

The Virtues and Failings of my Marxist Father that Shaped my Personal and Political

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One of my earliest memories related to politics is from the day the results for the 2004 Lok Sabha elections were declared. Not many had expected the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party to lose, but it did. More significantly, or so it felt back then, the Left parties had won 62 seats - their best showing ever.

Mobile phones were still a luxury item back then, but the landline in our house kept buzzing with increasing frequency late into that evening. My trade unionist father would exalt “Laal Salaam, Laal-e-Laal” on picking up the phone, instead of the customary “hello”. I might have heard the greeting on a few occasions prior to that, but didn’t quite make sense of it. That day, however, the gusto in my father’s voice told me that to him, it was more than just a way to congratulate his comrades.

The episode stands out for me for more than one reason. Still in my early teens, an unexpected election result and the drawing room frenzy around it meant that I would start reading the first page of the newspaper and not skip to the sports page straightaway. This was the initiation of my interest in politics of the country.

More importantly though, that election result put in contrast, the thankless and regardless nature of the politics my father toiled in. He started as a trade union activist soon after he started working as a medical representative in the mid-80s and did not take a single promotion till he retired in 2018, so that he does not have to give up on his activism for being part of the company management. Being a Leftist trade union leader in the Hindi heartland, in an increasingly liberalised economy, meant that his politics would not reward him with much electoral success or societal clout. His excitement after the 2004 election results, therefore, was evident.

However, my politics has been shaped more by the way he remained committed to his ideology despite such favourable outcomes being few and far between. In today’s India, where communal hatred, corporate dominance and high-handedness of the state machinery make headlines every day, the example of an

unwavering spirit of resistance that he sets, keeps me from plunging into an abyss of despair.

In my adolescent years though, I was yet to fathom the depth of the relevance of his politics. I do not know whether he did so purposefully, but my father never quite canonised me into Marxism. But, he did not need to and what I picked up from the way he went about things, helped me carve out the ideology on my own.

For example, his most pronounced political posturing within the four walls of our home was probably the fact that he was a declared atheist. The Bengali in him would get excited during Durga Puja, but only to the extent of planning the pandal hopping and sumptuous meals during the festivities. The fact that he made the festival all about social gatherings and quality family time was enough for me to reject the concept of an omnipresent, omnipotent force that needs to be held in reverence.

To give another instance of how he would sow seeds of political thought in me, I remember the time when he helped me with a chapter in my Social Science book on developing nations. After explaining a part of the chapter that dealt with institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, he asked me what developing countries should do to overcome their dependence on such bodies. The question was not part of the textbook, and was a rather difficult one for a student of Class 6. But, his motive I believe was not to get a correct answer. He himself probably did not have a definitive answer. However, in hindsight, I feel he sparked the idea in me that third world countries could and should look beyond the World Bank and the IMF.

The point being that a lot of what I acquired from his political positions did not have to be passed on formally. I do not know if this can be classified into any theory of parenting, and arguably he was not aware either, but we managed to build a relationship that seamlessly helped in forming the core of my political consciousness.

The fact that he did not take a promotion throughout his professional career meant that we always had sufficient, but never enjoyed plenty. Our family did not have a car, or an air-conditioner, and we would not go for as many vacations as many of my friends did. But, as my father spent his time beyond work drafting memorandums and pamphlets or held street corner meetings on Sundays instead of taking me for a weekend outing, I somewhere knew that this was for the “larger good”. I felt vindicated years later when I came across Marx’s quote: “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs”.

The bedrock of Marxism is made of contradictions and the use of dialectics to resolve them. Through my adulting years, I realised that the failings of my father as a parent played an equal, if not more prominent role, in shaping many of my traits, and as a result affected my worldview.

For all the progressive ideas that were encouraged in my home, it was and continues to be an extremely patriarchal household. My father would take all the major decisions of the family, and from what I gathered, it was the same when my grandfather was the patriarch before he retired from his job. As is often embedded in male dominance, the tool to exert their influence was fear. My actions as a child would often be governed by the thought of what my father would say about them. While that’s quite common in sub-continent households, the conflicts started to emerge as I grew up to be a young adult and sought my own agency.

It started with my father asking me to not participate in as many extra-curricular activities in school as I would have liked to. He feared that these activities would act as a distraction for my studies. Meanwhile, I felt way more fulfilled for winning a debate competition than scoring well in my examinations. Often, I had to lie to my parents to represent my school in such activities. To the extent that on one such occasion, I won a quiz competition, but could not show them the prize I had won, because I never told them I went for the event.

A couple of years later, after I feared poor scores in my Class 10 pre-board examination, I ran away from home, went to the Kolkata office of the newspaper we used to subscribe to, and asked the editor to give me a job. I was 16 and

looking back it seems as juvenile an action one could be, but I also realised that it was a desperate attempt at escaping the cloud of fear that intimidated me.

A psychoanalyst would probably be able to explain this better, but over time, trying to run away from difficult situations became sort of a habit for me. I would tell lies even when I did not need to, for the fear of getting disciplined if I told the truth. The embers blew up after I had to take up a Bachelors’ degree in Computer Science even though I wanted to study journalism, as my father thought an engineering job would be a safer option for my future. For almost a year-and-a-half while I was enrolled in a college in Kolkata, I did not attend classes. I used to spend my days fooling around in a paying guest accommodation where I was staying. Throughout those months, I lied to my parents about getting good grades in college. The bubble had to burst, and it did. Having virtually wasted about two years of my academic career, I came back to my home city of Jamshedpur and enrolled in another Bachelors’ degree - this time in journalism.

For more than five years, till the entire episode culminated when I started working as a journalist, the relationship with my father was ice cold due to mistrust, anger and ego. He resented me for my falsehood and I had reasons to believe that he was wrong in the first place to make decisions about my career option.

Rationality lies somewhere in the middle ground, but my takeaway from what happened is that I know what I don't want to be if and when I become a father. The “man of the house” aura that my father had created for himself meant that he was never held accountable for his wrong decisions. For someone who abided by Marxism in his social life, the lack of democracy in the way he handled domestic matters was appalling. Over time, I have learnt that my grudges against him for thrusting a career option on me were only a corollary of my repulsion to his toxic male traits. It is here that the personal became political for me. I started making conscious efforts to ensure that the gender roles that were visibly demarcated at my home did not become a part of how I carry myself. The process often poses me with questions on the concept of family and parenthood that I do not have answers for. But then, evolution would have

ceased long ago had human beings stopped being intrigued about unanswered questions.

My father became a parent when he was 30. As a 30-year-old myself, I realised that he might have had little clue about being a parent when I was

born. Did he do the best that he could have done? Or should the Marxist in him rejected the absolutism with which he wielded power in my growing years? Well, that's one of my unanswered questions.