

On Reasons for the State

Nirmalangshu Mukherji
Department of Philosophy
Delhi University

Abstract

Varieties of Marxists and Gandhians alike share the view that the State is an impediment to human freedom and justice. It is well-known that this is also the central point of departure for the libertarian-anarchist tradition which otherwise differs significantly from the Marxist tradition. Elimination of the State is thus a favoured option for a very large spectrum of (radical) political opinion. In this paper this option has been questioned from within the radical tradition. The viability of the State is not defended on statist grounds, but on grounds of radical demands on human freedom and justice themselves. It is argued that current radical priorities require the State since the elimination of the State currently favors anti-people forces of society.

The argument develops from Noam Chomsky's recent observation to the same effect. While Chomsky's thesis basically focusses on the conditions in the US and Western Europe, and is thus squarely concerned with the familiar aspects of global capitalism extensively documented in the radical press, the present paper makes an attempt to defend the thesis in the Indian context. Instead of harping exclusively on the features of global capitalism, attention is drawn to massive failures of law and order in large and apparently disjoint sectors of the polity. The nature of this lawlessness is carefully analysed and is linked to simultaneous loss of people's rights and freedom. This linking rules out the possibility, incorrectly entertained in various radical circles, that growing lawlessness is a sign of emerging change in social order in favour of the people. Just the opposite seems to be true. Various indicators with selective examples are discussed to

bolster the argument. Some suggestions have been made as to where more in-depth work is needed to examine these issues.

Introduction

Two apparently disjoint facts are beginning to characterize the nature of Indian politics. First, there is the general fact of widespread growth in the criminalisation of politics which is eating into the very foundations of legislative institutions across the board. It is thwarting people's participation in these institutions and, as a result, it is leading to a progressive withdrawal of the limited welfare functions once performed by these institutions. The second fact is a more specific one. The situation in most of the North-East is explosive in that vast masses of land and people are basically left to fend for themselves in the face of unprecedented violence and collapse of civic machinery. Apparently, the only visible outcome of this chaos, again, is widespread suffering of common people.

Both have been present for a long time. However, they have rapidly grown in extent over the last decade. Since both involve massive deterioration of law and order in their respective sectors, people have voiced concern; but the roots of them have not been adequately examined either in the mainstream media or in more scholarly journals. Moreover, I find no evidence of any attempt to understand them *together*. This is because, it seems to me, the following line of thinking prevails in the media.

These two facts are taken to be disjoint because criminalization of the election system does not seem to have any direct bearing on the phenomenon of insurgency. Their locales are disjoint; so are the characters involved in them. Thus it is thought that, if anything, they ought to be understood separately. In any case, each of them looks like a fairly restricted phenomenon: criminalization is basically concentrated in Bihar and eastern U.P and the North-East covers just a handful of parliamentary constituencies. The rest of the country seems alright under these considerations.

When a political phenomenon, akin to geological phenomenon such as earthquakes, occupies vast regions it often matures unevenly over the regions. Crucial symptoms begin to appear at the most mature places often geographically disconnected with each other; different properties surface at different times in differing conditions. It is the task of political thinking to grasp the general phenomenon before it fully appears. It is well-

known that the ability to intervene goes hand in hand with the ability to understand in advance.

It seems to me that despite many specific dissimilarities, the facts cited above bring out two general points: (a) they occupy the translucent area between lawful and lawless activities with growing lawlessness in both; (b) as noted, vast masses of people are faced with loss of rights and even livelihood even if some of the activities are launched in the name of the people. There are other related features of these facts which we will describe as we proceed. Is there a connection between the two? In my opinion, the role of the state is centrally involved in these matters. So I begin with the concept of state I have in mind.

Reasons for the State

I will basically hold on to the somewhat commonsensical idea that the state is a system of institutions which formulates a set of laws to be enforced over a given region. When the laws are fundamentally changed, the old state collapses and a new one comes into being as new institutions develop to form and enforce a new set of laws. This does raise the chicken-and-egg problem; but so does any other notion of state.

The definition leaves much room for gradual change. When the system of institutions are tightly woven together with some super-institution monitoring the tightness, there is very little room for gradual change. However in a large set-up of institutions, each institution will enjoy a degree of autonomy and will accommodate some change without immediately affecting the functioning of other institutions. The degree and the quantum of autonomy will obviously depend on the 'distance' from the centre of power.

This conception of the state is consistent with the Marxist conception that the state represents the interests of the ruling classes. The laws which the state formulates and enforces via its system of institutions are such that, in the long run and on the whole, they are heavily tilted in favor of certain classes. So the Marxist picture also requires that the state be viewed primarily as a law-enforcing system, albeit serving the interests of specific interest groups. Given that laws are enforced, and not obeyed out of love, some amount of lawlessness will always prevail depending upon the reach and the efficacy of the enforcing institutions; the state might even encourage certain lawlessness especially if it directly serves the interests of the ruling classes. In a capitalist system, industrial

tycoons are routinely allowed to get away without paying taxes; the judicial and the police systems routinely harass the working masses. But typically, laws (with their loopholes) are so framed as to achieve these ends in any case. So it follows that massive lawlessness is not in the interest of the state, whatever be the specificity of that interest. If there is a massive failure of law and order, we ought to conclude, other things being equal, that the state is beginning to collapse.

The Elimination of the State

In a recent conversation¹, Noam Chomsky makes the startling suggestion that the current task for radical democratic movements is to *uphold* the state. The suggestion is startling since it comes from an anarchist libertarian activist who has devoted his life to resist repression and other encroachments on freedom which are routinely justified for reasons of state, and for whom the preferred model of human organization has always been the autonomous small community free from any control from the outside. What is the argument then for rechanneling radical priorities *for* reasons of state?

Apart from Chomsky's personal history, the suggestion is problematic on other grounds as well. Those of us whose political opinion has been largely shaped by a combination of Marxist and Gandhian conceptions of social organization have always viewed the state as an impediment to human freedom. The state, viewed as a system of institutions, always favors certain interest groups and it thus formalizes and enforces inequality among people. For any egalitarian goals then the state must go. Chomsky is suggesting that this issue be reexamined afresh.

Let me try to develop a unified approach to this problem so that we do not get embroiled in partisan discourse. Marx and Gandhi differ quite radically about how this task of the elimination of the state is to be approached. They also differ substantially about much else: for example, they differ in their conceptions of the human individual and the concept of freedom to be embraced. I do not wish to enter these issues since they have been discussed at length.

Despite these differences, maybe there are deeper points of convergence between Marx and Gandhi which lie as yet submerged under partisan discourse and is hindering a unity of democratic forces. In my view, at least some of the disagreements between Marx and

Gandhi may be traced to Marx's conception that the first step for the elimination of the state is to overpower the current state with alternative social forces. There are at least two problems with this requirement of Marxist theory. First, the alternative state seems to impose new forms of control on freedom and it actually inhibits any further process towards the elimination of (as opposed to disintegration of particular) states. There is no doubt that there is significantly more space for the elimination of the state in the United States in the form of radical political dissent than in the erstwhile Soviet Union or in contemporary China. This holds despite the fact that the Soviet Union itself has disintegrated into a number of states: it will be wishful thinking to expect that the disintegration of Soviet Union is a step towards the elimination of fragmented states.

The second, closely related, problem with Marxist theory is that the intermediate step looks largely redundant. If the aim of radical democratic movement is to achieve freedom from all forms of control, why should one settle for an intermediate form of control as a necessary step towards that end? I am aware that complicated responses are available to this objection from within the framework of Marxist theory. Nevertheless, the historical experience has been that a radical democratic movement must encompass a large body of otherwise fragmented social groups down to the level of local communities. No democratic movement has a chance of success unless the movement is able to develop a cooperative structure with all these social groups. No notion of a *proletariat*, even when extended beyond its original explanatory use, and, hence, no notion of a proletarian revolution and proletarian dictatorship can capture the demands of large-scale democratic movements.

It stands to reason then that such a movement ought to aim immediately for a realization of the cooperative autonomy of each such social group; in other words, the movement ought to directly aim for the elimination of the state. For example, when Gandhi talks of the village as the ideal unit of social formation, he certainly does not have in mind the current state-controlled, inequality-ridden and unjust formations rather haplessly occupying the periphery. The village is a metaphor for the free local formations in cooperative engagement with each other. The task for the democratic movement right now is to establish such villages all at once. This is an ideal the seeds of which Gandhi thought, perhaps erroneously, to be already available in the current state of the village.

Chomsky would have certainly endorsed this picture in his earlier writings²; he would endorse it now as well but under severe qualifications. Ultimately, I think, Marx also would have endorsed this picture though he would have differed in his conception of the village given the eurocentric framework within which he was working³. Maybe one could begin with this central and agreed opposition to the state (between Marx, Gandhi, and earlier Chomsky) and work from there. Apparently, Chomsky's current suggestion seems to inhibit the very project. Still, in support of Chomsky, I think there are reasons to rethink the entire issue of the elimination of the state. In fact there are rather compelling reasons for the continuation of the state.

Faulty Assumptions

As a starter, let us try to describe how we used to visualize the ideal unfolding of events which was supposed to lead to the elimination of the state. Democratic opposition to the state, we thought, will slowly weaken its institutions including, hopefully, its institutions of repression. This will create more space for larger and more intense opposition and set examples for the hitherto silent social groups. The state will have to react by a simultaneous program of compromise with increasingly larger groups of the opposition while diverting its resources to the institutions of repression to smash the most rebellious rest. As repression increases in selective sectors, pacifying institutions--collectively labeled 'welfare institutions'--begin to lose their credibility creating unrest among the social groups hitherto friendly to the state. At a certain point in this unsustainable program, the state begins to withdraw itself from what it takes to be the 'dispensable' sectors and new cooperative forms of organization emerge there. This has a domino effect on the adjacent sectors: more sectors join the movement until the state diminishes beyond visibility. The picture can be improved with various details; but, although people do not talk about these things, it does seem to capture, in a nutshell, the political imagination that underlies much of radical thinking and activism.

If I understand Chomsky's recent position, there are serious problems with the picture just sketched. There are at least two underlying assumptions which need to be questioned. First, the picture assumes that there is *an absence of a third party* in the sense that it is uncritically assumed that the real confrontation is between the state and the people.

Second, the preparation of the withdrawal of the state from a given political space is assumed to be simultaneous with the preparation of the resisting people to occupy that space. Both the assumptions hinge on the idea that it is in nobody's interest--except the people--that the state be eliminated.

Chomsky is arguing that there is a powerful element, distinct from the state and the people, whose current interests are also served with the weakening and the ultimate elimination of the state. Chomsky is reporting largely on conditions in the United States and parts of Western Europe. Summarizing and simplifying lengthy empirical argumentation, the situation, according to Chomsky, is roughly as follows.

The growth of global capitalism over the last century has resulted in such a concentration of wealth and power that capitalism no longer needs the façade of the state to ensure its growth. Personal institutions of capitalism--the corporations, the private think tanks, the chambers of commerce etc.--are entirely totalitarian fiefdoms, not answerable to any public forum at all. By now, these institutions are so entrenched in the institutions of the state--primarily by installing its own personnel--that the state serves their interest to the hilt. Moreover, and perhaps more significantly, these institutions of capitalism have developed enormous flexibility in their operations such that they are not dependent on the machinery of *particular* states. This comes from their transnational ownership, offshore operations, global transfer of capital, and the like. In brief, they do not need to 'manufacture consent' anymore to push their activities through; they can push them either through sheer autocratic power or by a complete control over popular opinion-making. The classical state, with its layers of democratic institutions, is then largely dispensable for global capitalism.

In fact, in many cases, the functions of the classical state, with its 'debating societies', is a clear hindrance. Thus, almost every form of public institution in which there is a semblance of democratic participation is an object of virulent ridicule in the mainstream media. These include graphic reports on sexual and corrupt practices of the local councilor to the apparently chaotic functioning of the General Assembly. On the other hand, there is constant deification of the moguls of capitalism and those public institutions, such as the Pentagon and the Security Council, which directly serve its interests and are fiefdoms themselves. From all this, Chomsky concludes that the

remnants of the institutions of the state are probably the last platforms for the democratic participation of people. Hence, at least for now, the elimination of the (classical) state is *not* in the interest of the people.

Before we return to the Indian scene, I wish to highlight some general points of the argument to distinguish them from the features which are specific to the United States. First, although the modern democratic state continues to cater primarily to the interests of the elites, the state need not be *identified* with those interests; hence, the space, however tiny, for people's democratic participation. Rigid conceptions such as 'bourgeois state' miss this point. Second, since the modern state offers the *only* democratic space for the people by dint of its history of manufacturing consent, local organizations outside the state are likely to turn undemocratic when faced with various forms of intervention by essentially anti-people forces.

In other words, local organizations of people are not likely to be able to compete successfully for any political space outside the state. It is in the interest of the anti-people forces therefore to isolate and thereby *control* local organizations of people. In the United States, this anti-people role is essentially played by the institutions of global capitalism in opposition to the state. In other regions, the identity of these forces may not be so historically scrutable although they may be *indirectly* linked to the institutions of global capitalism in various complex ways, as we will see.

Fragmented Spaces

I will now try to relate parts of this picture to the Indian scene. What follows is essentially a selective list of facts which seem to me to throw light on the theoretical issues just sketched. To that end, I will gradually develop a general pattern from these facts. Needless to say the facts listed below are far from exhaustive.

The people are by now almost irreversibly fragmented into a very large and complex collection of local, community-wide formations. The scale and the complexity of this phenomenon is only superficially captured in (a) the emergence of a plethora of political parties and organizations often exclusively centered around a single individual, and (b) a parallel and rapid disillusionment with the hitherto centrist parties. While the inevitable jostling for limited political space mounts, there are signs of open hostility between these

local formations themselves: tribal against tribal, dalit against dalit, tribal against dalit, dalit against women, women against dalit, and so on.

So, in some ways, the first stage for the elimination of the monolithic state is indeed taking place in the very fragmentation of political space, thus allowing local formations to grow. No doubt there are new voices, new claims on history and, in general, a growing re-assertion of human dignity. The question is whether it is necessarily leading to the fulfillment of the *democratic* aspirations of people in securing progressively more equality, justice and freedom. The answer, as I will attempt to document, is largely in the negative.

One, perhaps superficial, indicator of this deep problem is the dismal failure of successive United Front formations to sustain themselves on a national scale. One would have thought that the rising local forces will forge a democratic unity among themselves and something like the United Front will represent this unity. The thought turned out to have weak foundations although, despite the BJP phenomenon and the current rise of the Congress, it is quite clear that the failure of UFs did not pave the way for earlier centrist formations. The political space thus remains fragmented.

The emergence of fragmentation has not led to a re-assertion of what may be termed 'people's issues'; in fact, these issues are consistently sidelined as local formations apparently rise. I have in mind issues like land reform, judicial reform, health care, education and prices: particularly, land reform. Thus the main pillars of structured inequality not only remain stable, their removal is not even in the political agenda of the various local organizations that claim to represent local dignity.

At least for the last two decades there has been no wide-scale working class movement, no significant peasant uprising, nothing comparable to the food movement of the '60s. This is not because there has been any amelioration on these counts--just the opposite in fact; but because the very democratic basis for these movements has lost the power to unite. Whose interests does this loss of power serve?

The strikes are now seen only in the service sector: postal workers, nurses, teachers, safai karmacharis, and the like. Most of these fizzle out as soon as they begin with little or no gain in the limited economic demands they raise. This contrasts sharply with the strikes organized by big traders, transport-owners etc. These strikes grow rapidly, affect

the functioning of the state and of individual citizens at vital points, and are quickly rewarded.

It is still held in some quarters that these facts only highlight the growth and the stranglehold of the ‘bourgeois state’ over people. Facts, however, seem to suggest just the opposite. We witnessed a rapid expansion of the state, say, upto the mid-‘70s. A centrist party was in absolute power, the judicial and the electoral systems infiltrated much of the countryside, state-funded institutions including industrial, financial and educational institutions showed exponential growth, the police and the army expanded and spread. This was also the period when mass movements in various sectors increased both in depth and extent.

The period *since*, in contrast, may easily be viewed first in terms of the stagnancy and then as a progressive withdrawal of the state. The Public Sector, both industrial and financial, is a salient case. While there has hardly been any growth in this sector (except, for obvious reasons, in the telecommunication area), many organizations have either disintegrated or have been passed on to the private sector. Roughly the same is true of health care and education. Even the repressive and the bureaucratic arms of the state have shrunk. Obviously detailed empirical argumentation needs to be marshaled here; I am just sketching what seems to me to be the overall picture⁴.

Therefore, on the whole, the dissipation of democratic movements correlates at least with the halt of the state, *not* with its growth. Given the fractured and uncertain nature of governance in this decade, it would have been difficult for the state, other things being equal, to repress any large-scale democratic movement such as the Rail strike of 1974. Yet there is a strong feeling that other things are not equal, that the conditions are such that such movements cannot even be contemplated.

This brings us closer to Chomsky’s point. The period in which we witness almost a simultaneous withdrawal of the state *and* of people’s movements is also the period of unprecedented growth of private enterprise in almost every sector. Apart from industry, finance, real estate, communication and entertainment sectors, there has been a massive entry of private capital in the areas of health, school and technical education. Even higher education has not been spared. ‘Trust’-based colleges and Universities are coming up on a daily basis. Private research institutions and other think tanks supposedly geared to

development, environment, public policy and the like (quite brazenly called ‘NGOs’⁵) are beginning to create the model for what academic activity ought to look like. Each of these is a fiefdom with no public accountability and most of them are directly linked to global capital. Alongside, there is the standard denunciation of public institutions and a deification of the private in the mainstream media.

It will not be an exaggeration to suggest that once the state was used by the elites for several decades to create a market of roughly 200 million people, private capital has taken over much of the functions of the state for this market whence the rest of the 700 million people can simply be dispensed with. The utter failure of democratic movements to resist this phenomenon gives weight to the central theme of this essay.

No doubt there has been a substantial growth in the civil rights movement over the past decade. Organizations such as PUCL and individuals such as Kavita Srivastava immediately come to mind. This has been one of the most promising developments in recent years: someone is trying bravely to occupy the vacant space *for* the people. In that sense, this movement is doing what the state ought to have done; that is, protecting the people from structured but *unlawful* repression by upholding the laws of the state. But the same is true of the conditions in the United States which otherwise supports Chomsky’s point. A quick look at the location and the characters involved in this highly-fragmented movement suggests that it offers at best a human face to the massive loss of people’s freedom without any visible ability to either launch or link-up with large democratic movements. Moreover, it is well known that the civil rights organizations are a ‘fall-back’ refuge for many radical activists who have found themselves isolated from more direct democratic action otherwise. In that sense, the civil rights movement is a symptom of the absence of large-scale mass movements. Roughly the same is true of the movements geared to the environment.

In general then, the three dimensions of Chomsky’s story are individually visible in the Indian scene as well: the weakening of the state and the creation of an empty space thereof, people’s inability to occupy that space, and the emergence and the ability of other elements to enter it. Nevertheless, the picture sketched so far is somewhat impressionistic and, therefore, tenuous. Despite explosive growth, the political role of private capital, at least in direct and open institutional forms, is still fairly limited in India

such that its survival and growth continuous to be parasitical on the institutions of the state. Moreover, it is not at all clear how the growth of private capital in fact inhibits democratic movements although these links are fairly clear in the case of the United States. In the Indian context then, some further anti-people elements are needed to explain the shrinking political space for democratic movements.

Rule of the Gun

This takes us back to the two phenomena mentioned in the beginning. Consider first the current election scene. Theoretically, the holding of elections and ensuring people's participation in it are paradigmatic functions of the state. In practice what happens is infinitely more complex. In a 'bourgeois state' such as the United States, the game is roughly clear: elections are really activities of the state to 'manufacture consent' in favor of the representatives of global capital. Hence, it was important to ensure participation of the people upto a point; it is no longer so important since consent need not be manufactured anymore. Elections in the United States are clearly a farce.

In the Indian case, again at least upto the mid-'70s (which seems to me to be a watershed period in Indian politics critically marked by the imposition of Emergency), elections no doubt served a similar purpose but there was ample space in the process for various progressive and radical forces to engage in it. This accounts for the significant presence, at all levels of legislature, of genuine representatives of the people, often from the Left--a phenomenon that is unthinkable in the case of the United States and most of Western Europe.

This situation has drastically changed over the last decade. It is well known that elections are now determined largely at the local level. Except perhaps in some urban areas, national and even regional issues do not play any major role. Notwithstanding their propaganda, political parties understand this very well. The problem they face in each constituency is this: who is most capable of securing the votes of several hundred thousand people? The cynical answer that has emerged is: one who controls them. A guaranteed method of controlling several hundred thousand people is to control their economic lives. Two conditions need to be satisfied: (a) there be some homogeneity in their economic lives such that control over this homogenous zone (or some combination

of them) ensures control over people; and (b) no other force is allowed to compete for the same zones.

It follows that fragmented formations of people--be it in the name of caste, tribe, creed, language, color, habitat, festivals, icons, memories, whatever--supply exactly the domain of control insofar as these roughly coincide with homogenous economic lives. As a matter of fact, in much of the Indian context, they often *do* roughly coincide. It follows as well that, since the state, in the absence of institutionalized private capital, represents about the only alternative force, much of the mechanisms of control need to be developed outside and in opposition to the state.

I must hasten to add that the actual mechanisms of control are likely to be more complex. For example, it is not clear that fragmentations based on caste lines do actually coincide with a homogenous economic activity. It is quite possible, and indeed the case quite often, that a given caste category may be distributed over heterogeneous economic spheres, while disjoint caste categories occupy a given economic zone. And, of course, the situation varies over a wide spectrum as regions change. Abstracting away from much of the complexity, I am trying to draw attention to two central points:

- (a) in a *local* context such as a village or a group of them, such identification can always be made even if tentatively and somewhat artificially; the local lords know how to exploit and give some ideological shape to the inherent inequalities in a village system.
- (b) in any case, all one needs is to find categories which are smaller than the categories of, say, 'middle peasant', 'landless peasant', 'unskilled worker', 'bonded labor', 'women', and the like, since these are essentially heterogeneous categories in the sense under discussion here.

Notice that both the points are simultaneously satisfied by the fact that constant re-alliances are attempted on the basis of ever finer and newer caste, creed or other *subcategories*.

It is natural then that the election system will increasingly depend on whoever is able to marshal the conditions just stated. Therefore, it is not at all surprising, given the primary fact of the withdrawal of the state, that massive unlawful organizations (coal-mafia, sand-mafia, stone-mafia, wood-mafia, tenduleaf-mafia, land-mafia, road-mafia,

sugar-mafia, rice-mafia, and, above all, arms- and narcotics-mafias) are able to operate more or less freely. Hence, as we go down the legislative structures from the national to the local, the prospective legislatures are either themselves leaders of the mafia or are closely linked with them. In reality, the situation is even more complex and shifting. For example, I have largely ignored the role of various arms of the state itself (its executives, police, judiciary) which help in the strengthening of these unlawful activities; thus they weaken or force withdrawal of the state by using it. Again, it may turn out that in certain regions, such as pockets of Bihar and, increasingly, of Maharashtra, what goes by the name of 'state' is already a conglomeration of mafia such that the presence and the use of parts of the erstwhile state machinery need not signal presence of the state itself⁶.

But the general point is already available in ghastly transparency: there is a close link between the fragmentation and the control of people, the inefficacy and the gradual withdrawal of the state and the widespread criminalization of politics. The prime motivation for access to state power is to enlarge the bases of private fiefdoms and thus weaken the state itself. In this, the general picture matches that of the United States. The differences lie in the specificities of the mechanism of control. Groups of people are mobilized and isolated from the rest on the basis of fragmented ideology. Then the isolation is linked to their livelihood. Then a combination of false leadership and sheer muscle power is used to drive them to the ballot box.

Once the process expands, we will expect it to cover vast regions--much larger than a single constituency--under suitable conditions of history and geography. The North-East, in my view, exhibits one extreme form of this expansion. In a dynamics in which the gradual weakening of the state coincides with expanding control over people, there comes a point where the last vestiges of the state are no longer needed. In this scenario, the rule of the gun is able to exercise so much power that it aims at once to dissociate itself from the state and establish complete fiefdom.

It is quite likely that the process begins with genuine democratic aspirations of the people, including its aspiration to secede from the coercive parent state and establish its own. Suitable conditions of history display largely the coercive face of the state, while suitable conditions of geography allow the scope for large-scale resistance. The North-East directly exhibits both in a vast scale.

Under genuine democratic leadership, this might in fact flower into a people's state. It all depends on how and on what basis the initial movement is formed. If it is based on land reform and popular control over habitat, some or other version of the classical scenarios unfolds. If it is based on ethnic categories, it is more likely to develop along the lines sketched above. Faced with repression from the state, the people get rapidly fragmented into subcategories and are brought under the complete control of various gun-toting leaders. Given the geography, the process gets linked to various *international* mafia, increasing thus its muscle-power over the people and its ability to pursue a state in retreat. The original idea of a people's state vanishes into a conglomeration of fiefdoms at war with each other.

Much of the North-East vividly illustrates this scenario. In the states of Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram, given the homogeneity of its people, the repressive institutions of the state have already become largely ineffective with the result that much of the remnants of the resources of the state actually feed into anti-state operations. Elections are a complete farce and parallel systems of administration, largely geared to collection of 'tax' from the people, function openly. Given vast links to international smuggling channels, a number of fiefdoms are already in existence. The neighboring states of Assam and Meghalaya are rapidly following suite along the path sketched in this paper. There is large-scale fragmentation of people along tribal, religious and linguistic lines. Fiefdoms in the name of 'liberation armies' are rapidly forming with the usual enforcement of parallel 'tax' collection⁷.

Concluding Remarks

In the plains of rural Bihar and in the hills and the valleys of the North-East vast masses of people are losing control on their lives and freedom as they lose their access to the state. These are the telling forms--already in view--of a much larger phenomenon whose presence maybe increasingly felt in other parts of the country as well: Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, parts of Tamil Nadu, and the like.

In the light of what we saw, the reemergence of centrist parties and 'absolute majorities' in some of these regions last mentioned need not reassure us about the restoration of classical forms of political participation of people. If we look closely at the actual operation of these 'centrist' parties down to the individual legislator, it turns out

that they are composed largely of small fiefdoms centred around an individual who is forever ready to join whoever pays him the highest price. Similarly, except maybe in some of the urban sectors, we need not make too much of the so-called ‘anti-incumbency’ factor⁸; otherwise, it will be difficult to explain the reappearance of so many individuals in new ‘incumbencies’ who were thrown out due to the ‘anti-incumbency’ factor just a while ago.

There has been a long concern about why the left movement in India failed to expand beyond its original locations. In the academic circles, this failure is traced either to the ‘obsolete’ nature of Marxism or to some peculiarities of what is called ‘Indian Culture’. It is obvious that the explanatory value of these suggestions rapidly diminishes the moment we seek clarifications on ‘Marxism’ and ‘Indian Culture’. In what we have seen above, we have a direct explanation of the phenomenon. If the left movement is to function as a people’s movement in opposition to the state, it must force the withdrawal of the state and occupy the resulting vacancy. There is no such vacancy outside their zones of influence; hence there is no occupation. Currently, therefore, as Chomsky has suggested, the only option for the Left movement is to help people consolidate their control over the *existing* democrating platforms of the state by resisting local, largely anti-people, fiefdoms.

People, in their helpless isolation, generally understand the point. They join the local formations with the sole expectation that their access to the resources of the state will increase: jobs, education, health care, security, financial assistance, civil rights, and the like. For well-known historical reasons, parts of which have been sketched in this essay, the Indian state has failed to create institutions with sufficient reach where these expectations will be directly met. Hence the people are forced to congregate under a local label of caste, religion, language and the like. They are compelled to do this under a ‘leader’, who seems to have the only visible access to these resources, to bargain with the state for this assembled voice. Since the Left movement has failed to assume this leadership, it has passed on, with the collusion of the agents of the state, to the agents of the mafia; hence, to forces outside the state. The sole task for the Left movement then is to bring the state back to the people.

Notes and References

¹ *Class Warfare*, Pluto Press, London, 1996. These are conversations with David Barsamian. See *Powers and Prospects*, South End Press, Boston, 1999; *The Common Good*, Odonian Press, Berkley, 1999; *Talking About A Revolution*, South End Press, Boston, 1998 for more on these topics.

² See, for example, *For Reasons of State*, Fontana/Collins, Glasgow, 1973; *World Order: Old and New*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1995 etc.

³ It is not at all clear to me that Chomsky is also working within this framework. His frequent references to the communes in Spain or the *Kibutzs* in Israel as ideal forms of social formations do not quite fit with the descriptions of the Paris commune fondly recommended in the Marxist tradition. The topic is beyond the scope of this paper.

⁴ Thus we need to look at the actual numbers: yearly sector-wise ratio of employment in the public sector versus the private, the ratio of sector-wise investment, the increase in the diversification of the decreasing resources of the state to directly serve the elites in the private sector (e.g., the nature and growth of the telecom sector, the railways and other transportation sectors), the selective growth of financial services, the growth of the police and the military per designated unit of population, the diversion of limited and decreasing 'security services' to fewer people and thus to the elites, and so on. Supposing that these are some of the measures for deciding whether the state is shrinking or expanding, I am assuming that these indices will support the point made in the text. Thanks to Indiver Kamtekar for raising these points.

⁵ Thus, without discounting the fine efforts of some NGOs, I am voicing the very recent concern about the unprecedented proliferation of dubious NGOs in various sectors of common life.

⁶ Recall that the state is identified with a system of institutions enforcing laws. Therefore, if the machinery of the state is used to foster lawlessness, it follows either that a new state has come into being or that the old state is crumbling without creating a new one. It is obvious that only the second option is currently available. Much of this is illustrated by the recent conflict between the Naxalites and the Ranavir Sena in Bihar. Unfortunately, a detailed examination of this conflict will take me much beyond the general thrust of this

paper. I am indebted to Rustam Singh and Badri Narayan Tiwari for exchanges on this issue.

⁷ See the report on the rapid expansion of various armed groups, typically as ‘liberation armies’, in Assam, *The Statesman*, January 21, 1998.

⁸ Viz., that people are able to collectively express their disenchantment with the existing governments by voting them out of power.