

B.Naxal Creativity: From Outspoken Admiration to Incisive Critique

Prof. Dasgupta proposes to deal with a vibrant phase of cultural activism in Bengal – from the late 1960s and 70s. The background to this was constituted by a phase of left extremism, a revolutionary movement that powerfully challenged the legitimacy of the Indian state for the first time since independence. The Naxal movement inspired considerable artistic creativity – among the actual activists, but also outside their circles. Some of the outsiders were ardent supporters, some partly sympathetic but more or less critical. Criticism was penned by the activist writers too. Prof. Dasgupta proposes to study both activist writers and non-activist writers, and both partisan and critical literature. His canvas seems very broad. He intends to carefully select his texts. I think this will facilitate an approach of inter-textuality and thus reveal the complex mood of a section of the Bengali middle-class world and its culture at that critical juncture of history.

Here are some of my observations on the proposal for Prof. Dasgupta to consider. The Naxal movement had a general impact on Bengali intellectuals and writers. Maybe they did not always write directly on the movement, but the impact showed in various ways. This is because the movement made quite a few educated middle-class people do some fresh thinking regarding several aspects of Indian history and reality. This led to reassessment of history, that of Bengal Renaissance or of the peasant movements of the colonial period, for example), of conventional social values, and above all of the nature of Indian state – the seemingly liberal-democratic state that showed its ugly face to suppress this movement. It now became clear that the structures of the Indian state and class power were much more complex and differentiated than hitherto assumed by the leftist orthodoxies, that Indian reality was mediated at many levels by diverse economic and cultural institutions, that cultural idioms of solidarity were often defined by elements such as kinship and community rather than class. We know such realizations made far-reaching impact in social sciences – bringing to the fore the urgency of the agrarian revolution, leading to studies of different aspects of agrarian life, peasant revolts and thus making the decade 1980s marked by 'return of the peasants' in academics.

Now, such a general impact of the movt can be seen in literature too. For example, I would consider Mahashweta Devi's *AranyerAdhikar* (1970) about the tribal right to forests and set in the background of late 19th century no less a product of the Naxalmovt than her *BasaiTudu*, an account of the contemporary agrarian revolt and *HajarChurshir Ma* which was about a Naxal youth and his mother. Similarly I would consider UtpalDutta's *Kallol* (1965) about the RIN Mutiny of 1946 celebrating the militant anti-colonial nationalism with a vision of social justice and equality and valorizing its heroes hitherto marginalized as part of the build-up to the Naxalmovt. One may call this 'prevision' or 'pre-echo'. I would say the clock had already started ticking the utopian moment. And thus I would perhaps include this in the study alongside UtpalDutta's *Teer* (1967) which was directly about the uprising in Naxalbari. Then in the field of cinema, I would deal with Satyajit Ray's *Pratidwandi* or *Janaaranya*. The youth characters of these movies were not part of a radical protest, but they shared the same background as the radical youths. Theirs was not perhaps a political struggle, but a struggle with life, showing a lot of moral dilemma, compromise and yet ultimately perhaps an anti-establishment attitude. That is, I would request Prof. Dasgupta to think if he could consider the general atmosphere in the world of art and literature, even if he concentrates on the pieces directly dealing with the Naxal movement. Of course, this may turn out to be too huge a subject for a single scholar to handle. But I would like to understand the time with all its complexities.

And so far as the creativity directly reflecting on the movt is concerned, I have just one question. – If we Where do we stop? At what point of time? I mean a lot has been written (and is still being written) on the Naxalite period in recent times. – And in this connection I would also point out that though Prof. Dasgupta talks about the paucity of memoirs and this was true until recently, a number of memoirs are, however, being published these days. This perhaps seems to be a suitable time – perhaps some distance in time helps one acquire a clear perspective, also the golden jubilee of the movement is approaching. I would like to mention Malay Ghosh, Ajit Chakraborty, Amit Bhattacharya, apart from Azizul Haq, Minakshi Sen, Jaya Mitra and others. I would like Prof. Dasgupta to take some of them into account. But of course, I leave it to his discretion.

We know little magazines proliferated at that time. This was perhaps the beginning of the famous little magazine culture of Bengal . There were periodicals like *Kalpurush* edited by AmiyabhashanChakraborty, which were interested in politics and literature alike. Could Prof. Dasgupta consider this aspect of the movt too?

Can North Bengal to be treated separately to some extent? Because there were separate north Bengal groups and south Bengal groups in the movt, and they had little connections. Perhaps the cultural atmospheres were different too. But again I leave it to Prof. Dasgupta's discretion.

When I think of the cultural activism directly generated by the Naxalmovt, a comparison with the communist cultural activism of the 1930s and 40s that I studied cannot but come to my mind. The two movements seem very similar – responses to difficult times, driven by the communist ideology and so on, but they were different too. Except for 1948-50, the period of my study was the united front period, when the communists were pursuing their United Front policy in face of the fascist threat. They were trying to forge a broad-based mass movement during this period. They talked of forging a People's Theatre Movt, a People's Song Movt. So the earlier movt was a clearly formulated cultural project and there were a number of communist mass fronts to sponsor it. Not that they were very successful in drawing the peasants and workers to the movement, but at least a galaxy of middle-class writers and artists of Bengal joined the movement, even beyond the ranks of the left, though many of them left later, with the onset of ultra-leftism.

The activism (both political and cultural) of the 1960s and 70s was not a mass movement. It remained just a cult cherished by some radical people. The Naxalbari movement that set off the whole thing involved local peasants, but soon it became an urban guerrilla movement. They had concerns for the masses of course, but forging links with the masses was not on their agenda. Indeed

alienation from the masses has been pointed out as a major drawback of the movement. It also led to 2 massive errors – the tactic of individual annihilation and glorification of violence, which confused and alienated common people, both middle-classes and under-classes.

This difference must have been reflected in the cultural ramifications of the two movts. In the field of music at least, the earlier cultural workers could spot quite a few talents from among peasants and workers. The People's Song Movt could become a real people's movement to some extent, thanks to dedicate cultural activists like Benoy Ray and HemangaBiswas. The reach of the Naxal-inspired culture was not that big. How many peasants and workers were inspired to compose songs for the movement? I know that in south west Bengal, ArunChowdhury, was a very popular CPI-ML leader among the Santals. He appealed to them in the names of Sidhu and Kanu. The Santals composed songs referring to Sidhu-Kanu and the Maoist leaders in the same breath, but then ArunChowdhury was killed by his own comrades and the Santals were shocked. The movement among them dwindled. I also wonder how many people even from the educated middle-class were inspired by the movement directly. The earlier cultural movement had seen a galaxy of talents joining the cultural front of the communists and seeped into the mainstream culture that continued to flow for a long time. So even while trying to feel the vibrancy of the Naxal-inspired creativity, we have to understand its limitations too. Ultimately perhaps, just like the earlier movement it could not overcome its middle-classness, encouraged emotion and even emotionalism rather than practicability and thus failed to establish a powerful counter-hegemony in society.

And just a caveat in this connection. I remember, as a researcher in the 1980s, I faced considerable problems while studying the movt of the 1930s and 40s. The participants often tended to mythify the movement. I felt what was expected from me was not an objective history, but a retrospective mythology. This presents a problem to the historian. The same problem may come up in this case too. I know quite some people who tend to bask in the glory of the Naxalite movement. Particularly because the movement is approaching its golden jubilee,

the celebratory tendency may increase. And the historian needs to be cautious about this.

As a student of history and social studies, I have a host of questions regarding the Naxal movement, and I am sure Prof. Dasgupta's work will answer at least some of these. Marcos Franda has famously related the Naxal movement to the tradition of militant nationalism of the colonial period. This relation is worth exploring. Perhaps this was reflected not only in glorification of violence, but also in interpersonal relationship – too much factionalism within the movement. And how this was reflected in cultural practices.

Then I would like to have some ideas about the youth culture of the time. What sort of image of youth was constructed by the movement and the society at large about this time? Did the images clash? Radical and rebellious youth, self-sacrificing and death-defying youth, a threat not only to the state's authority, but also conventional social ethics – such an image of youth had flourished in Bengal between the two world wars. Indeed, militant nationalists were closely associated with this image. To what extent did the Naxalite movement carry the legacy of this culture? I am curious to know how a communist movement stressing organization and discipline could be compatible with the passionate outburst of youth, what problems cropped up as a result of incompatibility. Maybe there was a politics-culture dichotomy here - using and disciplining the youth in politics on the one hand and glorification of youth in cultural practices on the other?

Any analysis of cultural practices necessitates the inclusion of the category of gender. In political terms, any such movement should question both class-based and gender-based inequality. However, there was a deficiency in regard to gender in the earlier movement I studied and my impression is that it was so in the Naxalite movement too. Women were present in the movement, it had a liberating effect on them; but were they not treated just as helpers, nurturers? Didn't the movement nurture socially conservative values? Jaya Mitra, Krishna Bandyopadhyay and others can help us in understanding this. Here too perhaps

we would find a politics-culture dichotomy. Not much autonomy for women was there in the movement itself, but their resistance, particularly to gender discrimination, was often foregrounded in literature and art. And ultimately this was a boost to feminist politics too.

And finally, the aesthetic aspect of the study. Aesthetic questions should be very important for such a study. Mine was a political approach rather than cultural. I treated the arts as objects of politics and not so much as subjective creations. My priority was the communist movement, its success and failure. I am sure that Dasgupta with his aesthetic sensibilities would do better justice to the aesthetic dimensions, personal dimensions of the movement. Perhaps the emotional tenor of creativity was different in this case, which needs to be revealed. What symbols and metaphors did the writers use? Any new thoughts about the use of folk forms? GP Deshpande criticized the earlier movement for reducing the political in art to mere 'reacting and responding', rather than 'thinking the political culturally', which merely produced simplistic manifestos and posters by lesser artists within the movement. Perhaps the Naxal movement fared better in this regard, in 'thinking the political culturally'? That Prof. Dasgupta is sensitive to this problem is evident in his proposal.

I look forward to his work.