



Recollecting A Peasant Movement: A Glimpse Of Naxalbari Uprising.

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ABSTRACT : The Naxalbari uprising was an event of great significance not only in the history of the agrarian movements but also in the subsequent movements also. After this movement the name 'Naxalbari' became a well-known place in the political atlas in India and abroad. This article is an attempt to look behind on the challenges of peasant mobilization in Naxalbari days in the light of recent available documents after fifty years. Therefore, in this study we try to focus on the causes and the Political unrest so that it can be conveyed to the isolated mass in a substantiated and simple way. This paper also focuses on the the participation of women and their strategies. It also speaks about the State police response and consequences of the movement. It furthermore emphasizes of understanding the reason of its present domain and to tackle the problem faced by the Naxalites. The armed struggle became an inspiration to the Naxalite movement which rapidly spread from West Bengal to other states of India creating division within the CPI(M) - India's primary communist party. Hoping forward for interesting reading by the readers.

KEYWORDS : *Peasant, Rebellion, Marxist, Left-wing, Naxalbari, North Bengal.*

INTRODUCTION :

Naxalbari uprising was an armed peasant revolt in 1967 in the Naxalbari block of Siliguri subdivision in Darjeeling district, West Bengal, India. It was mainly led by tribals and the radical communist leaders of Bengal and further developed into the Communist Party of India (Marxist–Leninist) in 1969. The armed struggle became an inspiration to the Naxalite movement which rapidly spread from West Bengal to other states of India creating division within the CPI(M) - India's primary communist party.

The term 'Naxalite' comes from Naxalbari, a small village in West Bengal, where an extremist section of Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI (M)] led by Charu Majumder and Kanu Sanyal organised a violent peasant uprising in 1967, trying to develop a 'revolutionary opposition' against the CPI (M) leadership. The insurrection started on May 25, 1967 in Naxalbari village when a farmer was attacked by local goons over a

land dispute. Maoists in the guise of local farmers retaliated by attacking the local landlords and escalated the violence. Majumder greatly admired Mao Ze-dong of China and advocated that Indian peasants and lower classes must follow in his footsteps and overthrow the government and upper classes whom he held responsible for their plight. He strengthened the Naxalite movement through his writings, the most famous being the 'Historic Eight Documents' which formed the basis of Naxalite ideology. In 1967 the 'Naxalites' organized the All-India Coordination Committee of Communist.

CAUSE OF THE UPRISING :

May, 1967 an agrarian movement broke out at Naxalbari and its adjoining areas on the outskirts of Siliguri of the northern part of Bengal known as Naxalbari Movement, which rocked the whole world. The local jurisdictions of Naxalbari and its adjoining Khoribari and Phansidewa Police Stations were the scenes of the series of movements. These three police stations form the extreme southern tip of Darjeeling district of West Bengal. The total area covered by these three PSs will be about 274 square miles, with a population of about one lakh and fifty thousand, out of which about fifty thousand were labours engaged in the 32 tea-gardens located within this area. The topography of this area is an admixture of jungles, bushes and tea-gardens on a fairly flat landscape. Cultivation is practically confined to paddy and the yield is of an average type. This area has borders with Nepal, Bangladesh and Bihar. Here the peasants are mostly comprised of the subaltern-Santals, Oraons, and Rajbanshis, formed a large portion of population. These people were exploited by Jotedars under the 'Adhiar System'. It means the landlords provided seeds, ploughs, and bullocks, in exchange, of which they cultivated the plots and got a share of crops. The peasants were least satisfied with the 'Adhiar System' because they felt exploited in the hands of the jotedars.

The tribal people, particularly in the Naxalbari area, and generally in West Bengal have been engaged in using unscientific methods of cultivation technically known as "shifting cultivation". Under this system when a piece of land is selected, the trees or bushes are cut down to a certain extent, allowed to dry and then set on fire. In the area which is thus cleared seeds are sown in little holes dug in the ground, or they are scattered. No plough is used and no animals are employed* All is done by human labour. These primitive methods of cultivation have left the tribals economically far behind in comparison with other peasants of West Bengal. Day by day the gap was becoming wider and wider, causing frustration among the backward tribal people. The only method to achieve better prospects in life was to welcome Maoist revolution under the leadership of radical Communists, who promised prosperity and justice.

We can understand the intentions and motives of the government of Pakistan by visualizing the war strategy of 1965. This area was strategically and geo-politically so important that it became a part and parcel of Pakistan's war plans in 1965. The plans of this government were that should Indian forces attack on the western border of Pakistan she would open a battle front on the eastern border. In the eastern side two possibilities were expected by these military strategy makers. Firstly, the Pakistan forces would be in an easy position to receive Chinese aid against India, and secondly the Pakistanis would be able to cut the Indian territory into two parts at the narrowest corridor exactly in the Naxalbari area. The leaders of Pakistan were sure that these developments would open the bargaining talks between the two countries on several issues, including the Kashmir issue.

EVENTS OF UNREST:

The uprising occurred during the height of the Sino-Soviet split, which was causing turmoil within the communist organisations in India and the rest of the world. The leader and ideologue of the uprising Charu Majumdar theorised that the situation was appropriate for launching an armed People's war in India following the Chinese Revolution (1949), Vietnam War and Cuban Revolution. Charu Majumdar wrote the Historic Eight Documents which became the foundation of the Naxalite movement in 1967. On 3 March 1967 just a day after the united front had sworn in ministers in West Bengal, some 150 peasants armed with bows and spears, took 300 maunds of paddy or around 11000 kg of paddy and started seizing land. The peasants were enraged that the CPI(M) did not retain workers in the party. By 18 March the peasants started seizing land from jotedars (landlords who owned large plots of land in the region). Peasant committees were set up throughout the region within four months. The first clash occurred between the peasants and landlords when a share-cropper, Bigul Kisan, was beaten up by landlord gentries. Following this, peasant committees seized land, foodgrains and arms from the landlord gentries, leading to violent clashes. The government started mobilizing the police forces to deal with the uprising.

The inspector of Jharugaon village was killed by peasant committee members. In retaliation, the police opened fire which resulted in the death of nine women and one child on 25 May 1967. By June the peasant committees gained hold in the regions around Naxalbari, Kharibari and Phansidewa seizing lands, ammunition and food grains from the jotedars. The tea garden worker around the Darjeeling region participated in strikes supporting the peasant committees.

Meanwhile, revolutionaries in Calcutta, who had also been running a campaign against revisionism, took up a massive campaign in support of the Naxalbari uprising. The walls of college streets were plastered with posters saying: "*Murderer Ajoy Mukherjee (the Chief minister) must resign*" The revolutionaries [still within the CPI (M)] held a meeting in Ram Mohan Library Hall in Calcutta and formed the 'Naxalbari Peasants Struggle Aid Committee', which was to become the nucleus of the Party of the future.

Simultaneous to the police action, the CPI (M) expelled a large number of their members. Sushital Roy Chowdhary, a member of the West Bengal state committee and editor of their Bengali party organ was expelled. So were other leading members like Ashim Chatterjee, Parimal Das Gupta, Asit Sen, Suniti Kumar Ghosh, Saroj Datta and Mahadev Mukherjee. The Darjeeling district committee and Siliguri sub-divisional committee were dissolved.

The spark of Naxalbari set aflame the fires of revolution in Srikakulam, Birbhum, Debra-Gopiballavpur, Mushahari and Lakhimpur-Kheri. The states of West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Punjab, U.P and Tamil Nadu saw a big spurt in Naxalbari-inspired struggles and Maoist formations sprouted in nearly every state of India. One of the most progressive tribes, they are engaged in agriculture and rural crafts like carpentry, tile and brick moulding, rope making and weaving of date palm leaf mats besides also finding employment in mining, quarrying, manufacturing industries. With the passage of time, they have migrated to different parts of the country during pre and post independent era in search of their livelihood (as manual labour).

PARTICIPATION OF THE WOMEN:

As long as the movement was limited to rural parts of Bengal including Naxalbari, Khoribari and Phansidewa districts of North Bengal, women fought shoulder to shoulder with men. There was no distinction of work based on gender. Men and women equally learnt using bows and arrows, rifle shooting and cooking in community kitchens. However, after the movement spread to the cities, the tasks of women were mostly limited to technical works and courier services. With the urbanization of a local protest by the intellectuals and political parties, it was the middle-class leaders of cities who dominated and directed the entire movement. It fabricated into a fight against the bourgeois class and the elite government led by the urban middle-class intelligentsia. However, the dominance of the middle-class also ensured the inclusion of their ideologies within the movement. Thus, the patriarchal characteristics of the 20th century urban Bengal middle-class society seeped into the movement as well. As Mallarika Singha Roy has noted, “Women’s participation in the movement ... has been largely deemed as supportive rather than front-ranking revolutionary activism by the Naxalite leadership”. This marginalization of women in the movement by giving them the supportive roles of technical work and not associating them with the mainstream action has been further verified by some surviving Naxal women.

Supriya, a female naxal activist speaks how women were reserved for the role of informers and healers, “*In general female cadres were employed to do tech kaaj (technical work), mostly courier work, including the transportation of papers, arms, and information ... only a few were employed*

While the urban educated woman was consciously articulating her feeling of being marginalised, the peasant women for the best part were perceived in terms of a group and had to be spoken for. Apart from physically resisting police and landlords, peasant women also assisted urban youth who tried to spread the Naxal ideology in the rural areas. Thus, according to Maya Chattopadhyay, peasant girls would stay up all night and guard the urban youth while they slept. The few notable names among the peasant women are that of **Shanti Munda, Krishnamaya** and **Leela Kisan**. **Shanti Munda** is a woman from the Munda tribe in Darjeeling district. Her family had a small portion of cultivable land in Sabdullajote village in Naxalbari police station area. Her father was continuously in debt to the local land-lord. At a very young age she came under the influence of the Communist Party, working among the poor peasants, landless labourers and tea-garden workers. She began to go to their meetings and processions, and in her own words: ‘I learnt about politics by walking in those processions and attending meetings, and gradually I began to speak in meetings’. She became quite a well-known local leader and worked alongside Kanu Sanyal and Charu Mazumdar, the two important architects of Naxalbari, and eventually married a Hindu male colleague – Keshab Sarkar – from the neighbouring district of Coochbihar. In her own words: “*As I became more involved into politics, I realized that men from my own tribe could not teach me about the revolutionary ideals, and then this Hindu man fell in love with me. My father was enraged when he came to know about my relationship, and threatened to kill me for intending to marry outside my tribe. So, we eloped and carried on with our political activism*”. Shanti Munda’s challenge to patriarchal authority was extended towards her Party as well, when she refused to abide by the Party directive of following the political line of ‘annihilation of class enemies’. She organised openly and followed the ‘mass line’.

Krishnamaya, 'a Nepali girl, who ran a wine-shop, was drawn in the movement by Kanu Sanyal. When her husband became a full-time activist, she sold the shop and joined the movement and gave shelter to absconding activists'. Apart from this single sentence in the academic history of the movement, her involvement is remembered only by her local comrades and her husband Punjab Rao, another Naxal. Punjab Rao said that Krishnamaya was politically conscious, from the beginning and he was greatly influenced by her participation in the local communist movement. She played a leading role during the 1967 uprising and organised local women to prevent the police from entering.

Leela Kisan, a Nagesia tribal woman talks about her involvement with the movement in the 70s. *"We were about four girls – Puni Kisan, Rangi Kisan, Pokli Kisan and myself – the rest were boys. We did not have any weapons. We carried lathis and stones. We knocked at the door of Jotedar Gobind Singh's house, and as we pushed it open, the little fear I had disappeared. Then we started seizing the grain and loading it onto carts we had brought. After removing as much as we could, we started to leave. I was carrying some of the grain on my back. It was very heavy.... When I reached home my mother asked me where I had been. I didn't tell her anything as she would have been terrified. The next morning police gheraoed our village. As some of the boys admitted to the police that I was with them, I was arrested."*

RESPONSE BY THE STATE GOVERNMENT:

When the Naxal uprising began in 1967, the Indian government looked at it as a law-and-order problem. It did not analyze the causes of the movement and the extent of mobilization of people. Hence, it believed that it could and would put an end to it in a short span of time using force. "During the outbreak of the armed clashes in Naxalbari, the then Home Minister Y B Chavan, addressing the Lok Sabha on June 13, 1967, described them as mere "lawlessness" – a transgression to be repressed and contained. So, while Charu Mazumdar named the 1970's the "Decade of liberation", the Indian state chose to make it the "decade of repression". The United Front government in West Bengal, confronted by the Naxal violence, was in a dilemma about the nature and scope of its response . It recognized the crucial need to address the problem of monstrous iniquity. As a government it could not let any violent uprising threaten its legitimacy, even if the cause was morally valid.

The government chose to react based on the latter point and so launched a massive police operation that drove the movement underground and brought most of its leaders under police custody within four months of the uprising. The emergency in 1975 was a period of carte-blanc to the state authorities to crush the movement. It led to the legitimization of violation of human rights by the state. But ironically, the movement arose again in a more violent form after the emergency. Police excesses like extra-judicial killings and extortion, misappropriation and harassment of the Naxal support base are public secrets, which governments have turned a blind eye to.

On the question of Police response to the challenge of the Naxalites, there are two dominant and mutually opposing views. The most common perception in West Bengal is that Police response is always brutal and inhuman. It encourages avoidable violence and precipitates harsh action without much justification. The government allowed the local Police to set up a number of Police camps in the affected area of Naxalbari, Khoribari and Phansidewa. These police camps were permitted to patrol the villages and to maintain law and

order. The net results of this grossly inadequate police action was very encouraging. Everyday large number of extremists lined-up outside the Police Station and obediently surrendered to the police. This exercise continued for a few months and ultimately Shri Kanu Sanyal was arrested by the Police in October, 1968. From the middle of the 1970 the Police, particularly in Calcutta adopted a very ingenious methods of deflecting the movement. By now police were aware of the extent of disillusionment of the young Naxalites of urban background. The police took the initiative of secretly contacting the parents and guardians of these young minded revolunarists. After some persuasion a few young naxalites agreed to surrender to the police secretly. By mid 1970s, it was strongly rumored that, many top ranking naxalite leaders had been eliminated on charges of betrayal disobedience. And then in 1972 this upsurge slowly faded away.

CONCLUSION:

The Naxalbari uprising had begun as a peasant movement due to the oppression of the tribals and the lower classes by the Zamindars and the Money lenders. The Naxals reached out to the people, understood them, took up their issues and fought for their dignity and rights. They earned goodwill among the tribals and the downtrodden by fighting for them. The Naxalite Movement started with a noble objective to protect the rights of the tribals, but its extremism and violence deterred it from becoming an accepted revolution. The tackling of the threat to internal security, as a result of this movement must start with government addressing the problems faced by the tribals and ensure that their rights are protected.

In my opinion, the Naxalites today are far more radicalised than they were when they first began and this leads to a greater chance of increased violence. The State particularly the Local government has played a huge role in controlling the violence and persuading the young extremists to retreat to the mainstream. By and large, the Naxalbari movement in Siliguri has left a deep impact on the people of West Bengal as well as in their culture and society.

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