1 ☀ A Longing for Freedom

The most revealing recent image of our global society was the picture of Chinese students in Beijing's Tiananmen Square rallying around a copy of the Statue of Liberty—a gift of the French sculpted to welcome to New York immigrants from many nations and cultures. The fact that the scenes were seen simultaneously on television screens in every part of the world, and that people of many different cultures and economic conditions reacted to the poignancy of the events, reinforced the universality.

Throughout the world there is a longing for democracy in the American and French revolutionary sense of men and woman able to control their own destinies and of open debate and freedom from fear. People everywhere saw parts of themselves in the pictures from Beijing.

Existing systems—whether the capitalist system in Western society, the Marxist system in Eastern Europe and China, or the caste system in India—are decaying. There is a universal pattern of conflict, taking different forms according to local conditions. The growth of social movements is an indication of this decay and conflict.

When the leaders of social movements speak of conflict, they do not mean the destruction of authority. They realize power is needed to regulate complex systems. For them confrontation is designed to expose invisible power: to force ruling groups to innovate and admit persons and issues previously excluded from the decision-making process.

Social movements have many names: the women's movement, the ecology movement, the peace movement, the democracy movement in China, the ethnic nationality movement in many parts of the Soviet Union, the antiapartheid movement in South Africa, the civil rights movement among blacks in the United States, and the wide variety of movements for better health and safety and a more equitable distribu-

tion of economic resources. The variety is misleading, for they all share a resistance to modern processes that have led to economic stagnation, ecological crisis, deepening deprivation amid increasing prosperity, and alienation manifested by racism, alcoholism, and drug addiction.

Alberto Melucci, a professor of sociology at the University of Milan in Italy, describes social movements as "laboratories in which new experiences are invented . . . to challenge the dominant codes of everyday life." He says they are different from traditional forms of collective action in that they have no universal plan of history:

> Contemporary social movements operate as signs, in the sense that they translate their actions into symbolic challenges to the dominant codes. . . . Collective action is a form whose models of organization and solidarity deliver a message to the rest of society. . . . Contemporary social movements stimulate radical questions about the ends of personal and social life, and in so doing, they warn of the crucial problems facing complex societies.

Social movements are radical but without the Marxist obsession with class and the struggle over production and distribution of goods. Activists are equally concerned with how society or a group generates and distributes information about itself and the surrounding structures.

In the West this is often carried too far: activists are so concerned with the larger problems of peace, the environment, and intellectual freedom that they are out of touch with—and at times antagonistic to—the bread and butter issues of factory and farm workers.

This is not true in India, where the social movement is concerned entirely with the poor. Its actors strive for immediately realizable benefits: a better place to live; improved medical care; more food and nurseries for children; and they don't expect this generation to be deprived for the promises of the future. The key word is empowerment: the poor must have rupees in their pockets so they are no longer bound to the local moneylender and landlord. The poor must also learn to shed the inferiority born of centuries of caste oppression and the belief in *karma* (inherited fate). Empowerment means ending hierarchies and bringing everyone into the decision-making process. A major characteristic is the high percentage of women as members and leaders. With their criticism of patriarchal oppression, women heighten the suspicion of hierarchy.

Sunita Narain: An Environmental Activist

Sunita Narain, coeditor of a four-hundred-page report on the state of the environment in India and codirector of the Center for Science and Environment in New Delhi, typifies the difference between the Indian approach to the environment and that of the West: Indian activists are concerned with the equitable use of the land, not with the mere preservation of beauty.

When I called on her at her office in New Delhi, she said she was twenty-five and had been in the environmental field for seven years and with the center for five years:

"In his early book, *Hind Swaraj*, Mahatma Gandhi said it took Britain half the world to feed itself. He asked: 'If India became like Britain, how many worlds would it need?' We quote that often. We don't have the rest of the world to rape, so we rape our own countryside. If you set up a paper mill, it wastes the entire forest around it, and the forest moves farther and farther away so now paper mills are going to the Northwest or the Andaman Islands to get supplies. The forests are disappearing, with a tremendous impact on the lives of the poor who live around them.

"For a long time people blamed the destruction of the forests on tribals or other village people who lived in or near the forests: especially blaming slash-and-burn cultivation. But that's unfair. When tribals and villagers used the forests, they made sure they were not destroyed: They collected only twigs, small branches, and dead wood. It's not they who have destroyed the forests; it's the market economy.

"We need to develop forests for three reasons: firstly, the ecological security of the watershed area: that is, to prevent erosion and the ensuing floods. Secondly, to meet the basic needs of people for things like fuel, fodder, thatch, and poles. Thirdly, to meet the cash needs of the people: that is, growing trees to earn money. Once the needs of the people are satisfied you can also use trees for commercial purposes, like making paper.

"So far our common resources of water, land, and forests have been controlled by the state structure, and they've made a complete mess of things. We've got water, but we haven't developed a system to trap it as it falls. There's too much centralization. People expect the state to provide them with water rather than have their own village *tank* (a word derived from Portuguese: any artificial pond or lake), making sure every family gets a share from it.

"In times of drought, when people are threatened with starvation because they can't buy food, we spend millions of rupees to employ them in building roads, so they'll have some cash. The money could be better used for projects to harvest water, like small check dams and tanks.

"Given the fact our society is caste ridden and corrupt, the question is: How can we transfer control to the people? We must rebuild village communities and also give women a voice in the management of these communities. Women are the vital element. When you talk about basic needs, you're talking about women. Unless you give women a voice, you'll never give the environment a voice. You can understand this if we start with the fact that the basic needs of a family are often seen only in terms of cash, which is held by the man, not the woman. But the man's priority can be completely different; he sees fuel as non-cash, something that's gotten free from the environment.

"Fuel is always the last thing bought with the family's supply of cash. Men will buy food, clothing, and maybe a radio, but they're seldom willing to spend money for fuel. It's a woman's job to go out and forage for it. If the surrounding trees are cut, the woman has to walk farther and farther and spend hours a day just to get fuel to cook a meal. A man is perfectly willing to cut and sell a tree to get cash, but a woman wants the trees nearby so she can collect twigs and leaves. Thus it's often the woman who cherishes and protects the environment, not the man."

The Paradox of Mahatma Gandhi

In India, as in the West, political theories based on charismatic leaders and institutionalized parties no longer have meaning. The belief that a particular individual can recognize and fulfill an historical process has been shown to be the starting point for political programs that, at best, have kept the poor in chains and, at worst, have led to violence and totalitarianism.

While social movement actors in the West quote the thoughts of Mahatma Gandhi and regard his nonviolent principles as meaningful for the nuclear age, Indian activists do not look to him for moral inspiration. The West sees Gandhi in terms of his abstract teachings, while modern Indians who are determined to change society see him in terms of his life.

He conceived nonviolent noncooperation as a process for breaking

the material and metaphysical chains of slavery, but he tied himself so closely to the interests of the ruling castes that he could not possibly put his beliefs into practice. As he confessed shortly before his death, the nonviolence practiced in India was mere pacifism willing to coexist with the traditional oppressive power structure.

It was through the instrumentality of Gandhi that power was transferred in India in what Antonio Gramsci called a "passive revolution." By this he meant a process presided over by established elites who use what are propagandized as revolutionary changes to maintain and consolidate a supremacy based on a narrow consensus that ignores most of the population except as cheering crowds in the background.

Gramsci, a man with a twisted spine that left him less than five feet tall and continually racked with pain, became the leader of the Italian Communist Party after World War I. He was arrested by the Fascists in 1926 and spent the rest of his life in prison, dying in 1937. Eric Hobsbawm in Britain called him "an extraordinary philosopher, perhaps a genius, probably the most original thinker of the twentieth century in Western Europe."

Most of Gramsci's thoughts are embedded in notes he wrote in the form of long letters from his prison cell. He never lived to work them into an ordered form. Although a Communist he, in effect, destroyed the theoretic basis of Marxism by asserting that cultural factors more than a preexisting economic formation are the basis of a "class" and that a class has to be constructed to be a politically active agent.

He also developed the concept of the "hegemony" of a civil society. By this he meant the predominance, obtained by consent rather than force, of a class or group over other classes. Hegemony is attained and exercised, according to Gramsci, by the many ways in which the educational, religious, and other institutions of society join, directly and indirectly, to form a common social-moral language separate from, although interlinked with, the coercive dominance of rulers.

Gramsci's theories help to explain the social movement process. Metamorphosis might be a better word: activists seek both continuity and change. Gramsci said society does not have one hegemonic center, but many. Social activists are trying to reshape all of the centers to develop a new, broad-based hegemony. Dropping the cant words, they seek participatory democracy based on consensus, even if given reluctantly, and not on pure force.

Examining the Process, Not Searching for Solutions

There is no way of knowing if social movements in India can be translated into a coherent political formation able to solve the country's many problems, so what follows is not a search for solutions. A journalist is primarily eyes and ears. This book is the product of a series of visits with actors in the social movement in the undramatic course of their daily lives as they experiment with projections for a more humane future. Neither is what follows a discourse on the convoluted politics of India, although contemporary realities will not be ignored: the experiments of social activists can be understood only in terms of the disintegrating social and economic structure that surrounds them.

Often described as the world's largest democracy, India in fact is a fledgling democracy on the order of Nigeria, the Philippines, or any of a score of Asian and African countries. Political practices that evolved in Europe over a matter of centuries were a response to a specific climate; it was unrealistic to expect the European plant to flourish in a different environment. As Satish Saberwal of Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University writes:

> Institutions designed after Western prototypes and implanted in the modern period are not layered deep in the Indian tradition. One should not take it for granted that the elements needed to sustain institutions of Western design would ordinarily be available to those located in every part of the Indian social and cultural milieu; and when persons formed in the less helpful of those milieus have to operate and, more generally, cope with these institutions, difficulties of some seriousness may reasonably be expected to arise. Political actors in contemporary India are heirs . . . to a variety of political traditions coming down from the precolonial period. . . . Such multiplicity of codes . . . tends to exact a heavy price.

Unlike European democracy, with its centralizing and codifying traditions of Greco-Roman society and the Roman Catholic Church, democracy in India is heir to what Saberwal describes as "interlinked webs of kinship, affinity, and clientship" that, especially under the Rajputs in the north, "functioned around a hierarchy of rulerships." The exercise of power in India has not been through strong dynasties and abstract principles of law or rights but through kinship, marriage, and ties between patron and client. This tradition of a multiplicity of claimants to power at all levels of society accounts for, in modern times,

the constant splintering of political parties and the rapid changes of personalities in state and central governments.

India lacks what de Tocqueville envisioned as an abstract force more binding than the outward institutions of power:

> A government retains its sway over a great number of citizens far less by the voluntary and rational consent of the multitude than by that instinctive, and to a certain extent involuntary, agreement which results from similarity of feelings and resemblances of opinion. I will never admit that men constitute a social body simply because they obey the same head and the same laws.

The defeat of Rajiv Gandhi—sardonically styled "The Promise that Failed"—and the Congress Party by alliances of disparate personalities and cliques in the November 1989 election was a result of this clawing for power. It did nothing to advance solutions to the nation's economic and social distortions. To the contrary, the emergence of the Hindu *Bharatiya Janata* (Indian People's) Party (BJP) as a major power broker presaged many years of bitter struggle over the body of secular democracy.

There are too many institutions in place to permit the dissolution of the existing union. Rather, the question is: What kind of an India will survive into the twenty-first century? Will it, like other fledgling democracies, be held together only by strong men or strong parties?

Indians themselves ask: What went wrong with the promised tryst with destiny?