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***“Tomar Santan Jano Thake Dudhe-Bhaate”: Exploring the Naxal movement through Bengali protest poetry***

Abstract:

The Naxalite Movement was a radical left wing extremist movement that started in 1969 in the Indian state of West Bengal. Inspired by the ideas of Mao Tse Tsung, the combatants engaged in guerrilla warfare aiming to capture state power through armed insurgency, “annihilation line” that included the assassination of the representatives of the state administration and mass mobilisation. In the early 1970s, Calcutta, the capital of West Bengal, witnessed large-scale student participation in the conflict. It was suppressed by the State through the Operation Steeplechase, brutal police repression including widespread human rights violations.

No political movement in post-independent India spawned as much literature, ranging from poetry to autobiographical narratives, as the Naxal Movement. Through a qualitative study, this paper attempts a critical analysis of the representative artistic expression by the Naxalites during the first phase of the conflict between 1969 and 1975. Drawing upon the poetry of revolutionaries such as Dronacharya Ghosh, Saroj Dutta and Timir Baran Sen, all of whom were killed by the police, along with the works of Naxal sympathiser poets like Sankha Ghosh and Birendranath Chattopadhyay, this paper aims to fill the research gap that exists in academia in the sphere of literary representation by the Naxal combatants.

Biographical note:

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Keywords:

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## Background

The Bengal province in India has historically been a hotbed of anti-authoritarian protests and revolution ever since the colonial times of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was here that the first successful revolutionary secret society the Anushilan Samiti and its radical wing Jugantar – was founded in 1902 – marking the inception of “revolutionary terrorism” in the Indian subcontinent. Unsurprisingly, even after independence, Bengal remained the bedrock of revolution in the country, ranging from the Tebhaga movement (1946-49) to the Naxalbari Uprising of 1969-1975.

Revolutionary terrorism may be defined as acts of individual targeted or collective attacks against the government to create fear among those in power and to propagate their agenda. It can often be linked to anti-State sentiment. Those involved in such acts do not necessarily believe that their actions would manage to completely overthrow those in power since in most cases there is a stark imbalance in power between these groups and the government (Ghosh B. K., 1922, p. 25). Marx commented that revolutionary terrorism is the only way to “shorten the agonies of the old society and birth pangs of the new”. Stating that a single action has the power to create more propaganda than a thousand pamphlets, the Russian anarchist Prince Peter Kropotskin remarked that such acts would prove to the masses “the established order does not have the strength often supposed” (Townshend, 2003, p. 15). According to Kropotskin’s analysis, winning the sympathy of the masses was important and thus the targets would have to be considered legitimate by the people. During the trial of Bhagat Singh and Batukeshwar Dutt, Singh and Dutt defined the concept of revolution in the following words: “Revolution does not necessarily involve sanguinary strife, nor is there any place in it for individual vendetta. It is not the cult of the bomb and the pistol. By Revolution we mean that the present order of things which is based on manifest injustice must change” (Police Enquiry into Assembly Outrage, 1929).

A feature unique to the culture of resistance in Bengal was the artistic representation that sustained these movements. It was Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay’s lyrical *Vande Mataram* (I Bow to Thee, Mother), an ode to the Nation as Mother, that became the biggest source of inspiration for young, firebrand revolutionaries during the anti-imperial movement in colonial India and also became a nationwide clarion call for the movement (Ghosh A. , 1908, p. 22). Similarly, the *Hungryalist* Poetry Movement in the Bengali language or the “Hungry Generation” played a crucial role in inspiring the middle-class youth to challenge the status quo (Imtiaz, 2016). This paper explores the role of poetry and lyrics in contributing to the Naxalbari Uprising (1969–75) in Bengal of independent India and traces how the movement impacted Bengali literature. The ongoing Naxal threat in the country was referred to as “the greatest internal security threat to India” by the former Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in 2005. This paper argues that vernacular literature has played a pertinent role in creating sympathy in Bengal for the first phase of the Naxal Movement, an event the rest of the country looks at as a sign of grave danger (Roy M. S., 2010, p. 159).

## History of the art and culture of resistance in Bengal

Mao Zedong, in his *Talks at the Yen-an Forum on Literature and Art*, stated: “all literature and art belong to definite classes and are geared to definite political lines. There is in fact no such thing as art for art’s sake, art that stands above classes or art that is detached from or independent of politics” (Zedong, 1956). Literature can never be created in isolation. In the following movements discussed, it has been observed not just how extreme socio-political situations have inspired Bengali poetry in various capacities across centuries but also how poetry has given one the courage to fight back oppression. Situations such as poverty and hunger, colonial oppression, class struggle and a critique of the middle class as silent spectators are some themes addressed in this survey. This review of literature provides a backdrop to the politico-cultural situation in Bengal and attempts to contextualise what might have ultimately led to the spurious outbreak of Naxal Movement – both in terms of politics as well as literature – in the 1970s. The movements also explain the socialist inclination of the common people of Bengal – the only state to have a 34 year long Left Front Rule – and it is argued that popular literature played a large role in impacting the psyche of the masses.

The underlying strands of early socialism in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal through the demand for the abolition of private property and alienation from the production process can be found in the compositions of poet and philosopher Ramprasad Sen’s (1723–1775) *Shyamasangeet*, i.e., compositions written as an ode to the Hindu deity Goddess Kali. For example, in *Chai Ne Maa Go Raja Hote* (I Don’t Want to be King, O Mother), Sen talks of social security for the proletariat and says that all he wants is two meals a day and a roof over his head. Similarly, in *Anna De Ma Annada*, the poet demands food security from the Goddess Annada, the deity of prosperity. These compositions come from his social position as an economically underprivileged person who has to choose a life of drudgery over pursuing his creative aspirations due to the demands of a capitalist system. It is interesting to note here that while the idea of communism is conventionally associated with state atheism, the advent of primitive communism in Bengal took place under the garb of religious literature. Ramprasad, a man who died even before Karl Marx was born and belonged to a place where Western ideas of socialism never reached, was able to reflect communist ideas such as the theory of alienation in his works simply because he spoke about his everyday hardships in his poetry. Composers of *Shyamasangeet* often came from the grassroot level and thus their work also reflected their class position.

The Bengali intelligentsia had a history of cultural protests ever since the colonial times (19<sup>th</sup> century). Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899–76), held in equal esteem as the Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore, for example, was referred to as the “rebel poet,” famous for his anti-imperial songs and poetry. In his popular poem *Bidrohi* (1922) or The Rebel composed in support of the Non-Cooperation and Khilafat Movement of 1920–22, he wrote:

I am the great rebel, weary of battle  
But I will rest only when the anguished cries of the oppressed  
Cease to resonate in air and sky.

Thus, for Nazrul, capitalism as imperialism were two sides of the same coin. When referring to the suffering of the masses, he refers to denial of rights to both the proletariats as well as the injustice faced by common people as a consequence of being citizens of a colonised nation. As a communist, Nazrul was heavily influenced by the Bolshevik Revolution. He wrote explicitly in favour of *samya* or socialism and edited journals devoted to peasants and the underclass such as *Langol* and *Ganabani*.

The communists, despite the Congress government coming to power at the national level after independence, enjoyed immense popularity in Bengal. Bengal was never particularly persuaded by Mahatma Gandhi's ideas of non-violence as a means for independence and rather extolled revolutionary terrorists believing in armed struggle (Hobsbawm, 1994, p. 216). Rajarshi Dasgupta argues the position of Marxists varied according to geographic zones. In India's case, the national revolutions in the inter-war years were one of the formative causes to have inspired their strategy. In Bengal, we see Marxism being contextualised and translated into the vernacular. This assimilation with the masses took place through a linguistic, local and national acculturation according to respective socio-cultural milieus. The tradition of associating creative expressions with politics already existed in Bengal. This became more apparent towards the 20<sup>th</sup> century when the Indian middle class began getting greater access to ideas from the West through the spread of English education. Inspired by the thought of philosophers such as Freud and Marx, a section of Bengali writers began experimenting with unexplored themes such as the underclass in Bengali society (Dasgupta R. , 2005, p. 80) These writings gradually set off the platform for what came to be identified as "progressive," initially a site for anti-Fascist creative expressions which merged into a wing of the Communist Party of India by the mid-1940s. Often coming from the society's intellectuals, in this practice, the middle-class was talking about the underrepresented lower strata of society. Marxist intellectual Gopal Halder argues that the task for Marxist poets was to break the isolation of the so-called *Bhadra* middle-class culture and assimilate it with the masses along with merging national popular culture with "bohemian aesthetic" (Dasgupta R. , 2005, p. 82). However, it does bring up the age-old discourse of agency and appropriation of the voice of the underclass.

Dasgupta's essay deconstructs the discourse of revolution and Marxist identity in late-colonial Bengal and the role played by poetry in shaping the cultural imagination of the Bengali middle class, a phenomenon reflected in the Left's 34-year-long rule in West Bengal since 1977, the party's longest in the country. It does so by analysing the works of two Bengali poets – Sukanta Bhattacharya (1926–1947) and Samar Sen (1916–1987) – to depict how the "discourse of revolution and Marxist identity converged with a radical vision of the *bhadralok* (gentleman) self of the 1940s" (Dasgupta R. , 2005, p. 83). For Sukanta, revolution was like a storm blowing away the old and decaying – a destruction of the old order that demanded to be savoured. His motifs and metaphors included everyday objects albeit with extremely powerful imageries such as a matchstick with the power to burn down palaces and cities (Bhattacharya S. , Sukanta Samagra, 2000, p. 43); a flight of stairs as a representative of the downtrodden that rises to rebel against its oppressors (p. 30) and a pen that can be harnessed as sword (p. 30). The young poet, in support of the hour of revolution in *Paila May-er Kobita* (The Poetry of First May) wrote:

Red fire has spread across the horizons,  
 Why go on living like a dog?  
 [...]
 Come, instead of dry bones,  
 Let us look for fresh blood,  
 [...]
 Let everybody grow over the chain-marks of their necks  
 The lion's manes. (Bhattacharya S. , Sukanta Samagra, 2000, p. 74)

Sukanta used the terms *bidroho* (rebellion) and *biplob* (revolution) interchangeably in his poetry. His writings diffused the lines between call for national liberation and the Marxist discourse supporting uprising by the proletariat. He was equivocal in his hatred for both the colonial and bourgeoisie class as well as the *malik* (owner) / *jotedar* (hoarder) nexus, the latter forming the foundation of the Naxal Uprising in 1967.

Samar Sen's poetry, on the other hand, is a radical self-criticism of the *madhyabitto* (middle-class), a class he too belongs to and one which according to the Marxist poets would like to shut their eyes to social inequality in order to maintain their convenient position in the status quo. Describing the Bengali *madhyabitto* as Mirzafar's progeny and "fruits of Macaulay's poison tree" playing hands in gloves with those in power, Sen argues that participating in protest by letting go one's petty self-interest is the only way the middle-class can redeem itself. Thus, he wrote in *Grihasthabilap* (Mourning of the Family Man):

Let me tell you my friend:  
 Mountains barricade the way,  
 Our bones keep rotting away,  
 Better give up your class, life still has some hope left that way. (Sen, 1946, p. 59)

*Kabigaan* (song of poets) and *torja* (verbal duelling) was another cultural performative practice in Bengal tracing back to the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries which involved teams of two or more *kabiyals* (poet-singers) along with their respective teams of chorus or *doharas* engaging in debate on a given topic through the use of verses, logic, verbal jugglery, satire and humour. This practice was extremely popular in the urban and sub-urban spaces, especially sustained by landlords and the *babu* class of Calcutta. However, the performers would often come from villages. Along with talking of themes such as religious harmony, universalism, spirituality, their poetry would also deal with popular contemporary events raising public awareness. Gradually, a critique of social evils, unjustified hierarchical structures that would result in the "otherisation" and oppression of a certain section of people and a commentary on colonial authoritarianism became a mainstay in these performances. This genre of performance poetry soon became a means for dissent in the twentieth century intermingling politics with grassroots cultural practices, aiding mass mobilisation from the bottom.

The famous *kabiyal* Ramesh Sil (1877–1967) hailed from Chittagong, a district in undivided Bengal (now in Bangladesh). His first protest poetry was inspired by the usurpation of peasant lands along the banks of river Karnaphuli by railway authorities. Sil wrote:

Railway comes to the country, what calamity  
The roots of all our danger  
Since then the people of Chittagong  
Are grief-stricken  
The river bank is now a site for trade  
As much as I can see  
These were the lands of the people  
And now belongs to none. (Basu, 2017, p. 15)

The 1920s were a particularly volatile period for India, especially Bengal, as a result of the Non-Cooperation Movement launched by Mahatma Gandhi, the Assam-Bengal Railway Strikes and several microlevel anti-imperial protests that were taking place. Thus, in his poem, Sil refers to how public land belonging to the poor are usurped by the colonial administration to create railways for their benefit without any compensation to the people. Moreover, the fertile land situated on the banks of the river Karnaphuli also resulted in the loss of farmland thus resulting in increased difficulties for peasants. In a more direct piece, he wrote:

My blood feeds your stomach, yet you call me “damn bloody”.  
If peasants and workers are united  
The white enemies shall be vanquished.

Thus, here Sil directly talks about concepts such as unionising and unity of the proletariat. It is also interesting to note that he subverts the language of his composition and includes slangs-breaking away from conventional *bhadralok* Bengali poetry.

Gumani Dewan (1895–1976) who hailed from Murshidabad was one of the most famous poet-singers of the twentieth century and is invoked along with star poets and litterateurs such as Anthony Firingee. Transcending geographical or religious boundaries and popular across both sides of Bengal, Dewan’s poetry indulged in criticism of casteist practices and Brahminical hierarchy. His compositions gave space to political events and evoked a strong sense of nationalism during the time of the Indian freedom struggle. His socialist ideas were depicted in a song where he called for the unity of all the workers and labourers of the country against capitalist exploitation without which this unjustness could not be challenged:

Worker brothers of this country, the service you lend through your labour  
Will not be adequately paid for  
A few of them will reap the fruits, and you will remain emaciated  
You won’t get the pay for your labour. (Shamsuddin, p. 131)

*Kabiyals* were historically patronised by feudal lords in semi-urban spaces for the purpose of entertainment. The shift to socialist ideas and endorsement by the public (Basu, 2017, p. 16)

was an interesting trend. It not only changed their vocabulary by breathing in communist sentiments into their creation but also transformed their works into “people’s literature”.

The Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA), the CPI’s cultural wing, came into existence in 1942, coinciding with the year of the Great Bengal Famine (1942–43) killing over three million people (Safi, 2019). Established in the backdrop of the Second World War, it emerged as an anti-imperialist, anti-fascist voice and attempted to mobilise the masses and create awareness through theatre, poetry and music (Bhatia, 1997, p. 434). With urban intellectuals at its helm, it tried to “educate” the masses through traditional cultural performances such as mythological plays and village mimes, inspired by theatre in Communist China where “strolling players educated the masses” (Waltz, 1978, p. 33). One of the key features of this was to create literature in easy, accessible language for the people and address themes relevant to the masses (Gunawardana, 1971, p. 226). However, despite the attempt to include the working class such as peasant poets within the sphere of this cultural movement, it continued to be guided by elite urban intellectual activists and failed to accommodate “people’s performers” (Basu, 2017, p. 15). The urban middle-class remained the base of the IPTA and it only reached out to the peasantry from cities and towns. Anuradha Roy argues that the cultural communism practised by IPTA betrayed their own class position of struggle and revolution as they always remained an “invisible intelligentsia” (Roy A. , 2014, p. 159). Hemango Biswas, one of the most popular IPTA activists from Bengal held responsible the movement’s confinement to the educated middle-class as a result of its disintegration within two decades (Bhattacharya B. , 2013, p. 185) and recalled in a personal interview in the 1980s how Nibaran Pandit, a sharecropper and *bidi* (locally produced inexpensive cigarette from cut tobacco rolled in leaf) worker, was accused of composing “vulgar lyrics” which he was asked to change and was even denied the permission to sing at an event in Calcutta.

*Khadya Andolon* (Food Movement) of the late 1950s was the second event that gave rise to resistance literature in post-colonial Bengal. Following the trauma of the Great Bengal Famine and the Tebhaga Movement, the *khadya anolon* was a protest movement by the masses against the corrupt public distribution system between 1956 and 1958 in a newly independent India that allowed uncontrolled black marketing and hoarding by the business class while millions of poor starved to death. While the problem existed throughout the country, the situation in West Bengal was worse due to the partition of the province which was followed by a huge refugee influx. It continued through the 1960s and reached its zenith in 1966. This crisis inspired many classical pieces of literature such as *Salemoner Ma* (The Mother of Salemon, 1958) by the poet Subhash Mukhopadhyay. Referring to the double trauma of suffering two famines within a mere span of less than 15 years, he wrote:

A sky like mad Babarali’s eyes, and ending on  
Your daughter from one famine  
faced with another famine  
is eagerly looking for you. (Dev, 2019)

Though deeply political in practice, Mukhopadhyay interrogated the line between poetry and politics. He claims that the job of poetry is “not just to contain politics but also be poetry” (Dev, 2019).

These revolutionary movements can be aligned to theorisation of sociologists from the Global North- Stouffer’s Relative Deprivation Theory (1949) and the Structural Strain Theory by Smelser (1962). Arguably, these reactions align with what Brinton states as the phenomenon that revolutions seem most likely to occur not when people are most miserable, but after things have begun to improve, setting off a round of rising expectation, here referring to the 1947 Indian decolonisation and relative economic affluence associated with national self-determination and political independence. The masses felt that State benefits were confined to the mercantile class while the educated professional class (middle class) were deprived of its shared economic growth and suffered as a result of the rising social inequality (Dasgupta R. , 2006, p. 1924). This paper uses the sociological, cultural and literary history lens to study the social cleavages and economic inequalities generated in postcolonial South Asia which led to the Naxal Uprising. The movement contested the legacy of India’s post-independence “growth narrative” and threw light on the failures of governmental development efforts at the micro level. Most importantly it compelled alternative and subaltern narratives to be included, raising the question: development for whom?

### **The Naxalbari uprising**

The term “Naxal” originated from a place called Naxalbari in the Siliguri subdivision of the Darjeeling district of North Bengal where the movement originated in 1967. This uprising was instigated by radical Left wing armed militants that wanted to overthrow the bourgeoisie Indian State following Maoist lines. It was augmented by the fact that the radical leftists felt their leaders had abandoned the communist movement by embracing revisionism and agreeing to participate in parliamentary politics (30 years of Naxalbari, 2010). Led by Charu Mazumdar and Kanu Sanyal, Mazumdar’s Historic Eight Documents argued the Indian revolution must take the path of armed struggle; it should be organised on the pattern of the Chinese revolution and not of the Soviet revolution; and that the armed struggle in India should assume the form of Zedong’s people’s war and not of Che Guevara’s Guerrilla War (Is there a Charu Mazumdar Thought ?, 2014). The mainstream communist party did not support this radical line and followed by the expulsion of Charu Mazumdar in 1969, the CPI split into the CPI (Marxist) of revisionists and the CPI (Marxist-Leninist) of the extremists. According to Dipankar Chakrabarti, the movement upheld the popular Marxist teaching, “force is the midwife of an old society pregnant with a new one”. Taking inspiration from Mao Zedong, the Indian revolutionaries wanted to forge a “protracted people’s war” with a bottoms-up approach beginning with an agrarian revolution with the peasantry and working class taking the lead role (Chakrabarti, 2010, p. 107).

A new dawn in the history of the Naxal movement rose with the spread of the movement to Calcutta in the early 1970s. It was heavily embraced by the educated middle-class youth of Bengal who were also frustrated with the current state of things in the country (Banerjee,



Mapping a Rugged Terrain: Naxalite Politics and Bengali Culture in the 1970s, 2010, p. 2). In an interview to *Liberation* in 1967, Charu Majumder said that the most important thing for the young revolutionaries was to be able to learn from the peasants by going to the villages and “integrating” with the masses. He advocated need for the urban intellectuals to unlearn and relearn, thus undoing the century-long class separation and urban and rural struggles (Baer, 2010, p. 20). This statement follows the line of Karl Marx, who in his Third Thesis on Feuerbach, “opposed the idea of educators from outside teaching the masses and said that one could only understand the true meaning of socialism through revolutionary practice” (Marik, 2009, p. 100).

The equal participation of urban and rural sections and the breaking down of class barriers was a phenomenon unique to the Naxal Uprising. Large sections of the intelligentsia including students from prestigious institutes were either sympathisers or active participants in the movement. *Deshabratī* and *Frontier*, the two literary mouthpieces of the CPI(M-L) tried to build a perception where the Indian State was portrayed as Goliath “whom the Naxalites were tackling as modern-day David” (Gupta, 2010, p. 78).

### **Naxal uprising and the poetry of resistance**

Cultural and artistic representation during the Naxal period mainly came from the educated middle-class (Banerjee, Mapping a Rugged Terrain: Naxalite Politics and Bengali Culture in the 1970s, 2010, p. 2). The urban guerrillas were the descendants of the *bhadralok* section, often referred to as the elites, and were products of “conditions imposed under colonialism” (Chatterjee, 1959, p. 103). The fact that knowledge of the English language practically remained one of the sole ways of landing a white-collar job, confined this within a limited section of people and the “enormous distance of this group from the sphere of social production” (Chatterjee, 1959, p. 105) reflected in the cultural sphere too. The discontent of the youth was also rooted in the collapse of the education system and the system’s failure to cater to the real needs of this aspiring professional class and they were greatly influenced by the Cultural Revolution of China. Iconoclastic acts such as destruction of statues of Bengal renaissance figures such as Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar or Raja Rammohan Roy were marked during this period in a bid to protest against the status quo which the youth had lost faith in. They wanted to upturn the aesthetics of the *bhadralok* class, ironically the same society most of them belonged to, by “demystifying the role of bourgeois icons” (Banerjee, Mapping a Rugged Terrain: Naxalite Politics and Bengali Culture in the 1970s, 2010, p. 10).

The Naxal movement made the urban middle-class question their evaluation of the “so-called Bengal Renaissance” and led to a spurt of new kind of “revolutionary literature” (Banerjee, Mapping a Rugged Terrain: Naxalite Politics and Bengali Culture in the 1970s, 2010, p. 3)). For some, this began with the rejection of fond romanticism in middle-class poetry. Murari Mukhopadhyay wrote:

When in love,  
Do not become a flower.  
If you can,

Come as the thunder.  
I'll lift its roar to my breast  
And send forth the battle-cry to every corner. (Translated by Sumanta Banerjee)

Thus, in his poetry, Mukhopadhyay urges to shed conventional genteel romanticism which might take one away from the harsh socio-political realities of life and instead urges love to be that strength which like a powerful thunder would send battle cries that would blow away the old and decayed. On the other hand, for some young poets, revolution intermingled with the idea of love. Thus, Dronacharya Ghosh, the 24-year-old poet and revolutionary who was murdered in police custody, wrote:

Love and revolution, revolution and love-  
Are inseparable from each other.  
Love for revolution  
And  
Revolution for love.

In this excerpt from the poem titled *Krishnar Uddeshye Koyekti Chhotro*, (Some Verses for Krishna), Ghosh intertwines his emotions for his lady love Krishna with his love for the party and the resistance movement. To him, there is no difference between the two. Talking of love in times of revolution, he established that romanticisation of revolution and vice versa was an essential part of Naxalite politics (Roy M. S., 2010, p. 165), probably as a result of the number of young participants in the movement. Romance and revolution are not reducible to each other but it is their continuity which would help sustain the movement. Similar emotions are expressed in Sudipto Bandopadhyay's *Song of the Walking Road*:

Stay, beloved,  
My love is not that tiny nest  
It is but a dream – I seek splendid rhythms of life  
I walk the roads  
I shall find them, I will...  
And when the dark night of the bats is over  
It becomes that tiny nest  
Beloved, if I am no more on that day  
And, if spring arrives,  
Set the voice of my rifle to tune  
Remember, I used to love  
The song of walking the roads. (Chakraborty A. , 2017)

In this poem, Bandopadhyay breaks away from the narrow definition of interpersonal love and intertwines it with his dream of a new society. He believes that the “spring” revolution will certainly arrive and tells his beloved to remember him and finish his incomplete task if he is not there anymore since he was also aware of the consequences of participating in this rebellion. In his poem, we also see a shadow of the impact of the Movement on women whose partners were arrested and even illegally murdered by the State. Women too were picked up by the police and physically abused if any connection was established with the Naxals. This

movement had a significant number of female participants too. However, it is interesting to note that as far as poetry or even literature at large is concerned, while novels such as *Hajar Churashir Maa* (Mother of 1084) has been written by Mahashweta Devi from the position of a sympathiser, almost nothing is known in terms of the literary contribution of female Naxal combatants.

A gulf had existed between two kinds of literature – the one of the educated middle classes of the cities and that of folk poets of the countryside resulting in a “depressing effect on the literary output of the city-based educated gentry” (Banerjee, *Thema Book of Naxal Poetry*, 1987, p. 25). While higher education had equipped one to analyse and adapt modern literature of the West, a sense of estrangement existed when it came to understanding the realities of the vast countryside and thus Bengali literature remained alienated and disconnected from the rural poor who constituted the masses. With thousands of middle-class youths joining the peasants in their struggle to set up liberated areas in their villages, cultural exchange also took place. This acted as a bridge between middle-class poets from cities and folk poets of the countryside. Through the exchange of knowledge system among these two cultural worlds, folk art and urban symbolism began to enrich each other (Banerjee, *Thema Book of Naxal Poetry*, 1987, p. 27). One such poem from the countryside in West Bengal used allegories from the Mahabharata and juxtaposes it with the peasant uprising. The first few lines of the poem are:

Can Krishna be held in the prison of Kamsa?  
Look at the hundreds and thousands of Krishnas in the fields  
Playing on flutes to the tune of fire.

Use of mythology was a typical trait in performative practices in the countryside. By referring to the peasant rebels as the deity Krishna, the poet raises them on a pedestal. A parallel can also be drawn to the legacy of Krishna fighting for injustice against his uncle Kamsa and directing Arjuna in the battle against the militarily more powerful Kauravas. Krishna is the symbol of justness and the victory of good over evil. Similarly, Saroj Dutta, one of the leading activists in the movement, subverts the story of the bandit Ratnakar turning into Valmiki, the author of the Hindu epic Ramayana, in his poem *Ratnakar*. While in the mythology, Valmiki begins composing the Ramayana out of the grief he suffered from seeing a hunter kill one of two mating swans and the other swan crying out for her beloved, in Dutt’s poem, the “dasyu” rishi (saint) is filled with rage and “tears those flags of non-anger apart” (Chakraborty A. , 2017).

In 1969, Charu Majumdar propagated the annihilation or *khatma* line where the young rebels believed that murdering and finishing of the *jotedar* and bourgeois class was the only final solution (Banerjee, *India's Simmering Revolution*, 1984, p. 152). This reflected in the poetry of the young middle-class revolutionary cadres too. The Chinese revolutionary Lu Hsun had said, “for revolution we need revolutionaries, but revolutionary literature can wait, for only when revolutionaries start writing can there be revolutionary literature” (Yu-Shih, 1977, p. 87). Shifting from the romanticism the *bhadralok* would expect in poetry, many turned towards outright propaganda and a style that would disturb the sensitivities of genteel readers. Directly

referring to the *khatma* line propagated by his leader Charu Majumder, Dronacharya Ghosh wrote:

The power that flows from the barrel of the gun  
Shatters to smithereens  
The last ruins of imperialism.  
Remember this-  
And select your enemies  
And turn your weapons  
Against them one by one... (Banerjee, Thema Book of Naxal Poetry, 1987, p. 19)

Nitya Sen, a peasant activist of the 1970s, called out to fellow suffering peasants who had lost their all to the bourgeois to join the movement:

Listen to the call of the rebels.  
Come out and join them.  
March forward  
And break the chains of servitude. (Banerjee, Thema Book of Naxal Poetry, 1987, p. 38)

Much like the rebels's attempt to overthrow State power and shake the status quo to build a new system of government, experiments were made regarding the language and thought expressed in poetry too. That was also a shackle that the young rebel-poets wanted to break and set a new parallel by discarding established cultural aesthetics and shaking the consciousness of the masses. The language of the elite was rejected for a new mode of expression which better represented contemporary times and the emotions, concerns and trials of everyday life of common people (Banerjee, Thema Book of Naxal Poetry, 1987, p. 27). The Naxalite poets indulged in a kind of verbal shock and used language that was considered to be obscene. They wanted to overthrow this "secret tyranny of language exercised by the establishment" and sought release from the oppression of language that had buried their voice under years of generational respectability. A conflict arose between classical aristocratic forms and the "earthy language of the masses" (Banerjee, Thema Book of Naxal Poetry, 1987, p. 7). Saroj Dutta, a leading figure in the movement, advised party cadres to "forget the past, forget the old poets". They attempted an assault on the old guard aesthetics and welcomed "new fighting poets" who emerged from the armed struggle.

Amiyo Chattopadhyay, beaten to death in jail in 1971, in *Hunger of Land in the Face of Guns* wrote:

Land roars out in hunger in face of guns  
O humans, look!  
Babies born today, in houses  
of the workers and the farmers  
Poked by bayonets, before the glinting sparks,  
They dream of a new world!

Chattopadhyay refers to the mass participation, especially from rural sections, in the movement in his poems. He dreams of creating a better world for the future generation. He claims that the new generation would be brave and cannot be cowered in the face of violence. Similarly, another poem talks of the economic crisis and sufferings of the poor which became a major trigger point for the unrest in urban quarters. A nameless poet held captive in Medinipore jail wrote of the anguish of an endless night and empty rice jar where he cannot afford to feed his mother. In the Naxal uprising he sees hope. As he sees “mansions of the rich crumble,” he requests his mother to allow him to join the movement to “make the bright sun rise” (Banerjee, *Thema Book of Naxal Poetry*, 1987, p. 205). Partha Bandopadhyay uses a harsher language. Drawing on Bengal’s history of two famines, he asks for death rather than a poisoned painful existence. In *March ’73*, he writes:

India, I’ve not been baptized  
 Into your doctrine of non-violence,  
 I am the outcast, the fallen.  
 I don’t obey any mandate...  
 The terrible revenge of  
 Malnutrition is coming down upon me. (Banerjee, 1987)

Bandopadhyay’s poem also takes a dig at middle-class Bengalis. Since the colonial rule, a large part of this section who created the “babu” class and received favours from the British, preached non-violence once tides of anti-imperialism in the country became strong. However, the young Naxal rebels were motivated from anti-colonial Indian revolutionaries who believed in the cult of the bomb (Hak, 1960, p. 50). Similarly, Srijan Sen, displaying his contempt towards the revisionists, wrote how the readers of Karl Marx’s *Das Kapital* are today busy “building their own capital” (Banerjee, *Thema Book of Naxal Poetry*, 1987, p. 205).

A significant phenomenon that Naxal poetry manages to capture is the torture and police repression faced by the young rebels during Operation Steeplechase, a counterterrorist operation unleashed by the government. Police and paramilitary forces were deployed to completely wipe out “red bases”. Hundreds of young activists and sympathisers were mercilessly killed on the streets of Calcutta in fake encounters (Sengupta, 2019). A greater number of people were arrested and tortured on mere suspicion. This also resulted in the deaths of many young budding poets who took to Naxalism. While the middle class was not always supportive of the actions of the Naxals, it is this heinous torture that began creating some sympathy. With it was the fact that the young rebels who were being tortured came from the same social strata that they belonged to and thus were very human to the masses. Thus, this attack was almost personal at one level and people could relate to the fact that this could happen to their children too. These times generated the maximum amount of literature. They were of two types – one was created by the imprisoned Naxalites in jail and the second came from poets who were sympathetic to the Naxal cause.

By 1973, Indian jails consisted of over 32,000 Naxalite prisoners. What is unique to this genre of poetry was that hope was often overtaken by the anguish and hopelessness of a failed

movement along with the grief for fellow comrades who were being killed by the State. An anonymous poem was inscribed on the walls of a cell in the Presidency Jail in Calcutta with a piece of stone by a political prisoner after they heard of the news of the murder of 22-year-old Prabir Chatterjee in jail in 1975. The nameless poet wrote:

Here sleeps my brother.  
Don't stand by him  
With a pale face and a sad heart,  
For, he is laughter! (Banerjee, Thema Book of Naxal Poetry, 1987, p. 97)

In *Clinging to the Bars of the Jail*, Dhurjati Chattopadhyay pens down the pain of the “mother of a destroyed child,” referring to the Naxals and universalises her angst. Beneath mangled lumps of flesh, from the depths of blood and pus as a result of custodial torture, it is impossible to distinguish an individual as the mother's son. The poem talks about collective dreams and suffering where one's face cannot be distinguished from another:

It's the same blood which flowed through everyone.  
The sighs of their breath were the same.  
They shared the same belief in gunpowder.  
They lie today in the same ocean of blood.  
They remain the children of the same earth. (Banerjee, Thema Book of Naxal Poetry, 1987, p. 98)

The final section that this paper discusses is the poetry of Naxal sympathisers who were not directly involved in the movement. It is here that the urban intelligentsia stepped in though not everyone supported the annihilation line of the Naxals. For many, they were kids with a dream who had gone wayward, especially considering the age of the participants. However, they also appreciated the unselfish struggle of the youths. Poet Birendra Chattopadhyay, in protest of the police brutalities, wrote:

Thousands of vultures have encircled the sky  
Wherever someone bleeds they rush in there...  
And here in the flaming fire  
Lakhs of hypnotised men find their faces mirrored. (Chattopadhyay A. , 2018, p. 16)

The most powerful poem in this regard, is however Chattopadhyay's *Amar Sontan Jaak Prottyoho Noroke* (Let My Child Go to Hell Every Day). Written from a place of extreme hurt and replete with sarcasm, it takes a dig at the so-called intellectuals of the society who have kept quiet against unjustified State brutalities against the youth. He questions their hypocrisy suggesting that having accepted favours from the ruling dispensation, the *bhadralok* class consisting of leaders, poets and journalists give up their own child's slain head as a gift to “Delhi,” meaning the central government, at night and in the morning the same set of people mourn saying the children have “committed suicide”. He critiques the journalistic practice of defaming these young children while conveniently suppressing the torture unleashed against them. In *Annadamangal*, a medieval Bengali text written in praise of the deity of food, a mother

prays to the goddess saying *Aamar santan jano thake dudhe bhaate* (Let my child remain in milk and honey). In the refrain to his poem, Chattopadhyay revolts by turning this phrase around and says *tomar (your) santan jano thake dudhe bhaate*.

After the Naxal movement was crushed by the State, the participants had to choose between two paths – leave the country and settle abroad (by testifying against fellow comrades to get relief from the police in some cases) or stay back with the burden of a broken dream. The latter is beautifully captured in Shankha Ghosh's *Babar's Prayer*. A stalwart Bengali poet, Ghosh was serving as a faculty in the Department of Bengali Literature, Jadavpur University in the 70s and was close to many students who went on to become Naxalites. This included the rebel-poet Timirbaran Singha, a favourite of Ghosh for whom he composed a moving tribute on learning that he was beaten to death along with 16 other boys in police custody. For Ghosh, the only function of poetry was to tell the truth (Chattopadhyay K. , 2010, p. 129). *Prayer* sprung out of the hopelessness that was reflected in the eyes of his students. In the poem, he requests the Almighty to restore the dreams of his children (younger generation) even if it came at the cost of his own destruction and pleads that the children should not suffer for the sins of the previous generation.

## Conclusion

Bengal has had seeds of socialism sown in its soil ever since the medieval times. The representation of revolution in popular culture has also helped nurture their sympathy towards anti-authoritarian uprisings and vice versa. Poetry and literature at large have been some of the main mediums of communication between participants and non-participants in revolution and it has been aptly used as a tool of propaganda. While literature was mostly produced by the middle class and urban intelligentsia who not only had the education but also the luxury and leisure to indulge in creative pursuits, one notices trends of the participation of the underclass too with elements of the grassroots gradually becoming a part of Bengali literature and bridging the gap between the elite and the underprivileged – a phenomenon particularly noted during the Naxal Uprising. This paper also concludes that the interaction among rebels and the civil society has been one of the greatest components in the sustenance and remembrance of the Naxal movement in Bengal. One is thus led to believe that representation in popular literature also encouraged socialist tendencies among the masses in Bengal resulting in a 34-year-long Left Front rule in West Bengal, the longest ever Communist government in a democratic multi-party system. The Naxal Movement did not just shake the political setup of West Bengal, but also resulted in a decolonisation of the language of Bengali poetry.

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