lal Garh have been justified by taking recourse to this or that text of Marx and/or Lenin. It is not a mere coincidence that the majority of the Central Committee members of the CPI(M) happen to be upper castes. What in effect happened in CPI(M) ruled West Bengal was that the upper-caste who had access to the sacred texts of Hinduism and who used them to the detriment of the masses of lower castes was replaced by the upper caste who, by virtue of his literacy, had access to the ‘sacred texts’ of Marxism, and who interpreted them to produce the same effect. The four Vedas are considered as the key sacred texts of Hinduism, and for centuries, only the upper castes had the privilege of learning it, interpreting it and disseminating it. Marxism, in the hand of the upper-caste Indian leftists, was turned into a fifth Veda; not a philosophy of emancipation of the poor, but a philosophy of preserving political and cultural hegemony of the elite.

The Maoists on the other hand also criticize the CPI(M) and its failures again by reference to the texts of the deities of Marxism-Leninism viz. Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, Mao. Violence-worshipping ultra-leftists defend the Maoists arguing that they have made inroads into the areas of the tribals, that are some of the poorest sections of the subcontinent. One should however have a healthy skepticism whether the Maoists are not actually indoctrinating the cadres taken from these sections with selected texts of Marxist-Leninist thought and the party’s interpretations of it rather than paying more focus to the oral tradition of these sections, which are rich in narratives of suffering and of resistance to oppression. The Maoists’ laughable class categorization of Indian society as ‘semi-feudal and semi-colonial’ is only comparable to their pitiable political approach to the question of caste. Indeed, despite tall claims of their supporters, their presence among Dalits and backwards castes is minimal – and the presence of these communities in their leadership is abysmal.

While, indeed, the writings of Lenin or Mao do provide valuable inputs for the purpose of organizing resistance, they should be, ideally, dealt only as mere strategies for the larger purpose of creating liberated individuals. Failure to combine them with the thoughts of democratic thinkers from the Dalit-Bahujan communities, like Phule, Ambedkar, and Periyar is an obvious failure of all variants of left movements. It is for no reason that Ambedkar famously called the Indian communists a bunch of Brahmin boys while Periyar, despite his socialist sympathies, “remained critical of the Indian communists, stating that they were mostly Brahmins” and for not having an “anti-caste orientation” (Venkatachalapathy, 2017, p. 130). This is largely so because the left here, whose leadership is largely from elite castes, historically paid less attention to concrete social realities of India and when they did, distorted it according to a vulgar reading of Marxism. When a philosophy of liberation degenerates to dogma, it replicates the powers that it

sought to displace in the first place, for it becomes a body of knowledge that constitutes new power relations.<sup>4</sup>

Personal narratives of the tribals, Dalits and the backward castes are not just stories, but also reflect specific empirical realities and are commentaries on the same. An imported text that is not innovatively read is devoid of it. If read dogmatically, in letter but not in spirit, such texts will always remain alien to the concerned oppressed subjects and remain a property of those that bought it in and be open to manipulation by a group of *elites*. Liberation is a philosophy of strength, not weakness. And faith in the invincibility of a text, in dogmatism, implies not strength, but its opposite. "How much one needs a faith in order to flourish, how much that is 'firm' and that one does not wish to be shaken because one clings to it, that is a measure of the degree of one's strength (or, to put the point more clearly, of one's weakness)" (Nietzsche, 1974, p. 374). Such a faith also stems from, if I might say so, a will to dominate, a desire to perpetuate authority, and a fear of the free-thinking, critical individual. And any political philosophy that bases its praxis on such a premise is doomed to totalitarianism.

### Particular Dangers

One must emphasize on the necessity to consciously de-emphasize the central role of a text for a successful liberatory praxis, especially in India. It is by the virtue of access to and interpretation of 'sacred texts' that a minority community of elites, the Brahmins, were able to grade their fellow human beings on the basis of a ritual hierarchy, of course, in collaboration with the upward and the upwardly mobile sections of those castes immediately below them. And it is always easy for an elite that controls a text to negotiate terms with another elite, even if the latter is against the interests of the vast majority of the populace over which the native elites presides. Colonialism in India and the collaboration of the brahmins in the initial periods is a perfect case. "Brahmanic texts, both vedic origin stories and the much later dharma texts of Hinduism's puranic period, provided transregional and metahistorical modes of understanding Indian society that clearly appealed to British colonial interests and attitudes" (Dirks, 1992, p. 6).

What got completely submerged in this process were the narratives of the rest, the Dalits, the tribals, and the various non-brahmin castes that were on the outskirts of brahminical discourses. Once *one* narrative was put across as *the* narrative, it was easy to push the others to the fringes, to look down on them as 'primordial' or 'premodern'. What was written on these sections, then, becomes what the master narrative and the masters of that narrative chose to write. Indeed, as Chinua Achebe points out "There is such a thing as absolute power over narrative. Those who secure this privilege for themselves can arrange stories about others pretty much where, and as, they like." (Achebe, 2000, p. 24)

It is this power over narrative that the CPI(M) and other communist leaders and intellectuals had that helped to successfully suppress the story of Marichjhapi, arguably, the largest state-

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<sup>4</sup> Foucault argues that "there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations." (Foucault, 1977, p. 27)

sponsored massacre of Dalits. That this happened in communist ruled West Bengal should not be a matter of irony. However, it is interesting to note that while anti-Dalit violence like what happened in Keezhvenmani, Tsundur, Karamchedu, or more recently in Khairlanji – all perpetrated by casteists from non-Brahmin groups – has entered mainstream discussion of caste violence, Marichjhapi has been largely ignored despite its proportion. A recent account, that painstakingly recounts the brutality through oral narratives of survivors, suggests that the toll may run into thousands (Halder, 2019).

Eric Selbin observes that “Traditionally, history has been constructed from above, composed by the victorious, orchestrated by the powerful, played and performed for the population” (Selbin, 2010, p. 9). The mythical characters of the Indian past that are referred to by the ‘mainstream’ Indian leftists in their writings happen to be those that figure in the brahminical texts. S.A. Dange had no issues in calling the Gita a materialist text whereas Subhas Chakravorty of the CPI(M) proudly claimed that he was a Hindu, a brahmin and a communist. Koteswar Rao alias ‘Kishenji’, the number 2 of the CPI(Maoist) who was also most known for the role he played in the Lal Garh agitation, referred to the Maoists as the Pandavas. I have mentioned before how the two opposing parties refer to the same Marxist-Leninist sources to oppose the other’s policies and to defend their own. The similarity in framing oppositional discourses also extends to their selection of aspects from the past. Yet, “There is another history, rooted in people’s perception of how the world around them continues to unfold and of their place in the process. This is a history informed by people’s ideologies, the views they have, and it reflects the context, material as well as ideological, of people’s everyday lives; a history revealed and articulated by the various instruments of popular political culture” (Selbin, 2010, p. 9).

Nissim Mannathukkaren is then right when he criticizes orthodox Marxism for ignoring the role of memory as a tool in the reconstitution of the present (Mannathukkaren, 2006, p. 17). I am inclined here to quote at large MSS Pandian’s reading of a Dalit intellectual’s framing of a counter-narrative to the logic of ‘civilization’ created by texts of the brahminical castes, “who rejects the civilisational claims and the teleology of modernity, and instead recuperates the past of lowly hill cultivators, hunters, fisherpeople, pastoralists, and the like as the high point of human achievement. He characterizes their social life as communal, with people pooling together and sharing food with a sense of equality, without much internal differentiation. Flow of history ceases to be civilising and Raj Gowthaman incites the dalits to step outside it... The need to reclaim what has been stigmatised is essential because that alone would end the self-hate that Indian modern has produced in the lower castes.” (Pandian, 2002, p. 6)

These pasts have no texts. Only stories. This leads us to exploring possible supplements to the organized texts.

### **The Story as Supplement**

The most common element in conventional politics is the creation of binaries. Modernity’s great contribution was the drawing of binary between fact and fiction, the former represented in that which is not fiction. And considering the value attached to that considered ‘truth’, all that deemed as fiction is condemned to the margins of the political. Rather than being an attempt to

analyze and realize reality in all its complexity “opposite values are an intellectual framework created by the mind to simplify reality, and as a result, the framework does not do justice to reality. The rich details and vast subtleties of the world cannot fit into two starkly separate categories” (Glenn, 2004, p. 5).

The body of knowledge that draws binaries is considered as infallible whereas the ‘unlettered’ narratives of varied experiences is looked down as unfit for serious politicking. A liberating praxis of resistance, I would argue, will need to go beyond simple binaries and attempt to absorb several narratives as a resource base for radical politics. Experiences are richer than texts as they are not just there, as being, but are in the process of becoming. This is where the story and the poem should enter politics, or those in politics should engage with stories. For what presides over stories, like poems, “is not the most lucid intelligence, the sharpest sensibility or the subtlest feelings, but experience as a whole” (Cesaire, 2010, p. 18).

Achebe notes that “Man is a story-making animal. He rarely passes up an opportunity to accompany his works and his experiences with matching stories” (Achebe, 2000, p. 59). I would like to use this opportunity to draw attention to the story of a resistance movement that was recently brutally crushed - the Tamil Eelam liberation struggle. Tamil popular culture has a tradition of venerating the dead in battle. The practice of installation of veerakal - symbolic stones to honour the fallen heroes of a community - was a celebrated practice among most subaltern classes. These stones are not just rallying points for the public, but they also become topics for emerging stories and oral narratives which became folk tales over the time. These tales got a new dimension with the onset of the Eelam liberation struggle. Frantz Fanon, writing on the articulation of national culture under colonial repression, points out that “oral literature, tales, epics, and popular songs, previously classified and frozen in time, begin to change. The storytellers who recited inert episodes revive them and introduce increasingly fundamental changes. There are attempts to update battles and modernize the types of struggle, the heroes’ names, and the weapons used. The method of allusion is increasingly used” (Fanon, 2004, p. 174).

In the course of the Eelam struggle led by the Tamil Tigers, the martyrs of the movement were honored annually on November 27th, the day that the first Tamil Tiger was killed in action - a tradition created from the 1980’s. When the Tigers were active, the day used to be marked with festivities in their strongholds. Several cultural groups used to stage street theatres and performances which expressed a collective memory of past resistance. Not always historically accurate, but again “to articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was’... It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger” (Benjamin, 1955, p. 257). The tombs of the slain Tiger cadres were revered as shrines, as veerakals, and analogies to past heroes were often drawn. The present modified the tales of the past, and the tales of the past aided the present struggle for a better future. Once the Sri Lankan government militarily defeated the Tigers, the army went on a systematic destruction and defacement of the Tamil martyrs’ graveyards and explicitly prohibited, with open threats of violence, the celebration of Heroes’ Day. The point was simple - they wanted no stories to be told. Fanon also points out how storytellers were targeted and arrested in colonial Algeria (Fanon, 2004, p. 174). The Eelam Tamil diaspora settled in many western countries continues to

celebrate Heroes' Day not just as a show of solidarity, but also to recount the experiences, the stories of the struggle.

According to Edward Said, stories “are the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history” (Said, 1994, p. xiii). Stories are usually more accessible than texts as they are undisciplined. They are not connected to an exclusive body of *knowledge*, but they emerge out of lived realities. While they are rooted in particular contexts, some stories of resistance have a far more universal relevance than is imagined. They have a far greater appeal in the day-to-day lives of the masses than the well-disciplined text, as a story is something that can be easily absorbed, modified, retold and passed on. The space for maneuver and adaptation makes it a potent device in resistance movements. Since stories are as comfortable in the oral as in the written, they are accessible to those outside the frameworks of literacy. And there is above all the possibility of human hope, “the conviction that stories are told so that they may be listened to elsewhere...” (Berger, 2008, p. 101).

I would like to rest my case by saying that while I do not reject the role of a well-researched text in a resistance movement, they cannot be the singular origin and destination of a liberatory movement, which defines it and justifies it. I, of course, do not endorse postmodernist nonsense that rejects the utility of Theory with a capital T. Indeed, without Ambedkar's theoretically rigorous output and the unified body of knowledge that he produced which provided a robust framework to understand caste, resistance to Brahminism would be impossible. Likewise, no understanding of capitalism is possible without the theoretical model that Marx carefully built. The purpose of this paper is only to understand strategies to supplement theoretical works in everyday practice, which considers ‘local’ and non-textual forms of knowledge. “We need to find a way to focus on the thoughts and feelings of people engaged in revolutionary processes, a perspective which binds the stories they convey of past injustices and struggles as they fight for the future” (Selbin, 2010, p. 9). The role of non-textual forms, particularly the story, needs to be reconsidered as they allow access to a greater number of the marginalized. After all, “in the final reckoning the people who will advance the universal conversation will be not copycats but those able to bring hitherto untold stories, along with new ways of telling” (Achebe, 2000, p. 83). This might be surprising to hear, but the perspective defended in this paper is fundamentally Hegelian.

**Acknowledgements:** An earlier version of this paper was presented at the ‘Conceptualizing Resistance’ conference at Jamia Millia Islamia in 2011.

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