



A Feminist Reading of the Naxalite Movement: Role and Fate of the Involved Women

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Abstract

Initiated as a peasants' revolt against the ruling Congress Government in the Indian state of West Bengal, the Naxalite Movement took a gigantic shape with political CPI (Maoist) activists constituting tribal folks belonging to the volatile areas, young college students from Calcutta, and intellectuals from various parts of the country. A lot of media reports and academic scholarships have covered the events and consequences of the rebellion. However, women's role(s) in the movement has been compromised from major discussions. This essay, instead, is a feminist exploration of the Naxalite Movement. It deals with the status and fate of women, directly or indirectly, actively or passively, voluntarily or involuntarily involved in the movement. Finally, it critiques the lack of feminist scholarship for the Naxalite movement and the absence of effective measures taken by the Indian government to support the female survivors of this movement.

Keywords: Naxalite Movement, Women's Oppression, Gender-Based Violence, Tribal, Indian Literature, Maoism

1. Introduction to the Naxalite Movement

The terms Naxal or Naxalite are derived from the name of the village Naxalbari (located in the Siliguri Division of Darjeeling District) in West Bengal, India, where the Naxalite movement had its inception. The movement dominated West Bengal and spread like a wildfire in neighboring states like Orissa (presently Odisha), Andhra Pradesh, parts of Bihar (that are currently in Jharkhand), and parts of Madhya Pradesh (that are currently in Chhattisgarh), eventually expanding the heat over 165 districts in 13 states of India^[1]. Among the armed movements that have been witnessed in post-colonial India, one of the most violent has been the indigenized Maoist Rebellion. This pertains to the insurgencies caused mainly from 1967 to 1971 and still ongoing at a reduced capacity, in various regions in West Bengal and other states in India, under the banner of the Naxalite Movement.

The movement was launched as a peasants' revolt when tribal youth, who had a judicial order to plough his land, was attacked by 'goons' of local landlords, in March 1967. The rebellion was launched against the Congress Government of West Bengal using the label of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)]. In April 1967, CPI(M) participated in polls allying with Bengal Congress and formed the United Front government. This alliance triggered the younger cadres to accuse CPI(M) of betrayal. Following May 25th, under the leadership of Charu Majumdar, the rebel cadres launched a peasants' uprising at Naxalbari village. Other male leaders were Kanu Sanyal and Jangal Santhal, who as well firmly believed in the ideologies of Maoism¹. Tribal folks (both men and women) stroke back and began capturing back their lands, primarily through coercion or violent means. During these

72 days of rebellion, the CPI(M)-led United Front government dismantled. According to media reports, a police sub-inspector and nine Santal² men were killed. The Congress government at the Centre supported the crackdown. This incident echoed throughout India and 'Naxalism' was born. As a reaction to the chaos created by the movement, the former Prime Minister of India, Manmohan Singh (years active: 2004-2014) has described it as 'the biggest internal security challenge facing our country.'^[3]

2. Women in the Naxalite Movement

From the hub of Calcutta (now Kolkata) to the unmapped tribal areas, the Naxalite movement has successfully enticed the participation of several women cadres. According to reports of CPI(Maoist)³, at least 40% of its cadres are women. However, ethnographic reports speak contradictorily that the core body of the Naxalites had a handful representation of females functioning as leaders. During its peak uprising, Charu Majumdar had written many letters to communicate his visions. Unfortunately, none of his letters was addressed specifically to women^[3]. This hints at the truth of the lack of women representation at leadership levels. Despite their fearless objectives and arduous participation, women were always ranked below men. Exceptionally, when a female combatant was allotted as a commander, the crew was female only.

The missing of intellectual representation of women in the movement or the lack of decision-making by a female leader throws light on the sexual/gender discrimination practiced

¹Maoism, or Mao Zedong Thought, is a variety of Marxism-Leninism that Mao Zedong developed for realizing a socialist revolution in the agricultural, pre-industrial society of the Republic of China and later the People's Republic of China.

² The Santal are an ethnic group native to India and Bangladesh in South Asia. Santals are the largest tribe in the Jharkhand state of India in terms of population and are also found in the states of Assam, Tripura, Bihar, Odisha and West Bengal.

³ The Communist Party of India (Maoist) is a Maoist communist party in India which aims to overthrow the government of India through people's war. It was founded on 21 September 2004, through the merger of the Communist Party of India People's War, the Maoist Communist Centre of India and the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Naxalbari.

among the Naxalites. This gender-bias and deliberate sexism rampant in the movement is well versed as – ‘This failure to acknowledge women activists carries an interconnected double meaning-it did not only erase from the official documents the physical presence of women in organizing and leading the movement but, equally important, it obfuscated the ideological possibility of redefining women's role and status in the larger social context.’^[4]

On the contrary, in a personal interview conducted by Seema Shekhawat, Babina, an ex-combatant, said that ‘the primary job of the group of female cadres led by me was the transportation of messages and other things’^[5]. Thus, I wish to stress that the Naxalite's ideological formulation is not adequately developed on the issue of class-caste-gender relations.

3. Roles played by Women in the Naxalite Movement

Over the years women in the Naxalite affected regions have been willingly/forcefully performing the following roles:^[6]

- 3.1 Women militants or combatants - Women who are actively involved in the struggle, (i) by choice, (ii) through intimidation, or (iii) who have become part of the struggle because of circumstances (like joblessness, financial crisis, and so on.)
- 3.2 Women as victims/survivors of sexual violence and/or physical abuse – On one hand, innocent or ignorant female civilians belonging to the Maoist-infested areas, irrespective of their age, have been targeted by males belonging to the armed forces at both sides.
- 3.3 Women as shelter providers – Some women provided food, shelter, and labor (as porters) to the Maoist combatants. Unlike the conventional duties within a family, these women are either sympathizers or are coerced to serve the Naxalites due to their extremely vulnerable conditions.
- 3.4 Women relatives of Naxalites- Women connected through familial relationships like mothers, wives, sisters, daughters, aunts, and partners serve the armed combatants of the Naxalite movement, sometimes by choice or by emotional attachment. Irrespective of the reasons, these women are eyed by the State servants and have been victims of sexual abuse on a large scale. Tribal women, owing to their marginalized status in society, constitute the majority in this category.
- 3.5 Women relatives of state armed forces – Almost similar to the above category except for the socio-political privilege, mothers, wives, sisters, daughters, aunts, and partners of the State cadres became a part of this conflict and often remain as invisible sufferers.

4. Why did Women Join the Naxalite Movement?

Several reasons contribute to the growth of the Naxalites in terms of women's participation. Following are brief explanations as to why women have joined the Naxalite movement all these years:

4.1 Ideological Motives

When it comes to an ideology that fuels a movement, there is a big gulf among participants joining the movement with varied perspectives. While some women understood the logic behind the ideology, some women joined following the popularity of the ideology. The former is called ‘formal ideologists’. They are young girls who studied high school

and college and left education to join the movement, swayed by its political ideology. The latter know less about the ideology and are called ‘instinctual revolutionaries’. They worked in the field and were directly oppressed either by the (Congress) state or by rich moneylenders. Rural women belonging to the Santal community contribute hugely to this category as female cadres.

4.2 Vengeance

Women, especially wives, belong to this category. With a motive to avenge the death of their (activist or just oppressed husband), widows rose to become Naxalites.

4.3 Escape Sexual or Gender-Based Violence

Tribal women in the Naxalite areas have always been acute targets of sexual harassment or rape by the state armed forces. To rescue themselves from such gender-based violence, they ended up joining the movement.

4.4 Need for Survival

From being harassed by the state personnel at the fields to being kidnapped and raped at the security camps, tribal women were curbed off their freedom to work in the open. Under such circumstances of joblessness and deficit of basics in the household, they turned into Naxalite militants. In socio-political terms, they became a supreme part of ‘class struggle’.

4.5 Opportunism

Tribal villages usually constitute a group of residents. During the insurgency, some women joined the Naxalite movement to gain local power in their own hands.

5. Sexual/Gender-Based Violence

Speeches on women liberalization delivered by CPI (Maoist) leaders remain a facade in reality. On one hand, female cadres of the movement face gender discrimination and sexual harassment by their male counterparts. On the other hand, tribal women belonging to the Maoist concentrated areas are sexually preyed by security forces of the State. Irrespective of the identity or association, women have faced gender-based violence. Simultaneously, regardless of representation for the State or the Maoist troop, men have widely been perpetrators of women's oppression and sexual violence. Thus, these women have fallen at the pedestal between the State and the Naxalites, championed by men.

In various Naxalite groups, female cadres allege gender oppression, sexual harassment, and rape within the territory of Maoist camps by male (superiorly ranked) combatants. In her book *Ek Maowadi ki Diary*, Shobha Mandi (aliases of Uma and Shikha), a Maoist commander turned fugitive, wrote how she was strangled, raped, and assaulted by her fellow leaders over seven years of military service. She has been a survivor of serial rapes, the first of which occurred at the age of seventeen by a commander named Bikash.^[7] In May 2010, two women cadres who surrendered in the Chhattisgarh's Bastar District, have alleged that they were raped by the Maoist leaders of their squads in forest camps^[8]. All of these survivors reveal how the main goals of the Naxalite movement have got dispersed with time, by the hands of these perpetrators, that otherwise motivated them to join the movement.

Media reports largely cover substantial cases and confessions, where rape as a weapon of war is consistent in its usage in steamy regions. A discreet police officer, participating in the Maoist gang in the alias name of Comrade Naveen, raped a girl in the village of Curreygudem in 2008. Eventually, a relative of the girl complained to a senior Maoist and Comrade Naveen disappeared from the forest. The perpetrator left the Maoist party and arrived months later in the village with his original identity and name as SPO Sodhi Gangaya^[9]. In May 2010, just after a month of killing 76 policemen by the Maoists near Chintalnar, three Adivasi (tribal) women of village Mukram (located near Chintalnar, Chhattisgarh), allege to have been raped by members of the security force^[10].

Focusing on Indian Literature in English, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*^[11], Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*^[12], Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*^[13] and Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*^[14] portray the Naxalite movement in their proportion and storyline. More importantly, the (Bengali) works of Mahasweta Devi define the lives and fate of women during the Naxalite movement from the most intersectional approach of feminism. *Mother of 1084*^[15] captures the grief and realizations of a mother why her dead son had (then) joined the Naxalite movement against the government that was otherwise glorified by his husband. *Breast Stories* is a collection of short stories impregnated with the tales and turmoil of tribal women in India. In that book, *Draupadi*^[16] captures the struggle and oppression of a tribal woman named Dopdi who is serially raped by the State police and then asked to cover herself up by the senior officer named Seminayak after they are 'done with' her. Hence, women's role and oppression in the Naxalite movement has lit a fire in the world of historical fiction and transnational feminism, which is eventually reaching readers and researchers, especially those interested in the lives and history of the Subalterns⁴.

6. Impact on the Tribal Women

For centuries, tribal societies of India are cast off by marginalization. Secluded from the social canon, norms operative in most tribal families are hugely different from other classes, castes, and groups. For example, the responsibility of feeding a tribal family is bestowed upon the women. Consequently, fields and forests serve as their working spots to fulfill the demand for food. This is highly contradictory to the patriarchal practice of captivating women in the inner quarters of Savarna caste and upper-class Indian houses, where men have to be the breadwinners in the family. When Maoism spread across the tribal belt of India, such women traditionally working in the fields felt disturbed by the chaotic ambiance. Initially, these women were disrupted in working late in the afternoon. Eventually, the fear of molestation and rape by armed men of both the forces coerced them to stop working outside. The resulting joblessness and loss of income propelled the women to depend on native men for protection and/or seek financial help. Such circumstances stole the independence, power, and stability of the tribal women. On the same wheel, males of the household were forced to migrate to cities, thereby

putting the female members to a more vulnerable position in a volatile zone.

Another element of the ill-impacts of the Naxalite movement is the health hazard faced by women.^[6] Despite the allotment of duties, medical personnel were hesitant at working or even relocating themselves to Naxalite-affected areas owing to security issues. Hence, the health quo at Naxalite-prone zones kept deteriorating at an alarming rate. While this is a cause of concern for all residents, irrespective of gender or age, women requiring reproductive health support services suffered miserably. They either had to travel long distances to reach a health center at a safer area or face worse repercussions like stillbirth due to their unattended position. In most cases, pregnant women were unable to travel due to physical and/or financial shortcomings. Hence, malnutrition among women and children became a prevailing condition. The most neglected of all is the mental health of these women. When in a conversation with ethnographers, these women displayed subtle traces of deeply rooted and persisting psychological problems of fear, anxiety, trauma, pain, loss, guilt, and hatred, especially among the survivors of gender-based violence.

7. Conclusion

While the Naxalite movement in India may not appear to be an example of a sustained guerilla war, the Naxalites certainly saw themselves as the vanguard of a liberation army in which political activists have become armed political artisans^[4]. Despite the dissimilarity in dimensions of the violation, women have fallen prey to the claws of sexual and gender-based violence. Although the rebellion emerged to offer justice, women are located at the receiving ends of the movement. If I draw a comparison between Naxalism and Feminism, the former has failed as an ideology to strike a balance between power and gender. In today's situation, although the State has undergone numerous changes in terms of leadership and political affiliations, proper political campaigns to manifest women's empowerment are missing, even after these insurgencies and their brutal consequences on women.

With a mission to control the casualties of the Naxalite movement, both long- and short-term projects are necessary to be launched for the sake of women, be it surrendering combatants or survivors or both. The language in use, to address the suffered/suffering women, should be switched from 'victims' to 'survivors'. Further steps are needed to be taken by the State to rescue the afflicted women and relocate them to safer custody. Effective programs are needed to replenish the style of media coverage of the diminishing yet persisting movement. Approaches implied on scholarships of the Naxalite movement need to be more feministic and inter-sectional. Women's protection and women's decision making should be implemented more practically, with redesigned programs on women's rights. Rehabilitation packages should be made ready for female combatants willing to surrender. Only by application of the above measures, the purpose of the Naxalite movement can be fulfilled to a massive extent.

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⁴ In postcolonial studies and in critical theory, the term subaltern designates the colonial populations who are socially, politically, and geographically outside the hierarchy of power of a colony, and of the empire's metropolitan homeland.

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