Precariat : narrow definition, discourse and reality

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Résumé : The discourse initiated by Guy Standing, on the 'Precariat', a few years back, was embedded in economic debates on 'class'. He, in the preface of his book *'The Precariate : The new Dangerous Class',* wrote that Precariat is a class in making (Standing G, 2011). He uses the word 'Class' in the Marxian sense. He suggests that the neoliberalism agenda embraced by almost all countries, to a greater or lesser extent, deliberately shifted the burden of 'risk' and 'insecurity' on to the 'working class and their families'. As a result millions of workers were pushed into the brutal market without 'an anchor of stability'. Standing goes on to, dramatically, warn politicians and civil society that 'There is a danger that, unless the precariat is understood, its emergence could lead society towards a politics of inferno.' He further adds that this class is global, angry and anxious, and 'prone to listen to ugly voices, and use their vote and money to give those voices a political platform of increasing influence'.Marxist scholars reacted sharply. For example Eric Olin Wright, presented 'a Marxist critique of this reconceptualization on two principle grounds : first, that the material interests of people in the precariat and in the working class are not sufficiently opposed to each other for these to constitute two distinct classes ; and second, that across the various segments of the precariat the optimal strategies for securing a livelihood are not sufficiently unified for the precariat as a whole to constitute a class. —-In the case of the precariat, the different segments identified by Standing have sharply different strategies of survival and advancement.' And thus, he concluded, there is no separate class, which can be categorized as 'Precariate'. Those who have faced the burden of recent global economic disasters, and were pushed towards the base of a pecuniary pyramid can be designated as 'proletariat class', at the best, depending upon their class consciousness and interest. The debate plunged into a terrain which focused on whether there is an emerging class, that too global in nature, which has common interest and enough cementing factors to represent common and universal class interest and consciousness, or not. Though the debate is yet to resolve major issues hovering around economic categories and their relationship with social and cultural factors, it cannot be denied that manmade and natural disasters often put sections of humanity into 'precarious' condition. Citizens, collectively and individually respond to a given 'precarity' in varied ways.This paper, while scanning the debate on 'precariat' attempts to develop a broad framework for examining the causes and nature of precarity, enlarges its definition, discusses sources, target populations, modes of operation through which precarity is introduced in any society and levels at which precarity operates. The article aims to scrutinize as to how, when the power balance is disturbed in society, ruling classes use physical force as an instrument of spreading fear among the agents of change. The article also makes an attempt to reflect on how the intellectuals, scientists, science communicators and journalist under the shadow of 'fascistic regimes' are pushed to the realm of 'precarity' and freedom of expression is threatened. The last section of the article gives some concrete examples of how 'precariat' responds to situations of precarity and tries to build broad alliances to resist the causal forces.

Mots-clés : Precariat, Risk, Insecurity, Marxism, Fascist, Job, Layoff, Globalisation

1 Discourse

The grounds for a debate on 'precariate' had been laid in the first decade of the current century (Wray L R, 2006, 391-411). For example Kavin Doogan in his book 'New Capitalism, the transformation of Work' had devoted a chapter to 'Job Insecurity, Precarious Employment and Manufactured Uncertainty' in which he argued that the claim of 'precarity' is exaggerated and 'manufactured'largely by the media (Doogan K, 2009, 192-206). While responding to Bourdieu (Bourdieu P, 1998), Doogan concedes that 'Precarite is therefore a very significant development of the concept of job insecurity and is particularly useful in describing a generalized condition of contemporary society and he is entirely accurate to identify the political and ideological content of the insecurity-inducing strategies.' Presenting a convoluted, highly Eurocentric, argument that demarcates difference between 'loss of jobs' and 'job security', Doogan concludes 'The decline of job security during periods of falling unemployment is less mysterious if the discussion considers that layoffs and closures will still make headlines even if the number out of work subsides.' He further concedes that during the early 1990s the rate of job loss was higher for older and more educated people compared to previous decades, however, eventually, he puts the blame on the media in USA and UK. Many other scholars, during this period, contributed to the discourse on changing economic scenarios especially the impact of globalization and precarity that it generated (Vosko L, *et al.*, 2003).

2 Expansion of the Debate

The book published in 2011, by Guy Standing, appeared with a catchy title, that included the phrase 'Dangerous Class', it immediately caught the eyes of intellectuals and the debate around the notion of 'precariate', emerging as a new class of workers or not, became vigorous. In the initial stages mostly economists reacted to the proposed framework. It could not have been rejected primarily for two reasons. Firstly, the precarity, especially existential precarity, introduced by the neo-liberalism and free-market economy, and above all the large scale migration to European and other countries (Devitt C, 2011, 579–596 ; Cohen R, 2006) had affected millions of worker across the globe and its impacts were too noticeable (Nicholas H, 2018). Secondly, Standing was persistent and the proposed framework was freshly packaged and forcefully argued invoking fear among the ruling classes(Standing G, 2014).

Among the first to react was Eric Olin Wright, Marxist scholar (Wright E O, 2016, 123-135) who questioned the proposed conceptual transition 'from *precatity* as a condition to *the precariate* as a class distinct from working class'. Soon others joined the debate(Hahnel R, Wright E O, 2016). It should be noted that in the initial phases the precarity debate was only confined to economic insecurity and the question does the 'precariate' qualify to be categorised as a class or not. Peter Frase responding to Standing summed up the response to the proposed 'concept' by raising three questions. 'First, has the work around the world in fact became more precarious in the past few decades, in some empirically defined ways ? If so, do those who perform precarious labor constitute a "class,"—- and, finally, what implications does increasing precarity

have for the demands and strategies of workers and their organisation?' (Frase P, 2013, 11-14).

The initial responses, quite naturally, were from economists and the debate was confined within the larger discourse that was present among the community of scholars who study economic trends and their implications. The data, tools of analysis, and frameworks used for probing 'precarity' and the nature of 'precariate' were narrowly defined and chosen from within the discipline (Standing G, 2016).

It should also be noted that most scholars, right in the beginning, had raised issues related to the narrow definition of large heterogeneous group with divergent characteristics. Peter Farse had pointed out that 'precariate is problematic as a category, because it attempts to draw together too many different heterogeneous strata of the population and because it too strongly excludes segments of what Standing defines (too narrowly) as the working class, which still enjoys relative stable and protected employment situations.'

The novelty of the idea and the serious impact that globalization had on almost all sections of society across the world attracted scholars to participate in the discourse (Korte B, Regard F, 2014). For this, enlarging the scope of the framework and definition of both 'precarity' and 'precariat', required to be enlarged. Greig de Peuter referred to a parallel debate where 'Cultural, media, and 'creative' workers – especially those outside the fraying 'standard employment relationship' – are role model subjects of contemporary capitalism', and defined a new category 'Creative Precariate' in which he included 'conditions and experiences of work in individual sectors of the creative industries, including, among others, television, fashion, journalism, new media, video games, and the arts' (de Peuter G, 2014). His primary focus was on 'efforts to counteract precarity in the arts, the media, and knowledge and cultural industries'. Similarly, experts devoted their efforts to probe as to how 'artists' negotiated 'precarity' in the cultural sector and 'struggle to produce and fund spaces of collective artistic expression' (Alison B, McLean H, 2013).

A recent seminar at Hyderabad, India, focused on precarity and town planning. The scholars gathered to ponder upon the issues of those sections of society who are kept out of the planning and, due to socio-economic conditions, they are pushed to the periphery, both physical and social and are forced to live a precarious existence. Women as a group figured quite prominently in the debate. At this stage it should be emphasized that as the idea percolated, the definition and scope of precarity kept on enlarging. Over a period of time 'dilution' of both 'precarity' and 'precariate' has been in progress.

3 Precarity a fluid state

The point that most scholars have missed out or deliberately avoided is that 'precarity' cannot be defined in absolute terms. It is always relative, both in space and time. Precarity by definition is not a permanent state of existence. Space here could be defined in terms of social, cultural, economic or even geographical coordinates. If we look at the time continuum, in order to fix precarity, we will have to fix its coordinate

and then look at the time of departures. For example, it can be argued that the human race as a whole lived a comparatively more 'precarious' existence in the jungles of Africa compared to present times, on the other hand some have forcefully argued that we lead a far more precarious life on planet earth today due to threat of a nuclear war compared to a few centuries ago.

If we accept that the idea of 'precarity' essentially refers to a tenuous and passing phase of human existence then 'precariate' cannot qualify to be a permanent class with long-term cohesive 'class interests' or long-lasting 'class antagonism' that may lead to enduring struggles for a qualitative change in social structure.

4 Enlarging the notion of precarity

Departing from 'work' and 'job security' based narrow definition of 'precarity' and 'precariat', this section attempts to identify some of the features of a generalized notion of precarious situations that sections of people and communities, across the world have been subjected to. The precarious as per Oxford dictionary, means 'not surely held or in position ; dangerously likely to fall or collapse, dependent on chance ; uncertain or in a dangerous state because of not being safe or not being held in place firmly. Which obviously is a generalized meaning and can be used for varied conditions. However, when searching for a dictionary meaning of 'precarity' the definition narrows down in the 'Macmillan Dictionary' current Internet version that defines it as 'the condition of living without secure well paid job'. The transition from adjective to noun has restricted the meaning for the simple reason, the noun has been coined and used for only specific purpose by specific groups of scholars. It is time to rescue it from confines of 'job insecurity' and include other insecurities which communities are subjected to. Of course economic security will always constitute an important factor, probably the most important factor while probing 'precarity' of the 'precariat'. Let me argue that precarious conditions of existence could be introduced by factors other than economic insecurity. For example war or natural disaster may threaten life of a large number of civilian population and push them to precarity. This precarity may eventually lead to a loss of jobs for working class, but is very different in nature and content from insecurities introduced by a well-oiled oppressive market economy.

Other than the economic structure, conflicts (religious, ethnic, racial or cultural) may cause precarity and victims may face existential insecurity (Karabekir A, Öktem K, 2016, 505-527). We have seen in the recent past how a large number of people have lived and are still living under threat due to terrorism. We have also witnessed behavioural changes in living patterns of people and their relationship with the state changed, due to this threat. Full-blown wars between nations also cause 'precarity' and leave a deep imprint on the security of population segments, which are directly or indirectly affected. Migration caused by repeated wars in the South Eastern countries has shaken even the developed countries. And finally, natural disasters such as Tsunami, earthquake, tornados, industrial disaster, especially when it is large-scale like 'Bhopal Gas Tragedy' or 'Fuko-shima Nuclear disaster', may also cause precarity.

Let us also look at the agencies or sources that can cause 'precarity'. National or international corporate sector are big actors in today's world order, they have ability

to destabilise a region or a nation. For example, recently, the 'Gupta-Zuma' corruption nexus was the cause of the destabilisation of the South African Government. Government, or state policies, could also be a source of precarity for large sections of society. Last year India witnessed the sudden and widespread disjuncture created by the demonetisation of it currency. Similarly, political, religious formations and organised terror outfits, when resorting to violent means, can be a source of precarity. Rwanda, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, even Brexit are illustrative examples of this. Finally, nature has been an important source of creation of precarity.

The target groups that have experienced precarity could be categorise on the basis of their geographical spread or the nature of sections of population. The geographical spread could be as large as a region, which may include many countries, or just one country or may be a city. However, when we look at the sections of society that have been specifically targeted, by sources other than nature, we find political activists, intellectuals (writers, artists, teachers, etc.) the working class, ethnic, racial or religious groups.

The agencies, other than nature, employ varied tactical tools, modes of operation and strategies to create precarious conditions. These could be economic instruments such as international sanctions, war or large scale armed conflicts, or targeted state policies. Terror networks and vigilante groups have also been used by the agencies to create precarious conditions in various part of the world. Media channels have also been used for creating disruptions, fear or actual disorder in peoples' lives.

While probing precarity, we must also look at the levels at which it effects the life of the people. The broad two categories 'perceived'and 'objective precarity' can be dived into many sub-categories. The levels of precarity are a direct function of intensity with which it affects life and the ease with which insecurity can be removed or overcome. It is obvious that there is a difference of level when there is a treat to job loss and actual loss of one's job. The threat of a war or armed conflict can be placed at lower levels of precarity compared to actual war, which can lead to loss of life or large-scale migration.

5 Turmoil and shades of precarity in the Indian sub-continent

The Indian sub-continent has been passing through disturbing phases. The intensity of the turmoils that West Asian, African and South American countries have witnessed were far more acute, yet India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Myanmar have seen serious disjuncture while experimenting with democracies. In this article examines two examples that have created different levels of precarity.

5.1 Demonetisation of currency in India

On 8th November, 2016, around 8 pm. Prime Minister Modi, addressed the nation and announced that Government of India has decided to demonetise the currency notes of Rs 500 and Rs 1000 – starting at the stroke of midnight (First post, 2017). The reasons given were that it will help unearth black wealth, control terror networks,

stop infiltration of terrorists and render counterfeit currency useless. What followed was a very different scenario when more than 86 per cent of all currency was suddenly out of circulation. ATMs stopped working, there were long queues to exchange the old currency and banks did not have money to replace it (Raza G, *et al.*, 2017).

The entire economy came to a grinding halt. The informal sector was worst hit and even after more than one year it has not been able to fully recover (Kumar A. 2017; Kumar A, 2017). The GDP dipped substantially, and the conservative estimates of loss of jobs vary from 800,000 to a 1.5 million (https://www.cmie.com). The precarity introduced by this sudden act of the government was not confined to job loss only, reportedly more than 100 people standing in queue died, marriages were broken, burial of dead bodies were postponed due to paucity of money, seriously ill patients could not be admitted to hospitals, people could not travel in trains and families went hungry for days on end (Worstall T, 2016; https://storytap. in; Kothari S, 2016)). Citizens had to resort to a barter system (https://timesofindia. indiatimes.com/city/ahmedabad; https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/varanasi; https://www.huffingtonpost.in). It was clear how an ill-thought of government policy, or for that matter a deliberate policy to help big business to mobilise money (http://www.aisa.in), can overnight push the citizens to a precarious condition.

5.2 Killing Journalists, Science Communicators and Rationalists

Since the resolution passed at the international conference, Science and You held in France in which the concern was raised about the increasing violent attacks on science communicators and rising intolerance in various parts of the world, the trends have further intensified (Nancy Declaration 2015). The Indian sub-continent, including Pakistan, Bangladesh and India has seen increasing numbers of premeditated murders in broad daylight of journalists, science communicators and rationalists (Malik S A, 2017; BBC News 2016; First Post, 2018). This has a direct relationship with the increase in fundamentalism of both Hindu and Islamic brands. Religious fundamentalist organizations, which have given birth to armed terror networks, issue threats and carry out murders with impunity, often with support and connivance of political formations and state machinery (Kumar K, 2002; Rebecca J F, 2007).

It will be appropriate to list here some of those professionals and activists who have been killed in recent times for holding on to their views.

Narendra Dbholkar (Murdered 20 August 2013, India);
Govind Pansare (Murdered 16 February 2015, India);
M. M. Kalburgi (Murdered 30 August 2015, India);
Gauri Lankesh (Murdered 5 September 2017, India);
Avijit Roy (Murdered June 15, 2016, Banladesh);
Ananta Bijoy Das (Hacked to death on May 12, 2015, Bangladesh);
Ahmed Rajib Haider (Murdered February 15, 2013, Bangladesh);
Washiqur Rahman (Murdered 30 March 2015, Bangladesh);
Shafiul Islam (Murdered 15 November 2014, Bangladesh);
Asif Mohiuddin (Attacked by fundamentalists and imprisoned Government, 2013,

Bangladesh) ;
Sabeen Mahmud (Murdered 24 April, 2015, Pakistan).

In these countries, threatening messages, delivered through phone, in person, or through an electronic medium, are not uncommon. A murder is committed to put the community, which disagrees with those who control power or threaten to disturb the power balance (Imtiaz A, 2016). Each of those who were killed, were prolific write and speakers against the established religious order, caste system and ruling classes. Dabholkar was killed by a Hindu fundamentalist organisation for his rationalist ideas and because he had introduced a bill in the State Assembly making a law against superstitions and mythical practices (Live Mint, 2013). Similarly, Muslim fundamentalist for propagating rationalist thoughts targeted those killed in Bangladesh and Pakistan. The terror groups, recognising the power of radical ideas, get unsettled and therefore create 'precarious' conditions for those who try to propagate anything which is counter to their belief system or is likely to shift the fulcrum of power axis against their interest (Steve B, 2008). When these terror groups make an example out of their opponents by killing someone, the felt 'precarity' propagates at exceedingly faster rate and ordinary citizens are terrorised (Samuel J S, Antonius D, 2013). The edited volume produced by Gunaratna Rohan and Kam Stefanie in which a number of contributors from across countries take a deeper look at the methods and intents of terror incidents, is a good source for understanding as to how terror attack creates 'precarity' among various sections of society(Gunaratna R, Kam S, 2016). For an ordinary citizen 'You could be the next one' is the message of all terror attacks. The professionals and propagators of scientific or rationalist ideas, who are specifically targeted, are forced to live a precarious life under the shadow of such 'death threats'.

6 Conclusion

The idea that economic precarity the world over has given birth to a dangerous class called precariat triggered an intense debate among the scholars. In this article I have argued that 'precariousness' is a transitory and relative condition, and the precariat do not qualify to be a class in themselves for two reasons. Firstly, due to impermanence and secondly, due to insufficient cohesive 'class interest'. It is suggested that the framework, when applied with caution and enlarged to include various sections of society, could give useful insights for analysing the social, economic and cultural trends in a society. For doing so the definitions of precarity and precariat must take into account different causes, types, levels and varied target populations and these definitions must be informed by the notion of 'precariousness' of existence. It is obvious that in a society, when economic, social or cultural power-balance shifts, beneficiaries of the old order create conditions of precarity for the catalysts of change. Agents of scientific temper or rationality in a deeply religious society are often targeted and pushed to 'precarious' existence.

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