

The Cultural Politics of “Spring Thunder”: The Naxalbari Movement and the Re-framing of Bengali Culture in the 1960s

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Abstract

This article tracks the radical turn in Bengali politics and culture and from the late 1960s, ushered in by the ultra-leftist Naxalbari Movement in the eastern Indian state of West Bengal. The movement initiated a search for a Maoist revolutionary praxis that could decisively liberate the dominant Bengali cultural sphere from its moorings in colonial and semi-feudal bourgeois class interests. The counter-hegemonic cultural praxis of the Naxalbari Movement repeatedly evaded its confinement within the diktats of a hardened party line (of the Communist Party of India – Marxist Leninist, which led the movement) but remained rich with multifarious possibilities, openings and narratives. The transgressive vision of this movement led to iconoclastic acts of destroying statues of deified cultural figures, publicly burning canonical books and assaulting higher academic institutions as sites of the propagation of a repressive culture. This article foregrounds the Naxalbari cultural debates along two distinct axes – the received tradition of Bengali culture from the colonial era and the internal schisms among intellectuals and cultural workers sympathetic to the broader objectives of the revolutionary culture articulated through the Naxalbari movement.

Keywords: India, Naxalbari, Maoism, West Bengal, politics, Spring Thunder, bhadrolak

Introduction

This article delineates the radical turn in Bengali cultural productions especially in terms of the co-constitutions of the spheres of the “cultural” and the “political”, which arose in the wake of the Maoist Naxalbari Movement from the late 1960s in the eastern Indian state of West Bengal. While we focus primarily on the cultural debates raging amongst Bengali intellectuals and activists associated with the movement, the political repercussions of Naxalbari, in the period under review, had a far more expansive pan-Indian presence. For instance, Maoist insurrections and their associated socio-cultural imaginaries swept over

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vast tracts of Punjab and Bihar in northern India and the Telangana region in the southern part of the country.¹ Mao Zedong’s “Little Red Book” rapidly became a powerful and ubiquitous symbol of social change in this period: visible as much on elite academic campuses of metropolitan cities such as Kolkata or New Delhi as in dusty provincial towns and rural peasant settlements. It would not be a historical exaggeration to suggest that the multiple currents of the Naxalbari Movement ushered in a new political geography of radicalism that continues to inspire resistance against the Indian state even to this day (Shah / Jain 2017).

The domain of culture, far from being a secondary element of “superstructure”, became a central concern of the movement in West Bengal between the years from 1967 to 1972. Historically, Marxism had already provided a strong ideological framework for what Sunderason (2020) has identified as the “partisan aesthetics” in Bengali cultural productions from the 1930s and 1940s under British colonial rule: this ideological framework was critical for articulating class inequalities, colonial domination and the brutal exploitation of subaltern populations including the peasantry. The harrowing events of the 1947 Partition of British India, the subsequent focus on attending to the human tragedies of the Partition, the forced segregation of the Bengali cultural milieu between West Bengal (India) and former East Pakistan and the re-making of national identities led to an inevitable dilution of the cultural focus on revolutionary political change. The Naxalbari intellectuals tried to powerfully re-align culture with what they saw as its one over-riding objective – to create the conditions for a total revolutionary transformation of society. What was needed was a decisive re-orientation of the field of culture that could powerfully negate everything that had preceded the Naxalbari moment of eruption – such as instances of ossified Bengali bourgeois (or *bhadrolok*) world-views detrimental to the cause of political revolution.

In order to explore how politics and culture were co-determining each other during the course of the Naxalbari Movement, we examine a large but eclectic archive of writings comprising (primarily Bengali) films, political pamphlets, poems, party manifestos and journals, novels as well as a large collection of memoirs from the Naxalbari era. The exploration of this archive, consisting of “canonical” texts as well as less eminently known authors and their works, shows how culture from the very onset of the movement became critical to the broader political visions (including armed revolution) for supplanting the hegemonic class-character of the Indian state. The article highlights the latent tensions between the spheres of the “cultural” and the “political” – sometimes running parallel to each other, at other times coming dangerously close and

1 Sumanta Banerjee’s *India’s Simmering Revolution: The Naxalite Uprising* (1984) is a detailed history of the Naxalbari movement that traces its spread in other parts of India such as Punjab, Bihar and Telangana (then within Andhra Pradesh); see especially pp. 216–220.

threatening to subsume the former into the later. The re-articulation of a properly progressive culture linked to Maoist praxis was meant to be a decisive blow for obliterating bourgeois socio-cultural domination (as in the urban Bengali culture in West Bengal) – steeped as it was in the “twin evils” of (neo)colonialism and semi-feudal modes of production.

The Naxalbari intellectuals were primarily engaged with the linkages between state, society and cultural practices in a process of historical continuity. They denounced the cultural milieu dominated by the Indian national bourgeoisie – with its intergenerational privileges of colonialist education reserved for a propertied class of social elites. This denunciation was also targeted against existing Bengali aesthetics grounded in Marxist social realism, at least from the 1940s, which failed to fully integrate literary activism with the demands of a properly revolutionary politics. Aesthetic dimensions of literature became rather unimportant by themselves and secondary to political activism for Naxalbari intellectuals.

This is also apparent from the relative lack of theoretical reflections on aesthetics amongst the major literary figures associated with the movement: the sole purpose of writing was to become the Maoist “spark” that would set off the revolutionary conflagration. The pressing task was to wipe the slate clean and make a fresh beginning after centuries of accumulated bourgeois aesthetic decadence. Naxalbari intellectuals aimed a savage critique not only at past writers, but against literary dissenters who failed to either re-produce the political tenor demanded by Maoist revolution or were not members of the Communist Party of India (Marxist Leninist) – CPI(ML) – leading the Naxalbari Movement.² The task of culture was to constantly uphold the lived experiences of poverty and suffering of landless labourers and workers – only the repeated representation of such experiences could pierce through the veil of bourgeois obfuscation of culture and herald revolutionary change. This was reflected in the attitude of poets and authors of the period, not only those directly associated with the CPI(ML), but those who were primarily sympathetic to the broader objectives of the movement as well.³ This lack of clarity regarding the formal and stylistic elements of culture and aesthetics among Naxalbari intellectuals, paradoxically, has germinated multiple possibilities of interpretation and literary innovations, even to this day. The possibilities of literature for addressing

2 For example Saroj Dutta, the poet and editor of the CPI(ML) party organ *Deshabrati*, attacked almost every major cultural figure and journal, including those that were sympathetic to the movement, in his editorial entitled *Potrikar Duniyay* (“In the World of the Magazine”; Dutta 1999: 81–196). During the period of his association with the Naxalbari Movement, however, Dutta failed to offer a clearly defined aesthetics – in contrast to his engaging polemics in the 1940s on the question of the representation of decadence in literature, with figures such as Buddhadev Bose and Samar Sen.

3 The poet Birendra Chattopadhyay in an interview claimed that the state’s atrocities were such that it was not possible to think of what makes good poetry; instead, unpoetic journalism had to be used (discussed in Sengupta 1997: 222). His poem *Mundohin Dborguli Ablade Chitkar Kore* (“Headless Corpses Shriek Out in Fun”) became as much a testimony of a troubled time as Nabarun Bhattacharya’s poem *Ei Mrityu Upatyaka Amar Desh Na* (“This Valley of Death is Not My Homeland”; both published in 1972).

social inequalities, the possibilities of resistance, the possibilities of the coming revolution – all have evoked myriad experimentations with forms, genres and styles of representation, as resonances of the Naxalbari moment. Transcending the narrow confines of the CPI(ML) “party line” on culture, one of the primary legacies of “the time of revolution” in West Bengal was to tease out a literary imagination that would be receptive to exposing the engrained violence of social domination. The long cultural afterlife of Naxalbari, decades after the movement was violently crushed, attests to the transformative promise of revolution.

The literary and aesthetic culture that emerged around the movement and continues to attract ideological commitment in the present can be broadly categorised into three distinct but over-lapping groups. In the first instance were the cultural workers and intellectuals directly committed to the movement – often affiliated with the CPI(ML) – who celebrated the movement as the fundamental pathway for liberation from bourgeois political and cultural domination. Utpal Dutta’s play *Teer* (“Arrow”, 1967), depicting the brutality of rural exploitation, or Swarna Mitra’s⁴ novel *Grame Chalo* (“Let’s Move towards the Village”), first published in 1972 and exhorting young activists to move to villages to experience the lives of landless labourers, testify to a committed revolutionary culture. The second group of productions includes those that remained critical of the violent excesses of the CPI(ML) yet shared a distinct sympathy and intimacy with the movement. This group includes films like *Padatik* (1973) by Mrinal Sen, produced during the last stages of the movement, as well as novels, memoirs and poems by activists and sympathisers writing after the movement had subsided. The third category of productions, finally, comprises those that revisit the Naxalbari era as a source of continuing revolutionary inspiration, decades after the actual waning of the movement. Revolution here appears often as a spectral event from the past haunting the present to tease out the inequities and societal stagnation in the contemporary period. Nabarun Bhattacharya’s novel *Herbert* (first published in 1993) is perhaps one of the best-known novels in this category. It is beyond this article to exhaustively discuss this vast and growing archive; instead it attempts to foreground some of the thematic issues underscoring Naxalbari cultural politics.

“High culture” and its reactionary tendencies

One of the distinct themes of the Naxalbari politics of cultural representation was its resistance to received hierarchies of a “high culture” sanitised of all traces of subaltern and peasant elements. The historically sedimented cultural

4 Utpalendu Chakrabarti (b. 1948), who wrote novels and stories in the 1970s under the pseudonym Swarna Mitra, later became an activist film-maker. He made several feature films, short films and documentaries, which often focused on political activism and the violence of the nation state. There is scarcely any substantial discussion of his life and works:

“heritages” of the so-called “Bengal Renaissance” of the nineteenth century, with its pantheon of iconic figureheads such as Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar⁵ or Rabindranath Tagore,⁶ was ceaselessly attacked by the Naxalbari intellectual vanguard for their moorings in a colonial extractive economy and unquestioning dissemination of a comprador bourgeois ideology. The Naxalbari intellectuals repeatedly interrogated the grand narratives of Bengali cultural refinement from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as ideological smokescreens validating the continuing social privileges of the educated Bengali bourgeoisie – the main beneficiaries of the economic depredations under colonialism and the class enemies of the exploited peasantry and industrial workers.

Such critique of bourgeois art was not, however, an innovation of Naxalbari politics. Socialist realism, depicting the suffering of the poor and the destitute and celebrating the subversion of the bourgeois power structure by the masses, became the fulcrum of Marxist art in leftist cultural wings from their very inception in the 1930s and 1940s. Party orthodoxy in the undivided Communist Party of India (CPI) attempted to regulate the sphere of art; yet, as Moinak Biswas suggests in discussing the history and legacy of Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA) (also known as *Bharatiya Gananatya Samgha in Bangla*), the absence of persecution like that in the former USSR enabled committed Indian artists to easily go beyond the determinations of any strict orthodoxy (Biswas 2018). This led, however, to fierce debates about the role of culture and especially the threat posed by modernist “decadence” to the revolutionary spirit of culture.

Already in the 1930s and 1940s, Saroj Dutta,⁷ who later became the principal ideologue of the CPI(ML), had entered into a fierce debate with mainstream modernist and Marxist authors and poets such as Buddhadev Bose and Samar

5 Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar (1820–1891), a 19th-century educator and social reformer famous for his crusade for widow remarriage (later made into an act in 1856), enjoyed an iconic status among educated Bengalis. He was also the writer of the famous Bengali primer *Barnoparichay*. He simplified Bengali prose and rationalised the Bengali alphabet. However he later suffered criticism from certain Marxist schools (including the Naxalites) for allowing a British army camp on the premises of a Hindu college during the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 of rebellious British soldiers against British rule. For further information on Vidyasagar see Asok Sen’s *Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and His Elusive Milestones* (1977).

6 Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) was a poet, author, thinker, painter, lyricist and composer who enjoyed an iconic status as the poet laureate among the Bengalis. He was the first non-European to receive the Nobel Prize in literature for his collection of devotional songs called *Gitanjali* in 1913. He was criticised later by certain Marxist schools, including the Naxalites, as a bourgeois poet, as he came from a family of landlords and enjoyed a privileged status throughout his life. For further information on different aspects of Tagore’s writings and politics see *The Cambridge Companion to Rabindranath Tagore*, edited by Sukanta Chaudhuri (2020).

7 Saroj Dutta (1914–1971), a Marxist intellectual and politician, started his career in *Swadhinata*, the party organ of the undivided Communist Party of India. He is well known for his raging cultural debates in the 1930s and 1940s with major Marxist literary figures from Bengal, like Samar Sen or Buddhadev Bose, on the relationship between radical politics and poetry. He later joined CPI(M) in 1964 after the first split of the communist party. After the Naxalbari incident he played an important role in the establishment of CPI(ML). He became the editor of *Deshabrati*, the Bengali organ of CPI(ML). In 5 August 1971 he mysteriously disappeared and it is claimed that he was killed secretly by the police. For further information on Saroj Dutta, see Sukhendu Sarkar’s edited volume on Dutta titled *Morone Meleni Chhuti – Saroj Dutta: Srishti o Sonkolpe* (2014).

Sen.⁸ Dutta argued that decadence should not be a subject matter of art as in “ultra-modern poetry”. He also asserted that the language or theme of politically committed artists should be communicable to the masses and should directly influence revolution. Utpal Dutta’s play *Teer* (1967), produced immediately after the massacre of rural peasants in the Naxalbari region of northern West Bengal, closely approximated such ideals of absolute socialist realism and portrayed revolution directly on stage. *Teer* was disparaged by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) – CPI(M) – however, for supporting the “left-adventurism” of Naxalite radicals. Even the IPTA denounced the play despite their avowed commitment to all political art.

Hemanga Biswas,⁹ the celebrated communist folk singer, commented on how the Bharatiya Ganatantra Samgha, after the establishment of CPI(M) in 1964, started operating under the diktats of this party, though it was initially established as a common platform for all performers of people’s art irrespective of their party affiliations (Biswas 2012: 134–144). Amidst fierce cultural debates on the relationship between political commitment and culture, the CPI(M) party line increasingly determined the efficacy of cultural practices by its exclusive ability to foment radical political activity.

In order to counter the dominant bourgeois culture Saroj Dutta led a frontal attack on the hallowed figures of the “Bengal Renaissance” along with a denunciation of the educational institutions, such as the universities, for propounding the myth of a reactionary, bourgeois cultural system as sacrosanct. He wrote a series of articles justifying the violent actions of urban student groups who burned books, attacked educational institutions and broke statues of Indian nationalist leaders like M.K. Gandhi or J.L. Nehru, along with those of intellectual figures of the Bengal Renaissance such as Rammohan Roy.¹⁰ Saroj Dutta attacked the hegemonic Bengali intellectual tradition as immersed in the colonial policies of creating a privileged land-owning class of English-educated *dalal* or *touts* of British imperialism, who had gone on to facilitate the dominant bourgeois class character of the post-independence Indian state. Other notable

8 To follow the debate see *Adhunik Lekhokder Obostha* (“The Position of Modern Writers”, 1938) by Buddhadeb Bose (see Das 2003: 375–376), *Chhinno Koro Chodmobesh* (“Destroy the Disguise”, 1938) (Das 2003: 379–384), *Oti Adhunik Bangla Kobita* (“Ultra-Modern Bengali Poetry, 1940) (Das 2003: 381–384, and 387–392, two articles of the same name by Saroj Dutta); and *Oti Adhunik Bangla Kobita* (“Ultra-Modern Bengali Poetry”, 1940) by Samar Sen (Das 2003: 385–386). The essays have been archived in *Marxbaadi Sahitya Bitarka* (“Marxist Literary Debates”), edited by Dhananjay Das (2003).

9 Hemanga Biswas (1912–1987) was an Indian singer, composer and political activist who wrote in Bengali and Assamese and was inclined towards communist ideology. He was famous for composing people’s songs and mixing local folk music with left-leaning activist songs. He was a member of the Indian People’s Theatre Association. For a brief introduction to Biswas see the blurb of his book *Ujan Gang Baiya* (2012).

10 See articles by Saroj Dutta published in *Deshabrati* in 1970–1971, such as *Murti Bhangar Somorthone* (“Supporting the Breaking of Statues”, 60–66), *Boi Porano Prosonge* (“On Burning Books”, 67–70), *Gandhi Prosonge* (76–79), *Subhash Bose Prosonge* (80–86), *Vidyasagar Prosonge* (87–88) and *Prafulla Chandra Ray Prosonge* (88–95), collected in *Saroj Dutta Rachana Sangraha*, Volume 1 (1993).

Naxalbari sympathisers such as Binoy Ghosh¹¹ and Asok Sen¹² (Sen 1977) corroborated this standpoint, although remaining critical of the excessive emphasis on violence in Dutta’s writings. Binoy Ghosh, a veteran scholar of the Bengal renaissance, revised his celebratory account of the nineteenth-century achievements of Bengali culture to suggest that they were “an exaggeration”¹³ and “nothing but a historical hoax by the end of the 19th century”.¹⁴

In place of the dominant cultural currents, Naxalbari intellectuals extolled the lived experiences of the rural peasantry as the substratum for constructing an anti-hegemonic and emergent cultural milieu. Notable intellectuals of the Naxalbari Movement such as Kanu Sanyal¹⁵ and the iconic Charu Mazumder¹⁶ repeatedly urged the urban activists and student comrades to immerse themselves in rural Bengal: to experience the life of the landless labourers or the dispossessed indigenous Adivasis to wage the people’s war, as well as to learn the languages, idioms and expressions of an authentic and egalitarian people’s culture. Appropriately enough, the immediate provocation for the movement came from an isolated incident in a little known rural settlement called Naxalbari in northern West Bengal. On 24 and 25 May 1967,¹⁷ a violent confrontation between police forces and local peasants over a disputed land title led to the death of eleven men, women and children, as well as a police officer. This incident decisively set the stage for a large-scale transformation of leftist politics in West Bengal, leading to increasing radicalism and the adoption of armed revolution as the mandate of Communist vanguardism.

11 Binoy Ghosh (1917–1980) a journalist, sociologist and commentator on Bengali culture and intelligentsia from the 1940s to 1970s was well known for his critique of the so-called Bengal Renaissance, a celebration of 19th-century colonialist intellectuals and the enlightenment they supposedly brought to India. For a detailed account on Binoy Ghosh see the Bengali newspaper article “Shatabarsha Periyē Gelen Binoy Ghosh, Sanskritir Sahar Nirbikar” by Sudhir Chakraborty in *Anandabazar Patrika*, 8 July 2018.

12 Asok Sen (1927–2015) was an economist and social scientist who wrote on figures of the Bengal Renaissance such as Vidyasagar and Rammohan Roy. For further information on Asok Sen see *Alochanachakra*, Volume 41, Special Issue on Asok Sen (2016) edited by Chiranjib Sur.

13 Binoy Ghosh, *Banglar Nabajagriti: Ekti Otikatha* (originally published in 1979 in *Aneek*) in *Banglar Renaissance* (Chakraborty 2006: 27–43).

14 See p. 191 in *Bongiyo Nabajagaran Ekti Mulyayan* (pp. 191–200; originally published in English in *Frontier* in 1971, *Dashadhikari* 2013: 191–200).

15 Kanu Sanyal (1932–2010), a major architect of Naxalbari movement and a founding member of the CPI(ML), announced the formation of the party on May Day in 1969 in a public rally beneath the monument Sahid Minar. His Terai Report in 1968 is a detailed firsthand account of the Naxalbari incident. After the death of the movement’s biggest leader, Charu Mazumdar, he critiqued the foundation of CPI(ML) and distanced himself from the party. He committed suicide in May 2010. For further information see Bappaditya Paul’s *The First Naxal: An Authorized Biography of Kanu Sanyal* (2014)

16 Charu Mazumdar (1919–1972), the main leader of the movement, who achieved iconic status as the leader of the Naxalbari revolution, though he came from a family of landlords, became a full-time communist worker and a leader of the Tebhaga peasant movement in 1946. Later he became a dissident voice within CPI(M) after its formation in 1964. He wrote the famous pamphlets called “Eight Documents” on the possibilities and crisis of an Indian peasant revolution. These documents played a vital role in the Naxalbari movement. He was the Chairman of the CPI(ML) party from its inception until his arrest and death in custody in 1972. For further information see *The Role of Individual in the History Charu Majumdar in the Naxal Movement: A Case Study* by Monalisa Basu, PhD dissertation, University of Calcutta, 2017.

17 For a catalogue of what happened in the 1960s that led to the Naxalbari movement one may refer to Arup Kumar Das’s *Ganajuddher Dinapanji (1960–1979)* (“Daily Catalogue of the People’s War, 1960–1979”).

Moreover, the key intellectuals and leaders associated with the Naxalbari Movement found much of their revolutionary inspirations not only in the immediate context of Maoist China but also in the anti-colonial wars waged by Vietnamese peasants against the imperialist French and American forces, in the Black Panther Movements in the USA and in the student protests against authoritarianism in Mexico. The genocide in erstwhile East Pakistan and the subsequent war for Bangladesh's independence provided a vast internationalist context and imaginary for framing the Naxalbari Movement as an emancipatory people's war led by peasants and students against the brutal might of an exploitative state.¹⁸ Not only Mao's *Little Red Book* but also Carlos Marighela's manual on urban revolutionary warfare provided possible routes to combat the repressive Indian state and destroy the stranglehold of the country's bourgeoisie over the country's wretched masses.¹⁹

By the very late 1960s, a savage and protracted guerrilla war would come to engulf not just rural West Bengal, but also the everyday urban landscape of Kolkata. Charu Mazumdar famously reiterated the Maoist line that "political power flows from the barrel of a gun" and called for the termination of ideological class enemies. The years from 1969 to 1972 in particular would see horrific incidents of torture, revolutionary terror, extra-judicial killings, assassinations and pitched street battles between young Naxalbari activists on the one hand and an uneasy coalition of police forces and cadres of "reactionary" political parties like the Indian National Congress and Communist parties opposed to the Maoist line, on the other. The CPI(ML), especially after 1969, adopted revolutionary terror as a key strategy of the Naxalbari Movement and emphasized the policy of *khotom* or the annihilation of landlords, reactionary political opponents and the police as class enemies. Annihilation was, for the CPI(ML), the only justice for those who supported and upheld an oppressive social order that perpetuated the exploitation of the poor and the deprived.

The state responded with equal ferocity – indiscriminately killing, maiming and torturing young people picked up randomly as potential Naxals. Entire neighbourhoods in Kolkata, especially with their complex geographies of serpentine lanes, like Dum Dum, Baranagar or Tollygunge, became virtual war zones where Naxalite cadres with their crude bombs, improvised guns (famously called "pipe-guns") and switch-blades waged an unequal but bloody fight with the sophisticated arsenal of the police forces. Killings led to counter-killings as police

18 Sumanta Banerjee in *India's Simmering Revolution: The Naxalite Uprising* (1984) has extensively discussed the impact of the war for independence in Bangladesh on the Naxalbari Movement and the ideological debates surrounding this war within the CPI(ML) (see especially pages 233-243).

19 The impact of international radical politics and the revolutionary theory of the 1960s milieu on the Naxalbari movement has been discussed in detail by Marius Damas in the section "Theories about Revolution and Revolutionary Theory: An Overview" of the "Introduction" to his book *Approaching Naxalbari*, which discusses the impact of revolutionary thinkers such as Che Guevara, Amilcar Cabral, Régis Debray and Carlos Marighela (Damas 1991: 1-62).

officials such as Runu Guha Niyogi²⁰ gained fearsome notoriety for their “expertise” in horrific forms of torture during routine interrogations. “Third-degree” – the euphemism for slow, methodical and savage torture of convicts, popular amongst Indian police forces since colonial times, became the norm in countless prison cells and lock-ups all over West Bengal and Kolkata. This period of unmitigated violence and pain affected poets and artists of the period, including both CPI(ML) activists as well as those sympathetic to the movement. Nabarun Bhattacharya’s poem *Ei Mrityu Upatyaka Amar Desh Na* (“This Valley of Death is Not My Homeland”), for example, became an iconic text describing the brutality of the state against activists with a note of despair and rage. There were also strong critiques of the indiscriminate violence perpetrated by the revolutionary party cadres on police personnel from humble backgrounds or upon the activists who were expelled from the CPI(ML) with charges of disloyalty and suspected as agents of the state. Memoirs by erstwhile activists such as Krishna Bandyopadhyay²¹ or literary works by authors like Saibal Mitra²² repeatedly evoke the fearsome nature of violence witnessed during the Naxalbari years.

Naxalbari and the crisis of Indian “leftist politics”

A crucial element behind the rise of the Naxalbari Movement in West Bengal was the social history of the state following India’s independence in 1947 and the role of Communist party politics in this history. Indeed, the decades from the 1940s saw enormous socio-political upheavals affecting the entire province and particularly the city of Kolkata. The infamous Bengal Famine of 1943²³ completely decimated rural Bengal and led to the desperate migration of millions of famished peasants to Kolkata. The uncertainty and fluctuations in the world markets during the Second World War years meant that Kolkata’s industrial outputs, particularly jute, were badly affected. If on the one hand thousands of

20 Runu Guha Niyogi, a police officer in the 1970s, was infamous for the extra-judicial murder of suspected criminals including Naxalbari activists. He was also accused of the torture and rape in custody of convicts and pre-trial detainees. The most well-known case against him was filed by Archana Guha, a Naxalbari activist arrested in 1974, on grounds of torture and rape causing her partial paralysis. For further information see Saumen Guha’s *Battle of Archana Guha Case Against Torture in Police Custody: Arguments, Counter-arguments and Judgement at the Trial Court* (1998).

21 Krishna Bandyopadhyay is a prominent feminist left-leaning activist from West Bengal who was involved in Naxalbari politics in her youth. It is difficult to find any detailed study on her except her own short memoirs and accounts (Bandyopadhyay 2008, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c).

22 Saibal Mitra (1943–2011) was an author activist involved from his youth in the student movement. He wrote several books on the communist movement and student politics. Many of his novels, such as *Agrababini* and *Agnir Upakhyān*, present a critical account of the Naxalbari movement. See also Mitra’s *Panchti Bajra-nirghosher Upanyas* (2011).

23 The Bengal famine of 1943 was largely a man-made famine in Eastern India that occurred as a result of British taxation policies, hoarding, black-marketeering and the acute economic crisis created by the transference of wealth to maintain British troops during the Second World War. For a recent study on the Bengal famine see Janam Mukherjee’s *Hungry Bengal: War, Famine and the End of Empire* (2015).

former industrial workers were finding themselves without a livelihood, the once secure middle-class homes were equally racked by fears of unemployment, immiseration and poverty. The 1947 Partition of India, marked by ferocious communal violence, ultimately saw a vast deluge of refugees from East Pakistan to the newly formed state of West Bengal and especially Kolkata.

By the end of the 1940s even the pretence of Kolkata's colonial era glory as "the second most important city of the British Empire" had dissipated as the city and its urban fringes filled with impoverished squatter colonies of refugees. Around this time, the undivided Communist Party of India (CPI)²⁴ gained a powerful presence in both Kolkata and Bengal politics by advocating for the dispossessed refugees. The precarious refugee communities found a new hope, especially in Kolkata, in the Communist ideologies of social equality and perceived the ruling nationalist Congress Party as mainly allied with a powerful block of urban corporate elites and propertied rural landowning classes or *jotdars*.²⁵ Even after independence, the absence of a significant land reform programme not only accentuated the wealth of the *jotdars* but led to harrowing levels of poverty amongst the rural peasantry. The Tebhaga Movement in West Bengal²⁶ had already established the ability of the Communist Party to mobilise the peasantry as a revolutionary force in Bengal politics – as a matter of fact, Naxalbari leaders like Charu Mazumder were initiated into peasant insurgency through the Tebhaga Movement.²⁷ The Food Movement²⁸ in West Bengal further established the ability of Communist groups and especially the CPI party

24 The Communist Party of India (CPI) is the oldest existing Indian Communist Party and was officially founded on 26 December 1925. It is currently one of the eight national parties of India. For further reference see "Brief History of CPI" at <https://sites.google.com/a/communistparty.in/cpi/brief-history-of-cpi> (accessed 28 May 2021).

25 *Jotdars* were wealthy owners of vast tract of lands, mainly from the upper caste, for whom the *bargadars* or landless peasants worked. These land divisions were created during the rule of the East India Company in Bengal as part of its taxation policies.

26 The Tebhaga Movement took place between 1946 and 1947 in eastern India against the *jotdars* when peasants demanded one-third (the word Tebhaga means one-third) of the total produce. The peasants in certain cases broke into the granaries and snatched their one-third share. The movement was supported and led by the CPI and it was partly successful, as some *jotdars* willingly surrendered the one-third share of crops to the peasants. For further information on the Tebhaga Movement see Kunal Chattopadhyay's *Tebhaga Andoloner Itihash* (1987).

27 The repeated and continued failure of the Indian state since independence to address the crisis of the landless labourers oppressed by the colonial system of taxation and the unchallenged social and economic power of the landed gentry created a situation of armed rebellion more than once. The Tebhaga uprising in Bengal in 1946–1947 and the Kakdwip uprising of 1948 exemplify such peasant movements backed by the Communist Party of India. The Kisan Sabha - the peasant front of the CPI - lacked the conviction to continue with the violent agitation, however, and accepted the Bargadar Act of 1951 to settle disputes between sharecroppers and landlords passed by B.C. Roy, the Indian National Congress Chief Minister of West Bengal. See *Tebhaga Andoloner Itihash* (Chattopadhyay 1987: 71–99).

28 The Food Movement took place in West Bengal twice, in 1959 and 1966. The continuing food crisis, due to the practice of the hoarding of crops and the corruption of Public Distribution System, produced a famine-like situation that led to spontaneous violence and food riots in 1959 and 1966 under the Indian National Congress Chief Ministers B.C. Roy and Prafulla Sen, respectively. The Price Increase and Famine Resistance Committee (PIFRC) of the CPI that had led the movement curtailed it in 1959. In 1966 it recurred with rampant violence and confrontations between police and agitators in which Nurul Islam, a school student was killed. For further information see Sibaji Pratim Basu (2019).

structure to organise spontaneous but mass youth movements to address social inequalities in both rural and urban contexts.

However, by the early 1960s, the CPI was increasingly losing its revolutionary character and was seen as leaning towards a reformist agenda of electoral politics and parliamentary participation. The stage was set for a radical turn in Communist politics, as the seething anger of dispossessed masses could no longer count on the CPI to usher in the long-promised revolution. In the opening chapter of his book *An Approach to Naxalbari*, activist Asit Sen²⁹ traces the maturation of Maoist politics in the 1960s due to the inherent pacifist and revisionist tendencies of the original Communist Party of India in the post-independence period (Sen 1980: 1–36). This led to the initial split in the CPI in 1964³⁰ leading to the formation of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) – CPI(M).³¹ Despite its subversive rhetoric, however, the CPI(M) participated in West Bengal’s electoral politics in 1967 and enjoyed a formidable presence in the United Front coalition government in the state, which managed to end the unbroken Congress Party rule in West Bengal since 1947. The uneasy relationship between Communist and non-Communist parties of the United Front, however, failed to bring any political stability to a state that was witnessing escalating violence, economic distress and mass discontent amongst radicalised youth populations. Successive elected governments in West Bengal followed in the short span from 1967 to 1970 and finally President’s Rule – the suspension of the state government and imposition of direct rule by the centre – was imposed on the state, which was rapidly shifting towards the Naxalbari moment of Revolution.³²

29 Asit Sen (1920–1996) established the Institute of Marxism-Leninism in 1964 for ideological discussions on the subject. He was a supporter of the anti-revisionist revolutionary line within the CPI(M) party. Later, after being expelled from CPI(M) on 30 June 1967 for supporting the Naxalbari uprising, he became a member of the All India Co-ordination Committee of Communist Revolutionaries (AICCCR) in 1968. Even after presiding over the rally on 1 May 1969 when the formation of CPI(ML) was announced, Asit Sen distanced himself from the party on the grounds of the authoritarianism and lack of democracy within the party. Late, he penned a critical account of the movement in 1980. For further reference to Asit Sen see *Asit Sen: Jibanpanji* (“Asit Sen: A Timeline”, Dashadhikari 2012–2013: 295–304).

30 The Communist Party of India (CPI) was split into two with the creation of Communist Party of India (Marxist) on 7 November 1964 due to the inner party clash based on arguments against revisionism within the CPI that attempted to defer the path of revolution, and the nationalist line taken up by CPI during the Indo-China War in 1962 (Sen 1980: 1–36).

31 In 1962 nationalist political parties like the Indian National Congress made an attempt to shift the focus from mass agitation using jingoistic nationalism in the context of the Indo-China War, and there was discontent within the CPI for officially taking a nationalist position against China. This and the repeated backtracking from the question of revolution turned out to be some of the major reasons behind the first split in communist party in 1964 and the formation of CPI(M) (Sen 1980: 1–36).

32 When the CPI(M) came to power in alliance with Indian National Congress (INC) to form the United Front government under Ajoy Mukherjee in 1967, defeating Prafulla Sen from INC, it created enormous hope among poor peasants and the revolutionary faction of CPI(M). But this hope was shattered by the denunciation of the revolutionary line after the events in Naxalbari by the conservative parliamentarians inside the CPI(M). The rebellious group in CPI(M) continued to organise violent agitation against the land-owning classes and were expelled by the party. The government failed in the state four times between 1967 and 1972 and President’s Rule was declared thrice in this period until the establishment of the INC government led by Siddhartha Sankar Roy on 20 March 1972. The 1972 INC government ruthlessly broke the Naxalbari movement, killing thousands of youths across the state. For a more comprehensive account see Sumanta Banerjee’s *India’s Simmering Revolution* (1984).

In the meantime, ideological dissensions between the moderates and the radicals within the CPI(M) – especially on the question of revolution – between 1964 and 1969 had resulted in further fragmentation of Communist party politics in the state, culminating in the formation of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) or CPI(ML) on the anniversary of Lenin’s birth in 1969. The CPI(ML) decisively marked a break with electoral politics and committed itself to the Maoist revolutionary ideologies of class warfare.³³

If the CPI(ML) provided the party structure and a dedicated mass following of young comrades to advance the cause of armed Maoist revolution, the “charismatic leadership” was provided by Comrade Charu Mazumdar (or CM to his admirers). The main course of action of the Naxalbari Movement came from Charu Mazumdar’s famous *Eight Documents*, written and circulated among activists between 1964 and 1967 (Mazumdar 2012, Volume 1: 17–62).³⁴ Mazumdar’s call for the “Spring Thunder” (as the Naxalbari incident was called by the Communist Party of China on Peking Radio immediately afterwards)³⁵ demanded a break with all reactionary and representative ideals of political mobilisation that characterised most of the other dominant Communist parties in India such as the CPI and the CPI(M). Moreover, Naxalbari intellectuals saw their contemporary movement as a continuation of a long lineage of subaltern armed struggles led by impoverished rural peasants and Adivasis against the depredations of their exploiters, such as colonial administrators, landowners and money-lenders. For instance, they suggested strong linkages between the armed revolution in the wake of Naxalbari to earlier instances of peasant resistance such as the Tebhaga movement and the 1947–1951 Telangana peasant uprising (against exploitation by feudal lords).³⁶

33 The CPI(ML), the third communist party of India, was formed from a faction of the co-ordination committee (AICCCR) of rebel leaders of the CPI(M) party on 22 April 1969 (Sen 1980: 61–85). Suprakash Ray (the pseudonym of Sudhir Bhattacharya), a prominent ideological sympathiser with the Naxalbari Movement, demonstrated through a study of the history of Communism in India between 1928 and 1968 how the pacifist line of thinking within the dominant communist parties such as the CPI paradoxically precipitated the radical Maoist turn in Indian Communist thought in the 1960s (Ray 2010).

34 Kanu Sanyal, a principal CPI(ML) member closely allied with Mazumdar, in his document *Naxalbari Somporke Aro Kichu Katha* (“More on Naxalbari”, *Dashadhikari* 2010: 273–290) suggested how the idea of armed resistance as a means of mass politics in Indian Communist thought came from Charu Mazumdar’s *Eight Documents*. Kanu Sanyal summarises the arguments of the *Eight Documents* as follows: “The CPI(M) is a revisionist party. This must be unmasked so that India’s liberation can proceed by following the Chinese path. Immediate tasks are armed resistance and the creation of a secret guerrilla group; setting fire to landlords’ houses and snatching their guns are also important duties. The masses should be mobilised by means of ‘action’ instead of a political campaign, so that mass organisation and movement are no longer needed” (p. 280, translation by the authors).

35 Published subsequently in *People’s Daily*, the organ of the Central Committee of Communist Party of China on 5 July 1967 (Ghosh 1992: 228–231). The title of a 1970 *Peking Review* article “A Single Spark Can Start A Prairie Fire” (Mazumdar 2012, Volume 2: 294–298) demonstrated how the Chinese Communist Party perceived the Naxalbari event and Charu Mazumdar’s subsequent actions as the revolutionary fire.

36 For the relationship among these movements see Tarun Ray’s *Tebhaga-Telangana-Naxalbari* (Ray 1989: 9–26).

A poem titled *Agami* (“Future”) by Mridul Dasgupta³⁷ drew a broad historical arc connecting spontaneous Adivasi rebels of the Santhal Rebellion,³⁸ the Tebhaga peasant insurgents, the foot soldiers of 1857 rebellion³⁹ and the anti-colonial extremists with the Maoist heroes of Naxalbari:

It was a similar night, motionless, spectral air;
Pistols roaring now and then, this time
Binoy, Badal in another name has won the balcony war,
Son of Surja Sen piercing the air-conditioned air entered the gorgeous club;
Sidhu, Kanhu, Chand and Bhairav reached Kolkata with a different name by then;
Sixty thousand soldiers and Mangal Pandey with fixed perfect target
Reverses the Guns;
Suppose, another night like this, in Jallianwala Bagh
Dyer’s gun snatched by that precious lad
Dronacharya Ghosh!
Think; Think the festival that day! From Baranagar Ganga
Come out once more
Three hundred young men.⁴⁰ (Dasgupta 2017: 245)

The poem attempts a twisting of historical time – for such is the nature of revolutionary exuberance that shatters the stranglehold of bourgeois notions of linear causality and historical chronology. The nationalist heroes of early twentieth-century anti-colonial armed resistance such as Binoy, Badal and Surja Sen occupy the same temporal space as the martyred heroes of the nineteenth-century Santhal rebellion such as Sidhu, Kanhu, Chand and Bhairav, as well as Mangal Pandey, the leader of the 1857 Mutiny. The experiences of state repression connect those massacred at Jallianwala Bagh⁴¹ by the British General Dyer during the colonial period with the young Naxalite comrades butchered in northern Kolkata’s

37 Mridul Dasgupta (b. 1955) is a journalist and poet. His first collection of poems *Jalpai Kather Esraj* (1980) contains several poems on the violent revolutionary upsurge and atrocities of the state. The current poem is originally from that collection. For more on Mridul Dasgupta and collection of his works see Mridul Dasgupta’s page on the Milansagar website: http://www.milansagar.com/kobi/mridul_dasgupta/kobimriduldg.html (accessed 29 May 2021).

38 The Santhal Rebellion, popularly known as Santhal-Hool, took place in today’s Jharkhand in Eastern India. It was an uprising of Santhals against the colonial British administration and local landlords that started on 30 June 1855. The movement was led by Sidhu, Kanu, Chand and Bhairav. It was brutally suppressed by the British government and ended by 1856. For further reference see “Civil Rebellions and Tribal Uprisings” by Bipan Chandra and others (Chandra et al. 2012).

39 The Revolt of 1857 was an Indian uprising also popularly known as the Sepoy Mutiny and First Indian War of Independence. It started on 10 May 1857 as a mutiny of Indian soldiers under the British army in Meerut and erupted in other mutinies and civilian uprisings in the upper Gangetic plain and Central India. For further reference see *First Major Challenge: The Revolt of 1857* by Bipan Chandra and others (Chandra et al. 2012).

40 Dasgupta 2017: 245; written sometime between 1970 and 1979, translation by the authors.

41 The Jallianwala Bagh massacre occurred on 13 April 1919 when, suspecting a possible insurrection, the Acting Brigadier General Reginald Dyer ordered British troops to open fire on a group of peaceful unarmed people gathered in Jallianwala Bagh, Amritsar, Punjab to celebrate the Indian festival Baisakhi. 379 people were killed and over 1200 grievously injured. For further reference see V. N. Dutta’s book *Jallianwala Bagh* (2021).

Cossipore-Baranagar area.⁴² The act of resistance is personified in the figure of the Naxalite revolutionary poet Dronacharya Ghosh⁴³ snatching the gun from General Dyer, the man who initiated the Jallianwala Bagh genocide.⁴⁴ Mrinal Sen's⁴⁵ film *Kolkata 71* set in 1971 is an almost real-time depiction of violence and mass agitation that similarly showed the continuities in historical experiences of exploitation and deprivation leading to the revolutionary time of the Naxalbari Movement. It opened and closed with scenes of street violence as well as police brutality. It made its nameless narrator-protagonist an angry twenty-year old youth who carries the burden of a "thousand-year-old" history of exploitation, hunger and rage. Four different stories representing four different time periods before and after the decolonisation of India portray repeated cycles of suffering and exploitation of the poor in the film. Sen used to roam around the city capturing shots of mass agitation and violent confrontations for use in his films (Sen 2015: 105). The difference between politics and its representation is collapsed in *Kolkata 71* as the cinematic moment approximates Kolkata's street-politics in real time.

Intellectual vanguardism

From its very inception, the Naxalbari Movement celebrated (primarily urban) intellectual and political vanguardism, with its key leaders claiming foreknowledge of the revolutionary upheavals – in spite of its repeated invocations of spontaneous, armed resistance by rural subaltern populations. Sushital Roychoudhury,⁴⁶ one of the Naxalbari pioneers as well as an internal critic of the

42 The Cossipore-Baranagar massacre was an infamous police operation in that area, located in South 24 Parganas, near Kolkata. This brutal attack and mass murder of young men suspected of being Naxalites happened on 12 and 13 August 1971. The death toll was claimed to be between 80 and 100 though no official record was provided. The dead bodies were carried in hand-pulled carts and dumped into the Baranagar Ganges. For further reference see Economic & Political Weekly 1971.

43 Naxalite martyr poet Dronacharya Ghosh was tortured to death in police custody on 6 August 1972. He was a partner of the social activist and fellow revolutionary Krishna Bandyopadhyay. For further reference see Dronacharya Ghosh's *Gronthito O Gronthito Kobita o Dinolipi* (2013).

44 Saroj Dutta, in his article *Murti Bhangar Somorthone* ("Supporting the Breaking of Statues", Dutta 1993: 60–67) invoked the same legacy of a continuity of subaltern uprisings in Indian history and placed the Naxalbari Movement in a longer lineage of anti-colonial resistance and peasant movements.

45 Mrinal Sen (1923–2018) was one of the most important Bengali filmmakers, who directed several political films throughout his career and won several national and international awards. His set of three films *Interview* (1971), *Kolkata 71* (1972) and *Padatik* (1973), known popularly as the Calcutta Trilogy and made during the turbulent period of Naxalbari, critically focused on the crisis of the period and its politics. For more about his work and politics see his memoir *Tritiyo Bhuban* (2015).

46 Sushital Roychoudhury (1917–1971) was one of the major ideologues of the Naxalbari movement. He participated in the Tebhaga Movement and during the first split of the Communist party took the pro-Chinese line and went with the CPI(M). He was on the editorial board of *Deshabitaishi*, one of the organs of CPI(M) until his expulsion from the party for supporting Naxalbari in 1967. After joining CPI(ML) he acted as editor of *Deshabrati* and *Liberation*, its Bengali and English party organs, at different points. He distanced

movement, drew attention to this contradiction inherent in the CPI(ML) style of politics after the first party congress in 1970, in two documents.⁴⁷ In the second document (Dashadhikari 1999: 1–20) Roychoudhury criticised Charu Mazumdar’s prophetic assertion that 1975 would be the date of the revolution’s fulfilment⁴⁸ as unwarranted intellectual vanguardism. While the unplanned emotive exuberance of Mazumdar’s assertion could be understood as folly, it also marked a break from bourgeois rationalisation of the gradual and linear unfolding of democracy through electoral politics. The Naxalbari Movement made an epochal break with such an evolutionary historical unfolding of politics and instead laid bare a revolutionary horizon that demanded sacrifice, spontaneity, bloodshed (if necessary) and an unshakeable faith that the moment of revolution has already arrived.

The CPI(ML) leaders cited the example of Naxalbari as an instance of taking revolution beyond the chambers of rational discussions and long drawn out debates. Charu Mazumdar, in the second of his Eight Documents, had disparaged the transformation of the communist party into a debating society, which is a bourgeois tendency to defer political mobilisation and action (Mazumdar 2012, Volume 1: 25–26.) Therefore what was urgent for Mazumdar was to bypass the long process of mobilisation through mass organisations, ideological indoctrination of peasants and industrial workers, and the gradual movement from economic demands to a struggle for political power.⁴⁹ Moreover, with the formation of the CPI(ML), a “cult of personality” had also evolved around the figure of Charu Mazumdar, supported by his close allies including Asim Chatterjee,⁵⁰ Saroj Dutta and Kanu Sanyal. Mazumdar’s authoritarian leadership brooked no ideological opposition within the CPI(ML) and any attempts to bring up alternative modes of political mobilisation by party members led to their immediate denunciation as reactionaries and expulsion from the party.

himself from the CPI(ML) in 1970 after expressing his ideological differences with the central party line through two documents. For more articles and references on Sushital Roychoudhury see *Ananya Sushital* (Dashadhikari 1999).

47 One of them was famously known as *Purna’s Document* (Dashadhikari 1999: 21–36) after the underground pseudonym of Sushital Roychoudhury. The other, written around the same time, but not released until after his death, is called *Hatakari Baamponthi Nitike Protibata Korun* (“Resist the Foolhardy Left Principles”, Dashadhikari 1999: 1–20).

48 See Mazumdar’s “By 1975 Millions of Indian Masses will Create a Great Epic of Liberation” (Mazumdar 2012, Volume 2: 116–118).

49 Yet it can be argued, following Suniti Kumar Ghosh, that mass politics, ideological work and economic struggle were not totally abandoned in the early works of Charu Mazumdar despite the emphasis on guerrilla action and the quest for political power (see Suniti Kumar Ghosh, Charu Mazumdar O Communist Andolone Biplobi Dhara, Dashadhikari 2009: 224–242). A relationship developed between these two forms of struggle, at least during the early phase, as reflected in the Eight Documents (Mazumdar 2012, Volume 1: 17–62). Later, the former line was abandoned, as decided at the 1970 CPI(ML) congress (Dashadhikari 2009: 226).

50 Asim Chatterjee (b. 1944) was one of the most prominent student leaders of the CPI(ML) party from its inception. In 1971 he broke with the party owing to his difference with their views on the liberation struggle of East Pakistan. He then formed the Bengal-Bihar-Orissa Border Regional Committee of CPI(ML) as a separate faction of the movement. He is popularly known as “Kaka” (Mazumdar Volume 2, 2012: 334).

On 23 April 1972, in a prophetic last meeting between Charu Mazumdar and Suniti Kumar Ghosh,⁵¹ Majumdar agreed to call a meeting and engage in self-criticism.⁵² Archives would show how Charu Mazumdar's last letter written to his wife on 14 July 1972 (which fell into the hands of the police and precipitated his eventual arrest) reflects the leader's intention to review some of his positions when he finally concedes that "there has been widespread criticism in the party ... Revisions will be made".⁵³ Yet that moment of self-criticism and opportunity for course-correction would never arrive, as he would be arrested on 16 July 1972 and died in custody of cardiac arrest on 28 July 1972.⁵⁴

Notwithstanding the authoritarian tendencies within the CPI(ML) leadership, the latent socio-economic tensions exposed by the movement provoked a fecund exchange of ideas between various Communist parties in the 1960s that has remained unmatched till today. In this ideological "war of positions", primarily carried out in multiple political journals, even the Naxalbari intellectuals often strayed far from the CPI(ML) party orthodoxies.

The Naxalbari vision of the political did not remain confined to the struggle for the control of the state despite their emphasis on the capture of political power through violence. It also meant addressing the contradictions between landless peasants and the complex nexus of feudalism, capitalism and colonialism/neo-colonialism. The CPI(ML) party leadership emphasised armed guerrilla action over mass mobilisation and economic struggle.⁵⁵ They also minimised the importance of argumentation. However, parallel to this call for direct action, a "culture of critique" informed by a "negative dialectics", as Ranabir Samaddar had put it (2019: 279), meant that Naxalbari intellectuals engaged in animated debates in radical left-leaning journals.⁵⁶ These journals functioned beyond the

51 Suniti Kumar Ghosh (1918–2014) was the editor of the English party organ of the CPI(ML) called *Liberation*. After Saroj Dutta's disappearance in 1971 he also took charge of the Bengali organ *Deshabrati*. Following Charu Mazumdar's death he published a self-critical view of the movement in *Frontier*. Later he formed another faction of the party called COC, CPI(ML) with Jagjit Singh Sohal. He is also the author of several important books on social sciences including *India and the Raj* and *The Indian Big Bourgeoisie* (Mazumdar 2012, Volume 2: 333).

52 Suniti Kumar Ghosh discussed this meeting of 23 April 1972 in his articles *Sesh Dekha* ("Last Meeting") and *Charu Mazumdar O Communist Andolone Biplobi Dhara* ("Charu Mazumdar and the Revolutionary Line in the Communist Movement"), reprinted in *Ebong Jalark* (Special Issue on Charu Mazumdar; see Dashadhikari 2009: 196–205, 224–242). This magazine has reprinted original documents and writings by a variety of Naxalbari activists.

53 Charu Mazumdar quoted in the newspaper report "Letter led to Arrest of Majumdar" published in *Hindustan Standard*, Calcutta, Tuesday, 18 July 1972 (Dashadhikari 2009: 59).

54 See newspaper reports "Letter led to Arrest of Majumdar" in *Hindustan Standard*, Calcutta, Tuesday, 18 July 1972 and "Charu Majumdar Dead" in *The Statesman*, Calcutta, Saturday, 29 July 1972 (Dashadhikari 2009: 58–60, 85–87).

55 See "Political Resolution of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist)" (Ghosh 1992: 46–54).

56 Madhumay Pal discusses the more politically inclined magazines that grew around the critical questions raised by the Naxalbari event in his collection of original documents on the movement. He writes: "Three issues of *Krantikaal* were released after 1964. The magazine *Chinta* was released from 1965 onwards [...] Since 1967 *Dakshindesh*, *Purbadesh*, *Bhitti*, *Puber Hawa*, *Chhatrafouj*, *Commune*, *Abad*, *Kalpurush*, *Ghatana-prabaha* and many more journals and magazines have left the impression and testimony of the political debates of the age, which can itself be a subject of research" (Pal 2017: 131–132).

political authoritarianism that characterised the party organs of the CPI(ML) – *Deshabrati* (in Bengali) and *Liberation* (in English).⁵⁷ *Deshabrati* was founded by Naxalbari sympathisers within the CPI(M) after they were expelled from that party for supporting the Naxalbari uprising and forcefully thrown out of the management of the CPI(M) organ *Deshahitaishi*.⁵⁸ With the formation of the CPI(ML) on 22 April 1969, *Deshabrati* became the pronounced party organ of the CPI(ML). Some people associated with *Deshabrati* refused to join the CPI(ML) and expressed their objections. But these dissident supporters of the movement were alienated from the magazine when it became the party organ.

It is also important to keep in mind that, even before *Deshabrati* was founded, another magazine called *Chinta* propagated radical thought beyond the hegemony of any party (Sen 1980: 30). *Dakshin Desh* is another prominent political journal that articulated notions of armed revolution even before the Naxalbari event of 1967 (Sen 1980: 39).⁵⁹ Although journals such as *Chinta* and *Dakshin Desh* inveighed against the CPI(ML) policy of abandoning mass organisation, they also insisted upon the need for revolution. These groups also wrote against the propaganda and false hope generated by the CPI(ML) and the latter’s intolerance of dissent and blind leap into guerrilla action.⁶⁰ The *Dakshin Desh* group chose to maintain the Coordination Committee of Revolutionaries, even after a large number of its members left to form the CPI(ML) party.

Criticism emerged as the strongest element of the Naxalbari movement, with its counter-hegemonic and confrontational style of politics. The CPI(ML) repeatedly tried to silence criticism, denouncing dissenting opinions of even the most committed comrades as revisionist. Paranoia and conspiracy theories were spread about dissenters and the party increasingly adopted an anti-intellectual posture.⁶¹ Charu Mazumdar proposed that comrades not read too much, as books might distract them from the diktats of the party, the real harbinger of revolution.⁶² Relying heavily on Chinese Marxism and the theories of Mao Ze-

57 Apart from these political journals, literary journals such as *Aneek* and *Anustup* in Bengali and the social science journal *Frontier* in English contained more critical and creative debates on Naxalbari. Although they did not have any particular party affiliation, they nonetheless acknowledged many of the Naxalbari criticisms of the Indian state and the dominant social and intellectual classes.

58 After the expulsion, which occurred on 28 June 1967 (following the Naxalbari uprisings on 24 and 25 May of that year), the Naxalbari supporters formed *Deshabrati* as their mouthpiece on 6 July 1967.

59 This group formed a separate organisation called the *Maoist Coordination Committee* (MCC) on 20 October 1969 to continue their struggle and produce their own Naxalbari legacy. For details see “Co-ordination Committee o CPI(ML)-r Songe ‘Dakshin Desh’-er Somporke—MCC-r Jonmo” published in 1994 by MCC (Pal 2017: 246–253).

60 See “CPI(ML)-er Rajnoitik Prostab Somporke Koekti Katha” (Pal 2017: 237–245) and “Kakshar Siksha Nin: Bam Line Borjon Korun” (Pal 2017: 75–79) in *Dakshin Desh* magazine in the years 1969 and 1974, respectively.

61 See discussions in *Naxalbari and Indian Revolution* (Sengupta 1983: 112–116), originally translated from the Bengali book *Biplab Kon Pothe* (1970).

62 See Mazumdar’s “A Few Words to the Revolutionary Students and Youth” (Mazumdar 2012, Volume 2: 61–69).

dong, often without considering their appropriateness for the Indian context, he insisted that young party comrades read only a few writings by Mao, as well as *The Quotations of People's War* published by the Central Committee of the great Communist Party of China (Mazumdar 2012, Volume 1: 80). He promoted experience as a mode of knowledge acquisition for Naxalite radicals, who were required to share their lives with destitute peasants and landless agricultural labourers. Through its attack on bourgeois historiography and knowledge, the CPI(ML) leadership erected its own foundational principles, marked by adventurism and the personality cult of Charu Majumdar. This also gave a romantic aura to the revolutionary violence that appealed mostly to middle-class student groups, rather than proletarian workers or peasants. Sambhu Rakshit⁶³ in a poem⁶⁴ titled *Rajniti* ("Politics") makes a powerful and self-reflexive critique of this romanticisation of urban youth members relocating to the villages for political radicalism. He writes:

When I return to the village with the kinship of my progress
 I feel scared; Sunshine, water, the rage of farmers all seem false to me
 ...
 Honestly speaking I do not love the village and all that; I don't even think of doing
 anything for the village
 It seems my only task is to
 Study the awakened eyes, arms, faces, and prophesy the future.⁶⁵

If 1975 was the year prophesied by Charu Mazumdar as the successful fulfilment of the Naxalbari Revolution, then Sambhu Rakshit's poem (published the same year) exposes the deep sense of estrangement felt by urban radical youths sent to live with the rural peasantry in whose name the revolution was supposed to be waged.

Poetics and politics of revolution

Decades before the brutal killing of peasants in Naxalbari in 1967, Saroj Dutta had already offered a trenchant critique of modernist Bengali literature, influenced by a Freudian emphasis on the individual psyche, as a distraction from the path of historical materialism (Dutta 1993: 51–57). More broadly, the CPI(ML) insistence on political art that focused only on the question of revolution made personal intimacy and the individual psyche superfluous. On the one hand, this

63 Sambhu Rakshit (1948–2020) was the youngest poet among the Hungrealists, the experimental group of poets and authors from West Bengal in 1970s. For more on Sambhu Rakshit and his works see Sambhu Rakshit's page on the Milansagar website http://www.milansagar.com/kobi_8/sambhu_rakshit/kobi-sambhu-rakshit.html (accessed 29 May 2021).

64 Published in the 1975 special issue on politics of the magazine *Kolkata*.

65 Rakshit 1975: 68, translation by the authors.

led to a proliferation of literature depicting the miseries of the working poor and the revolutionary artist’s sacrifice, which became increasingly suffused with masculine fantasies of revolutionary violence and courage against all odds. Immediately after the Naxalbari event, when Ajit Pandey⁶⁶ composed his famous song “Terai Weeps oh/ weeps my heart/ Naxalbari field weeps/ For seven daughters” (translation by authors) dedicated to the martyrs, Charu Mazumdar requested that he change the word “weeps” to “burns” as a means of foregrounding the emotional tenor of rage against oppression rather than the pain of loss. On the other hand, this reductive approach to revolutionary art invited internal criticism and doubt regarding the leadership in various cultural productions. An excessive emphasis on revolutionary praxis undoubtedly prevented CPI(ML) affiliated intellectuals and artists from developing a clearly defined aesthetic theory of their own. Nonetheless, the party orthodoxy’s repressive tendency initiated a wide-ranging practice of interrogating cultural forms and aesthetic expressions emanating both from the past as well as the CPI(ML) leadership.

As suggested earlier in the article, Utpal Dutta’s⁶⁷ 1967 play *Teer* (“Arrow”, Dutta 1995: 215–326), written and performed about the Naxalbari police action against the peasants, remains one of the most powerful examples of the cultural expression favoured by CPI(ML) intellectuals such as Saroj Dutta.⁶⁸ *Teer* exposed the hypocrisy and reactionary tendencies of the mainstream communist parties associated with the CPI(M)-led United Front government in West Bengal. In the play, when Adivasi leaders organise an uprising against *jotdars* under the patronage of the ruling CPI(M) party, the communist leader Siben characterises it as an American-led capitalist conspiracy, while at the same time seeking help from the US government to curb the revolution. This exposes his hypocrisy and serves to strengthen the revolutionary upsurge. The stage set was designed with six window frames placed high up on the stage, exposing the faces of a suit-wearing capitalist, a *kurta*-clad *jotdar*, a Congress leader wearing a *khuddar* cap, a newspaper editor and a woman wearing loud make-up (representing the consumerist bourgeoisie) – suggesting the tight-knit association among repressive elite groups ranged against the subaltern Adivasis. The faces of the leaders of the mainstream communist parties – such as the CPI(M) – periodically appear in the sixth window, thus exposing the communist parties’ collusion with dominant

66 Ajit Pandey (1937–2013) was a popular singer with leftist sentiments with thirty albums to his credit and was famous for political and folk songs. He was also elected as a Member of the Legislative Assembly from West Bengal under CPI(M) in 1998. For more on Ajit Pandey and his works see Ajit Pandey’s page on the Milansagar website: http://www.milansagar.com/kobi/ajit_pandey/kobi-ajitpandey.html (accessed 29 May 2021).

67 Utpal Dutta (1929–1993) was a highly celebrated political playwright, theatre director and actor (both on stage and in films) from West Bengal. He was also known as a Marxist intellectual and scholar with expertise on dramatic art and Shakespeare. For more information on Utpal Dutta see the opening page of his book *Towards a Revolutionary Theatre* (2009).

68 Utpal Dutta visited Naxalbari to see the situation himself and interviewed some of the militant peasants and their wives. He also met Charu Mazumdar at his house in Siliguri before composing the play (Dutta 2009: 87–89).

social elites. Each face thus represented a particular counter-revolutionary force. The play denounced how CPI(M) leaders (like Siben) failed the subaltern peasantry by collaborating with the *jotdars*, making false promises of revolution and ultimately mobilising state repression against the rebelling peasants. The play's significance lies in its depiction of solidarity networks among various indigenous groups from northern West Bengal, who gradually relinquish their divergent faiths and prejudices in order to pursue revolutionary violence.

While Dutta later conceded that the Naxalbari event was exaggerated in his play, he also pointed out that – “When the volley of police bullets mow down the women in Prasadujot,⁶⁹ only a ‘pure’ intellectual, disdaining taking sides, could remain unmoved” (Dutta 2009: 90).⁷⁰ Violence and rage became privileged literary affects to represent social inequalities and demand redress. These affects dovetailed with the Naxalbari call for the termination of class enemies and modes of oppression. While *Teer* remains a powerful paradigm for cultural productions committed to the Naxalbari cause, its portrayal of collective struggle among poor peasants had little impact on later works depicting Naxalbari, which largely focused on the struggle, suffering, angst and crisis of middle-class activists.

Sexuality and the feminist critique

The real-time politics in artistic productions did not prevent criticism of the dominant Naxalbari party line, despite its celebration of the revolutionary impulse. Mrinal Sen's film *Padatik* (“Foot Soldier”, 1973) is one such example of critical intimacy with Naxalbari politics by a politically sensitive artist. The protagonist, Sumit, is a Naxalite youth who finds safe haven in the apartment of an affluent woman who is separated from her husband. The woman, who undoubtedly belongs to the privileged bourgeoisie, sympathises with the movement because she lost her activist brother in the revolution. Made in 1973, the film shows the final phases of Naxalbari as it was fragmented by police brutality and internal conflict within the CPI(ML) hierarchy. Sumit is increasingly alienated by his growing criticism of the party line, and his radical comrades

69 The village in the Naxalbari area where the 24–25 May 1967 confrontation between police and demonstrating peasants took place.

70 Even after his fallout with the CPI(ML) party line, Dutta continued to support Naxalbari forms of politics in staging plays that related to the legacy of past anti-colonial peasant resistance, such as *Titumeer*, depicting the eponymous leader of Wahabi movement, or that criticised non-violent politics, such as *Manusher Adhikare*, which was based on the crisis of the exploitation of Blacks in the United States. For more on his works and politics see his book *Towards a Revolutionary Theatre* (2009). After his separation from the CPI(ML), when he was arrested for supporting the party and subsequently released (allegedly by surrendering to the government according to some of his critiques), he became an ardent critique of the CPI(ML) party line. He wrote in *Frontier* using the pseudonym Rafiqul Islam, expressing his critical views (Islam 1969: 37–40).

ultimately abandon him over his doubts about the real objectives of revolutionary violence. The film manages a sensitive but sustained depiction of conflict within CPI(ML) politics, where authoritarianism reigned and debate meant expulsion from the party.

In the film, sexual conservatism and petty bourgeois conventional morality, moreover, lead the CPI(ML) leadership to suspect that Sumit is having an affair with his hostess. His life and relationship are scrutinised as he is increasingly suspected of having strayed from the heroic path of revolutionary sacrifice. Although anxiety over the intimate lives of radical activists began appearing in aesthetic productions related to the movement in the early 1970s, Naxalbari’s revolutionary discourse failed to address questions of sexuality and gendered intimacies, except through ideals of sacrifice, rejection and denunciation. Recent scholarship on the Naxalbari movement, authored by Mallarika Sinha Roy (2011) and Srila Roy (2012), focuses on the movement’s gendered and personal aspects, concentrating primarily on the experiential lives of female activists. Sumit’s alienation in *Padatik* may have been caused by his failure to live up to the idealised model “of the ‘revolutionary youth’ – an uncompromising, honour-bound and somewhat naïve young activist who lived and died in that enchanting high tide of radical politics” (Sinha Roy 2011: 67), which is predominantly masculine in nature and “remains one of the most definitive characterisations of the Naxalbari movement” (ibid.).

Control over the personal lives and sexuality of men and women was a regular practice within the revolutionary party. When reflecting on their revolutionary lives, many erstwhile activists’ accounts reveal a self-reflexive and critical view of the movement. In her memoir on Naxalbari, Krishna Bandyopadhyay, a Marxist and Feminist activist from Bengal, criticised the patriarchal culture within the CPI(ML) rank and file, while also acknowledging the movement’s impact on her later life (2008: 52–59). She described how her lover and comrade Dronacharya Ghosh interrupted an intimate moment between them to ask her to read a book by Mao Zedong on class struggle among Chinese peasants. Perhaps he did this because he thought sexual intimacy with a comrade might distract them both from the path of revolution. While Bandyopadhyay celebrates the Naxalbari movement and the ideological emancipation it offered her, she remains critical of party orthodoxy and anxieties surrounding the sexual lives of young activists.

In the novel *Atta Natar Surjo* (2013) by Ashok Mukhopadhyay, Krishna Bandyopadhyay is portrayed as the fictional character Panchali, whose love for the revolutionary poet Dronacharya Ghosh is ultimately frustrated because of his ideological commitment to asceticism. The novel seems to have drawn upon real life accounts such as Krishna Bandyopadhyay’s memoirs (Bandyopadhyay 2008, 2017a–c), which discuss sexual conservatism as part of the revolutionary

activist ideology, and Dronacharya Ghosh's diary (2013), which testifies to his discomfort with sexual relationships.

The novel moves on to show Panchali's second relationship with Nirupam, another comrade from the revolutionary party, after Dronacharya is killed in police custody. The party leadership proscribes this second relationship, and many of her male colleagues resent her supposed lack of sexual fidelity and failure to perform the role of a bereaved widow devoted to the memory of her martyred comrade. As Srila Roy correctly observes – "The irony is that within the radical redefinition of marriage in the movement [...] the labels of 'wife' and 'widow' were largely rendered redundant. Yet, women were made to perform symbolic (and actual) roles that served to restore middle-class codes and expectations of womanhood" (Roy 2012: 79).

Panchali's relationship with the party remains ambiguous throughout the novel. Despite being a middle-class, liberated woman, she has a marginal position within the party. Yet as a female revolutionary, she often expresses a dissenting opinion on certain party ideologies. Once she refuses to abide by the CPI(ML) party's injunction of *khotom*, or "murder", of a male comrade who tried to molest a woman staying in his shelter. She protests, stating that sexual abuse and power plays were regular occurrences within the party, and murdering the perpetrator might not solve the problem. Krishna Bandyopadhyay's multiple accounts (2008, 2017a–c) are framed in the novel as a critique of authoritarianism and patriarchy within the party. The novel depicts the final phases of the Naxalbari Movement as marked by bitter internal schisms and fragmentation over questions of ideological orthodoxy and suffocating debates over moral pretensions.

The novel ends in 2010, after a time lapse of several years. By now, Panchali has become a social activist, and we see her arriving at a tribal village in Jhargram to protest against a police encounter with some Adivasis falsely framed as Maoists. Witnessing children in the village staging a mock confrontation between police and protesters, Panchali remembers her Naxalbari past and her two lovers who gave their lives for the revolutionary cause. She realises that the battle between the state and the revolutionaries continues in a different form. The novel acknowledges the limits of mainstream Naxalbari politics and yet, at the same time, reveals its subversive potential as a radical promise of revolution to redress social inequalities.

The sexual and moral conservatism idealised by the CPI(ML) was part of the general revolutionary consciousness of the period, as reflected in the intellectuals who broadly supported the movement. Samaresh Basu,⁷¹ who penned

71 Samaresh Basu (1924–1988) was a major Bengali writer and was a part of the Trade Union movement and the Communist Party of India for a brief period. In 1949–1950 he was jailed when the Communist Party was declared illegal. He wrote a number of novels on the Naxalbari movement such as *Manushh Shaktir Utsaha* ("Power Comes from People", 1974) or *Mahakaler Rather Ghora* ("Chariot Horse of Time", 1977). His works also dealt deeply with human sexuality and he faced charges of obscenity twice, for his novels *Bibar* (1965) and *Prajapati* (1985). For more on his works see *Samaresh Basu Rachanabali* Volume 7 (Basu 2002: 5–7).

a number of novels depicting Naxalbari, was bitterly criticised in the pages of *Frontier* for his 1968 novel *Patak* (“The Fallen”) for imagining “a Naxalite going straight to a brothel after having a fierce battle with the police” (Chattopadhyay 1968: 15).

Saibal Mitra, an active participant and supporter of the Naxalbari line of politics, was similarly disparaged for his representation of sexual relationships in his 1978 novel *Agrahabini* (Mitra 1990). The novel depicts most of the major political events and internal debates of the movement up to the death of Charu Mazumdar and fragmentation of the party. The firebrand revolutionary, Ajit, is the central protagonist. His intimacy with a Santhal woman and assumption of a Santhal way of life by giving up his middle-class revolutionary identity is severely criticised by the party leadership. He is expelled from the party and eventually killed by police after his erstwhile comrades inform upon him. The novel perhaps shows the crisis of the bourgeois leadership of a revolutionary party, which wanted to share lives with the poor tribal peasants but did not expect their comrades to transgress sexual proprieties of class and ethnic identities. These cultural texts, emerging especially in later stages of the Naxalbari Movement, were no doubt sympathetic to the broader ideological aims of Naxalbari, yet manifested the severe strain placed on bourgeois revolutionaries in their attempts to transcend class and social position through revolutionary self-making.

Continuations

The Naxalbari vision of political transformation and its critical impetus for representing the violence of class domination led to the emergence of a radical group of writers even after the end of the movement. While they wrote stories and novels focusing on the movement, they were also invested in portraying the abject poverty and exploitation of contemporary society that created the grounds for revolution. Nabarun Bhattacharya⁷² is one such writer whose collection of poems, *Ei Mrityu Upatyaka Amar Desh Na* (“This Valley of Death is Not My Homeland”) published first in 1972 (republished in 2004), is broadly based on state violence and brutality toward Naxalbari supporters. The collection’s title poem refers to the extra-judicial murders of eight young activists at Amdanga in Kolkata. Throughout his career, Bhattacharya’s work continued to refer to social differences, the exploitation of the poor and the subjugated, and the latent possibility of revolution’s eternal return – transcending the inten-

72 Nabarun Bhattacharya (1948–2014) was an experimental Bengali fiction writer and poet with strong radical left sensibilities who started his creative career in the 1970s and became popular in the 1990s. His works touched upon social exploitation, political resistance and neo-liberal consumerist culture. He was the son of the renowned author Mahasweta Devi and playwright Bijan Bhattacharya. For more on Nabarun’s work and politics see *Nabarun Bhattacharya: Aesthetics and Politics in a World After Ethics* (Bhattacharya et al. 2020).

tionality of both the state and organised political parties. Traces of the Naxalbari movement as a subversive moment of radical politics continually surface in his works.

His 1993 novel *Herbert* returns to the theme of Naxalbari and reflects the emotive and unpredictable connections between past revolution and memory in post-1990s neo-liberal, consumerist and apparently counter-revolutionary urban Kolkata. The eponymous character, Herbert, is deeply consumed by his belief in ghosts and necromancy. He calls the spirit of his nephew Binu, who was a Naxalite activist killed by the police during the fiery decade of the 1970s. Later, in a dream, Herbert learns of Binu's diary, hidden behind a picture of the Hindu deity Kali in their household.

The novel employs a strange suturing between past and present, between Herbert's emotional closeness to Binu, who was a foot-soldier in the Naxalbari movement, and Herbert's present role as a spirit medium who can converse with ghosts. Under the influence of Binu, Herbert had served as a messenger and supplier of arms for the movement in the 1970s. In the post-revolutionary world, he becomes a local medium informing people about the condition of their dead relatives suffering in the other world. Eventually, he commits suicide after being accused of fraudulent activities by the members of a rationalist society. When his body is placed in an electric furnace, an explosion suddenly blasts the cremation ground. We later learn about the sticks of dynamite lying dormant inside Herbert's mattress from the time they were secretly stashed there by Binu at least two decades earlier.

In Suman Mukhopadhyay's 2005 cinematic adaptation of *Herbert* the viewer is shown the Bengali words *Pulisher Kukur Debi Roy Hushiyar*: "Police Mongrel Debi Roy Be Careful!" scrawled on the door of the crematorium furnace just before it closes with Herbert's body inside, referring to Debi Roy, a police officer during the Naxalbari period infamous for torturing revolutionaries in custody. This warning flashes just before the furnace door closes, leading to the huge explosion. Similarly, the memory of revolution acts as a warning: apparently meaningless and disconnected to the present, but imbued with the unconscious political imagination of eruptive revolutionary violence. The police chief investigating the strange case of terrorism that exploded Herbert's dead body quotes Foucault, acknowledging that it is a far reach for our political establishment to tell when and where such explosions may occur. Binu's absolute faith in revolution is compared ironically with Herbert's equally powerful faith in ghosts. The possibility of revolution lies beyond any calculative set of logical possibilities. The novel suggests that nobody knows where the dynamite of revolution is hidden, as the unconscious effect of Naxalbari lingers beyond our knowledge, even after it is presumed to have been safely consigned to the past.

The critical intellectual tradition of the Naxalbari movement witnesses two parallel potentialities between orthodoxy and dissent. While it is clear why dissent should be important to culture, the need to attempt to build a counter-hegemonic orthodoxy, despite rightful criticism, cannot be denied. Despite strategic follies, such as reducing guerrilla action to individual terror and indulging in such actions without creating a proper popular base, the counter-hegemonic orthodoxy of the Naxalbari movement sought an alternative to the hegemonic political, social and cultural apparatus. A revolutionary movement may be understood as a response to structural exploitation, compelling resistance against the pervasive social realities in which exploitation is rooted.

While accounting for the all-encompassing nature of such a violent critique, one must also understand the limits imposed by the revolutionary orthodoxy of a party that appropriated, reduced and streamlined such a critique into an immutable line of action. While sexual and moral conservatism was a part of Naxalbari politics, the movement also offered alternative ways of life and liberation for middle-class women (and men) from their traditional roles within the family. Like gender, caste hierarchies were subverted in the movement as well, although an inadequate understanding of caste and a sweeping valorisation of the class oriented analysis by Naxalbari activists limited such subversion. In the villages, young comrades encountered landless labourers of lower caste origins.

Santosh Rana,⁷³ an active participant in the Naxalbari movement who was born to a marginal caste, asserted that the antagonism and exploitation of landlords was not based on feudal power alone.⁷⁴ Identity politics had a major role to play, and Rana observed that questions of caste or tribal identity were not properly addressed by the communist parties in India, creating a serious lacuna in understanding on the part of the Naxalbari leadership. The fact that the Naxalbari movement did not discuss caste or ethnic identity, or subordinated these to questions of class struggle alone, is a topic of frequent reflection for former activists.

Asok Rudra, a social scientist writing in and around the Naxalbari milieu who had strong sympathies for the movement, remarked on the misevaluation of the Indian state as semi-feudal by Indian Marxists, asserting it to be “Brahminical” instead. He believed that the counter-revolutionary ideology of caste had been used to naturalise and maintain exploitation (Rudra 1981: 2133–2135, 2137, 2139, 2141, 2143–2146). In an article entitled “Bhojpurer Krishok Sangram”, originally published in *Aneek* in 1981, Gautam Bhadra addresses the uprising of the Mushahar community in Muzaffarpur, demonstrating that the peasants’

73 Santosh Rana (1944–2019) was an active revolutionary leader of CPI(ML) who came from a lower caste family of Gopiballavpur in Midnapore, West Bengal. He is famous for organizing guerrilla warfare in the Debra-Gopiballavpur area of Midnapore district in 1967–1970. Later he had an ideological fallout with Charu Mazumdar on the question of the Bangladesh Liberation war. He was a life long activist and a social commentator (Mazumdar 2012, Volume 2: 336).

74 Santosh Rana, “Comrade Charu Mazumdar Prosonge Kichu Katha” (Dashadhikari 1998, Part 2: 151–171).

exploitation was not only feudal but caste-based. The caste position of the exploited was constantly reinforced through physical and sexual violence. The landless labourers who resorted to counter-violence were compelled to do so in order to protect their *izzat* or “honour” (Bhadra 1989: 33–64). According to Bernard D’Mello, the second phase of the Naxalite movement between 1974 and 2003, often considered Maoist, addressed questions of gender and caste discrimination much more explicitly (D’Mello 2018: 16). These debates were integrated into Naxalbari’s critical discourse of revolutionary thinking, which transformed Indian political thought and social activism. Many erstwhile revolutionaries carried these discussions forward into a variety of critical, creative and activist scenes.

Charu Mazumdar proposed the birth of a new human – the production of a different political subjectivity through the practical critical activities of activists from bourgeois backgrounds living and sharing lives with the landless labourers.⁷⁵ This idea of a new subjectivity was not altogether a myth. New collaborations developed between young educated people from elite backgrounds and lower-middle class youth, challenging the existing social hierarchies. This experience is reflected in a novel like *Hajar Churashir Ma* (“Mother of 1984”, 1974) by Mahasweta Devi, where we see Brati, a Naxalite youth from an upwardly mobile family, who is killed in a police encounter along with his comrade Somu, from a more humble background (Devi 2010).

Another novelistic representation of this experience is *Communis* by Raghav Bandyopadhyay, published in 1975 under the pseudonym Sankar Basu (Basu 1975). *Communis* is a non-elite way of pronouncing the word communist, which suggests the reception, appropriation and transformation of communist principles among the less privileged sections of society. Even if we concede that Naxalbari politics, particularly as expressed within the CPI(ML), was simplistic and weak, its impact on Bengali intellectual and cultural life cannot be denied. The Naxalbari dogma emphasised practice divorced from theory. This led to what Sushital Roychoudhury called *tarahurobad* or the “ideology of hurried action” (Dashadhikari 1999: 13). While the Naxalbari path can be criticised for its fetishisation of practice, practice remains an alternate means of theorising Indian society and politics, with the potential to open up new paradigms of thought.

75 See Mazumdar’s 1970 letter titled “The Birth of the New Man” (Mazumdar 2012, Volume 2: 143–144).

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