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**The Creative & Cultural Dimension
of the Naxalbari Movement**



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Subhoranjan Dasgupta

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Preface

Efflorescence ... Efflorescence ... Efflorescence. The legendary teacher of English Literature, Professor Taraknath Sen, used this particular term to evaluate the outburst of sonneteering in the Elizabethan age. Quite consciously, this term is being repeated to encapsulate, if possible, the prolific abundance of creativity inspired by the Naxalite movement. A few relevant though approximate figures will substantiate the choice of the word. No fewer than 500 poems were written by activists and sympathizers to record the upsurge; no fewer than 200 short stories were penned by the writers to capture the ebb and flow of the complex, political movement; no fewer than 50 novels were written to express the Naxalite experience; no fewer than 50 plays were written by indefatigable playwrights to dramatize the movement which struck us like a meteor and then dwindled; no fewer than 20 films were made to capture in celluloid the upsurge and tragic decline of the violent rebellion and resistance. Indeed, on commencing to explore this creative efflorescence, it is difficult to know where and how the quest should be terminated. It is therefore strange to read the comment of an otherwise excellent critic, Iraban Basu Ray, which labelled this outburst as 'slim', 'confined' and 'slender'.¹ If one cares to read the plays published in the journal *Abhinay* and old copies of two magazines in particular, *Anustup* and *Aneek*, one realizes that the objections chosen by Iraban Basu Ray were fallacious.

The truth of the matter is simple. No social and political movement in post-independence India spawned this amount of creativity as Naxalbari spawned, and that too in all possible branches of literature beginning from poetry and ending in autobiographical journals with short stories, novels and dramas coming in between.

Poetry and Naxalbari

There are still some literary critics in our midst who raise their complaining eyebrows the moment they confront the expression 'committed poetry'. These steadfast disciples of Stefan Mallarme and Paul Valery reason that 'committed' poetry is opposed per se to 'pure' poetry, and hence not much worth should be attached to this kind of verse. Their argument is as follows: (a) committed poetry

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does not fulfil the precondition of pure poetry because it brings politics to the forefront (b) this intrusion of politics leads to the entrance of slogans and (c) poetry of commitment turns fast into sheer sloganeering. These critics are so stubborn that they hesitate to extend rightful applause to markedly political poets like Vladimir Mayakovski, Bertolt Brecht and Pablo Neruda.

To these critics who love to dwell in their self-contained ivory towers, we should gift the anthology titled *Bajaromanik Diye Gantha*. Edited and compiled by Rahul Purakayastha, this selection contains 280 rousing lyrics as well as tragic reflective poems penned by 182 poets, some of them Naxalite activists and others dedicated fellow-travellers and sympathizers. Needless to say, this remarkable anthology proves once and for all that the poetry of commitment fulfils the basic aesthetic preconditions. In fact, poems such as these or committed poetry engender at the same time a new aesthetic or poetics which goes beyond the borders of pure poetry.

The poets included in this anthology follow celebrated icons like Mao-Tse-tung and Louis Aragon. Mao-Tse-tung exhibited how to blend the Chinese tradition of lyric writing with new revolutionary content. Following his footsteps, the activist Dronacharya Ghosh has written “Our births represent only the ceaseless despair of exploitation there is no time now to hold a story session under light shades/ now is not the time to drink liquor like a helpless character/what is now needed in the face of bullets/is the extermination of class enemies / a hard and ruthless organisation”.² In this lyric resonant with resolution, rebellious promises are uttered with refined nonchalance. The language employed is hard and strong and it reveals a revolutionary programme that must be translated into necessary action. It needs to be mentioned that Dronacharya, one of the finest lyricists of the Naxalbari movement, was martyred in Hooghly Jail.

And why only Dronacharya Ghosh? Murari Mukhopadhyay, Timirbaran Singha, Bipul Chakravarti and many others travelled and fought on the same road. One is particularly drawn to Murari Mukhopadhyay’s poem *Bhalobese*. Almost following the structure and syntax of Heinrich Heine’s lyric – another rebellious poet – Murari in this poem links a number of conventional romantic associations with pristine revolutionary ardour. For example, the moon-river-flower and bird shed their conventional semantic to inaugurate the process of violent change. He writes with deathless determination : “Moon, river, flower, stars, bird/ will be seen after sometime/ because now in darkness we still have to fight the last battle/now we need fire in our huts”.³ Like Dronacharya Ghosh, Murari Mukhopadhyay was also martyred on July 25, 1971 in Hazaribagh Central Prison. His lyric *Bhalobese* is like a sheet of steel, astute and glistening.

We are startled even more by Bipul Chakravarti’s heroic lyrics. Probably, under the influence of Rainer Maria Rilke, who in spite of his angelic missions, was firmly rooted in material reality, Bipul compares his condition with that of a wounded tiger. He reminds us of Rilke’s celebrated poem *Panther*. Awful torture and persecution have failed to weaken his commitment. In point of fact, just the opposite has happened – he has turned out to be even more ardent and more devoted to his revolutionary cause: “Stains and marks of whipping from head to foot/let these remain/hit me... hit me in that way/so that I look like a royal bengal tiger/after the bout of your hitting is over”.⁴ Like an enraged and wounded tiger, the poet is determined to strike his foes – his agenda is that of rock hard and merciless retribution.

Not only those engaged in direct political action in towns, cities and villages, but also non-active fellow-travelers, sympathizers and, broadly speaking, humanists coined lyrics and poems to express their sensitive and anguished reactions to the Naxalite movement. Rahul Purakayastha, quite correctly, has included their creativity in *Bajaromanik Diye Gantha* which remains till date the best and most comprehensive anthology of poetry dedicated to the violent and idealistic moment. Eminent poets like Subhas Mukhopadhyay, Birendra Chattopadhyay, Sankha Ghosh, Alokeranjan Dasgupta,

Shakti Chattopadhyay, Sunil Gangopadhyay stood beside the activists extolling their sacrifice, courage and bravery though they did not endorse their picking up the gun. Sankha Ghosh, by far the most eminent poet writing in Bengal, explained the ideological stand of the poets. He said, “We endorse the idealism, desire and aspiration of the Naxalite youths – with that we did not have any quarrel. But we questioned their method, course of action and violent programme. We were dead against the ruthless state oppression that was launched against them. I do not know if the Naxalites spread *Lalsantrash* or red terror, but of this we are quite sure that the state unleashed horrible white terror or *Swetsantrash* against them”.⁵

These poems written by well-known poets expressed solidarity in a variety of moods and intonations. For example, Subhas Mukhopadhyay in his almost iconic poem *The son has gone to forest*⁶ laments the fact that the young rebel has gone to the forest to fight leaving the old and aged comrade in self-lacerating, familial bondage. The pronounced note of sorrow and guilt recorded in this poem gives way to loud and outspoken condemnation in the poems of the uncompromising bard Birendra Chattopadhyay. We all know that Birendra Chattopadhyay throughout the phase of this movement from the late sixties to the early seventies of the last century voiced rocklike support for the young militants, despite the fact that he was not a Naxalite by conviction. In one of his condemnatory lyrics, burning like hot iron, he wrote: “Let my child go everyday to hell/let the paid executioner tear his body/I, who pray every day/let your child partake of milk and rice”.⁷ We fall silent as we read these scalding lyrics; we realize that the poet is revealing the very tears of things – to quote Horace – in these poems.

It happened sometime that a tremulous bridge was constructed between the young, relentless Naxalites and progressive poets. One such fervent relationship flowered between Timirbaran Singha, the young fearless Naxalite, and the two eminent poets and teachers, Sankha Ghosh and Alokeranjan Dasgupta. Timir was their favourite student and they saw him going into the deep and long night, to use the words of Dylan Thomas. Timir, according to them – to employ the diction of Dylan Thomas again – raged and raged against the dying of light even if his going deep into the murderous night could not be averted. Timir was killed inside Behrampur Jail in 1971, and on hearing this news, Sankha Ghosh wrote an ardent elegy: “The maidan drops heavy in the midst of fog/Route march melts towards the horizon/I sit low and pick up with my hands/your cut out head, Timir”.⁸ Alokeranjan Dasgupta, on his part, hailed him as *Amritadham Yatri* or *Sojourner to Heaven* and wrote in his lyric full of agonized sympathy: “Whose nectar of death do I taste in my mind ... when he was handcuffed/he gave me in secrecy his songbook/exactly at 2 am/as if a terrible theft takes place when everything is given.”⁹ And what did the living Timir have to say to his two teachers? To Sankha Ghosh he said, “I am leaving. I do not know where I shall be going, what I shall do and when I shall return”.¹⁰ To Alokeranjan, he said with conviction, “Sir, you must believe, revolution is approaching, no one can stop it”.¹¹ What is even more heart-rending is his tongue-in-cheek lyric *O Pagal* in which he indulges in caustic self-exploration : “O you madcap do not go that way, please do not/O you madcap get rid of your madness/ Just say, does it befit you to be a martyr.”¹²

The Naxalite poets picked up this self-deprecatory tone time and again. At times, driven to despair and failure, they questioned the very ethos of their struggle and expressed the terrible fear of loneliness. Such self questionings found their diction in lyrics. The Naxalite activist Srijan Sen wrote while assailed by this mood, “The air becomes heavy/Memories suddenly become peddlers of flowers/I found only stairs before me – stairs of the overbridge/laying themselves here in the darkness/I return home/The lamp is flickering/A cold, wooden seat welcomes me”.¹³

In the very beginning of this section we placed committed poetry and pure poetry in juxtaposition. the aim was to demolish the redundant wall that is at times raised between the two. So,

at the end, let us close with an imagist poem that perhaps would have pleased Mallarme and Valery. This poem was written by Srijan Sen : “One after another/Eyes burn/Watch them from far/They look pale like the night stars/ Come closer/Every eye looks larger than the sun, each a ball of fire”.¹⁴

As we read and reread these moving poems revealing a mosaic of moods and emotions, as we traverse from fiery slogan transmuted into stirring verse, to the enquiring sotto voce, we realize that the rebels were not only fighters but minstrels too. While recalling Dronacharya, Murari, Bipul, Timir, Srijan we are reminded of those immortal words uttered by the poet of the French Resistance and lifelong communist Louis Aragon, “Friend, I go to my death and O Friends will know the reason why”.

Drama and Naxalbari

Some scholar-critics have posed a pertinent query. The query is: “Why do you want to begin your section on Naxalite drama and dramaturgy by referring to and analyzing Bijan Bhattacharya’s *Debigarjan*. After all, this rousing play was written four years before the actual Naxalite uprising broke out and it was first staged in 1966”? The reason for this inclusion is simple enough. *Debigarjan* is the first drama which looked into the seeds of time and foretold the class annihilation of rampaging landowners or zamindars and jotedars. Indeed, the ultimate stage direction at the end of the play focuses on this annihilation and it could have been well-nigh included as a reportage in *Deshabrati* or in a play written by, say, Amal Roy who was the most irrepressible among Naxalite dramatists. To put it simply, the playwright who wrote the conciliatory play *Nabanna* adopted a completely different position in *Debigarjan* where he anticipated the crucial call for annihilation given by the Naxalite leaders from 1968 onwards.

In fact, there are two schools of thought regarding *Debigarjan*. While the astute critic Samik Bandopadhyay read the play as a justified culmination of the seeds that had been planted in *Nabanna*, Nirmal Ghosh (a close friend of Samik) dismissed *Nabanna* as a reactionary piece and claimed that the playwright had turned into an entirely new leaf in *Debigarjan* where he championed the annihilation of the class enemy jotedar Pravanjan as an integral part of an essential class war in which the militant and persecuted peasants finished off the jotedar without a doubt or hesitation.

No matter what the two schools say, *Debigarjan* has stood the test of time as a rousing and uncompromising drama which pre-tells the revolutionary violence that broke out four years later. In point of fact, it acts as an appropriate curtain-raiser and bearing this anticipatory truth in mind the author has begun this section with *Debigarjan*.

Nevertheless, it is not a hundred per cent Naxalite drama for two reasons. First, it does not envisage the capture of state power as a logical follow-up of the annihilation. That is, it limits itself to the reform of panchayati politics and, secondly, it dwells on the depiction of the vengeful Goddess Kali before the play ends. To be precise, the bloodthirsty Kali struts across the stage to provide a religious sanction to what had taken place. No such specific religious association is to be found in Utpal Dutt’s *Teer* or in the plays of Amal Roy and Manoranjan Biswas. Perhaps it would be fair to say that a master-narrator from the western world, Nobel Laureate Günter Grass, underlined the possibility of an insurrection in Bengal by describing the wrath of Kali who crosses the shore in the last lines of his Kolkata chronicle *Zunge Ziegen*. But the author insists that reverting back to a religious image and upholding a reformed panchayat should not be dismissed as reactionary baggage. What is most significant is the violent removal of the class enemy and the remarkable exploration of the basic contradiction between starving peasants and the depraved jotedar in the play. In other words, this play simmering with revolutionary action and gripping dialogue opened the terrain for other

dramatists who began their writing after four years. Finally, *Debigarjan* serves as an important link between the earlier *Nabanna* and Bijan's full-fledged Naxalite play *Chalo Sagare*, which he wrote during the Naxalite outburst.

Like *Debigarjan*, Utpal Dutt's remarkable play *Teer* also fomented some amount of controversy. And in this case the controversy was engineered by no less a person than Utpal Dutt himself. For certain reasons he dismissed the play after its first successful run in Minerva and he also came to the vulnerable conclusion that the politics layering the play was not hundred per cent correct. The query which he raised was: "If armed insurrection is the only way out, where are the much-needed arms and ammunition".¹⁵ It is said or rumoured that he wanted to divert some of his earnings from his engagement in Bollywood to the cause of purchasing arms. But critics and viewers were not satisfied by his recalcitrance. For example, Samik reminded him that *Teer* was an excellent production and it needed to be re-staged. Samik wanted to probe Dutt's indifference towards the play. When he raised this pointblank query, Utpal Dutt came out with the unconvincing excuse that the script of the play was missing. What actually transpired in this debate-ridden phase was Utpal Dutt's sharp criticism of Naxalite politics and programme. He found it to be premature and adventurous and he began to keep a distance from the entire, rebellious politics. That something had gone wrong was underlined by Charu Mazumdar's conduct as well. He with his oxygen cylinder had gone to see the rehearsal of the play at Minerva but he did not stay for long. He found it to be unsatisfactory and commented that the play mistakenly concentrated on slogans applauding democracy. This applause, he added, was an escapist bourgeois vice. But *Deshabrati*, the Naxalite mouthpiece, extolled the production in ebullient prose. It wrote, "*Teer* is an unforgettable production. We have seen *Ferrari Fouj*, we have seen *Angar*, we were fascinated by the bold content of *Kallol*. Still, *Teer* belongs to a different class. It is a burning document of the Naxalbari agrarian revolution. It is the expression of audacious truth. *Teer* sets alive the history of Naxalbari".¹⁶ Sudeshna Chakravarti has written in detail on this controversy in her excellent evaluation of *Teer*.¹⁷

Let alone the nature of controversy which shrouded *Teer*, it remains till date as one of Utpal's best produced dramas where the politics propagated was not awry. As an example of this corrective politics, one could focus on that masterly scene where the class antagonism prevailing in the country is superbly etched. In that scene a capitalist, a jotedar, a newspaper editor, a fashionable lady and official communist spout their venom at the Naxalites in similar words and tones. Thereby they come to represent that one and the same bourgeois and semi-feudal class hegemony exploiting the workers and peasants. On the other side of the dividing river stand the exploited who are dreaming resolutely in terms of an agrarian revolution. Another superb scene at the end of the play depicts the painful and frightening death of the jotedar, Satyaban, who is sucked in by mud and mire. Utpal Dutt's Satyaban and Bijan Bhattacharya's Pravanjan remain as abiding examples of class-directed, merciless tyranny.

Utpal Dutt and Bijan Bhattacharya were, by any measure, the two most illustrious dramatists who dramatized the theme of Naxalite rebellion in their own distinctive ways. But there were others too, not negligible in number, who focused on the revolt in their well-crafted and moving plays. Both sensitive and full of insight, these playwrights were also activists who drew from their personal experiences. It is thus a pity that we have almost forgotten their contribution to this sphere of literary creativity. The irrepressible Amal Roy, Anal Gupta, Jochan Dastidar, Manoranjan Biswas, Lokenath Chattopadhyay, Samir Majumder, Samar Datta and many others wrote stirring as well as tragic plays to record the ebb and tide, rise and fall of the entire political movement. Indeed, this complete dramatic genre could be well compared with other dramatic collections written in any other part of the world exploring the same or similar themes. As it is not possible to dissect all the plays within this

limited space, the author shall focus on the texts of two dramatists, Amal Roy and Samar Datta; Amal Roy, in fact, deserves a special recognition because he was the most prolific. The three most important among his plays are *Aat Jora Khola Chokh*, *Pankajbabu aaschen* and *Lasbipani*.

Aat Jora Khola Chokh is based on an actual incident which took place on November 19, 1970. The incident was truly macabre--eight young Naxalites were arrested by the police, tortured in gruesome ways and then murdered. The corpses were dumped in different areas of Barasat. This frightful act came to be known as Barasat genocide. But what is really nerve-shattering is the fact that even after the annihilation, their eyes in the play remained wide open. They continued to stare. Amal Roy in a postscript to this play stated, "Writing this play has been my most honoured experience".¹⁸ The play earned a remarkable resonance and was greeted by activists and commoners alike. Asim Chatterjee, better known as Kaka, chose this play for particular praise and said. "It is difficult, nay impossible, to forget Amal Roy. He is an integral part of the Naxalbari creative endeavour".¹⁹

Amal Roy closely followed the Brechtian mode of multiple dramatic representations. He erased the distance between the living and the dead. The murdered protagonists emerge alive and engage themselves in dangerous, active and libertarian politics. Fixed borderlines are wiped out while the living turn to dead and the dead turn into living with their message of liberation. Not only words and actions but also the glaring eyes of the dead prove that the movement, doomed to temporary defeat, will ultimately emerge victorious. The dialogue is searching and searing. Consider the following example: "Third Goon – Sir, I am feeling afraid. Note, how the eyes of all the corpses are open/ Second Goon – Sir, the eyes are alit even in this darkness/ Officer – Come, come back / Second Goon – I am feeling really afraid, even after dropping the corpses, what fright, what fear! / First Goon – Even after death they are staring at us with strange, vengeful eyes/ Officer – Hurry up, quick / Third Goon – Eight pairs of open eyes, eight pairs of open eyes! Eight pairs of open eyes of the corpses".²⁰

The reader will be certainly surprised by the title of the drama written by Samar Datta, which is *Giordano Bruno*. He will be provoked to ask, "What has Giordano Bruno to do with the Naxalbari upsurge?" He receives a convincing answer in the consummately structured play where Adorno's 'Wahrheitsgestalt' is palpable. It is this essential structure that binds the seeker of truth, who lived in the Middle Ages and was burnt at the stake, with the seekers of truth in our own times and clime. Giordano Bruno inspired by Copernicus stuck to the scientific truth that the earth revolves around the sun and even his impending death at the hands of the Church could not wilt him into submission. Similarly, the Naxalites profess the undeniable socioeconomic truth that the prime contradiction in our country is between the semi-feudal landowners and the poorest of the poor peasants. Accordingly, scientific truth and political or socioeconomic truth reinforce each other and both demand the ultimate sacrifice for its assertion and dissemination.

There is yet another related point of connection. Both Giordano Bruno and the dedicated Naxalites are not afraid of death and persecution. This fearless, no-holds bar attitude couple the Middle Ages and our times, and it strengthens the bond between the martyrs separated by seas and temporality.

So, ultimately, it is the truth that matters, scientific truth or political truth and a hundred Giordano Brunos are reborn in the form and embodiment of Naxalites. The following extract from the drama highlights this association bridging five centuries.

"One document of history
One myriad of history
Theorist Karl Marx
One document of history

One myriad of history
Chairman Mao Tse Tung
One fossil of history
Valiant Giordano Bruno²¹

A Note on Street Theatre

It would be wrong to assume that the plays on or about Naxalbari were limited to conventional stage production only. Playwrights like Amal Roy, Manoranjan Biswas and above all, Badal Sarkar, crossed the limits of proscenium performance and presented *Patha Natak* or street plays throughout the turbulent seventies of the last decade. Irrepressible Amal Roy wrote the first street play on the Naxalbari uprising, he gave it the title *Bharater Vietnam* (1967). Other plays written by him like *Gabriel Perry* (1973), *Ekhon Astra Shanau* (1974), *Natajanu Noi* (1973), were primarily meant for proscenium performance, but at the same time they were curtailed and adapted to accommodate the genre of 'street theatre'. In point of fact, Amal Roy churned out one street play after another and the seventies saw the street theatre performances of his Naxalbari plays such as *Tartur-er Chamber*, *Bujhe Nik Durbitoo*, *Mundubeen Dharguli*.

The thespian Utpal Dutt, devoted to street theatre, presented performances throughout the sixties and seventies. In the late sixties he wrote street plays like *Special Train*, *Guerrilla* and these were followed in the seventies by the non-proscenium productions of *Laubo Manab*, *Janatar Kallol* and *Din Badaler Pala*. Utpal Dutt was not well-disposed to the third theatre concept and praxis of another renowned thespian Badal Sarkar who with Beer Sen, a noted director, introduced the arena form of street plays that were produced in open spaces like Curzon Park, Surendranath Park and big crossings. Though Naxalbari was not directly eluded in his plays like *Michil*, *Bhoma*, *Spartacus*, *Bhanumati Ki Kbel*, they adhered to the cause of armed rebellion and debunking of establish-nurtured barren left politics. By far, the best and most moving play written and produced by him is *Michil* or *Procession*. In this street play or park-play we observe the processions of different groups of people – condolence michil, revolutionaries' michil, religious michil and all these varied actions focus intensely on the deep wound of the time. It is true that the productions of Utpal Dutt and Amal Roy were different from Badal Sarkar's who did not depend on explicit political slogans and poster-acclamations, but the unraveling of themes step by step, intense soliloquies, plethora of rebellious body movements – all pointed towards the revolutionary nature of the productions which were 'for' Naxalbari uprising and not 'against' it. In a word, the late sixties and seventies of the last decade experienced the efflorescence of street plays which in one single voice proclaimed the indispensability of armed revolution.

Novels and Naxalbari

1) *Grame Chalo* by Swarna Mitra

The author's first reading of the novel was cursory and fast-paced. Even then he was struck by its narrative excellence. The second meticulous reading revealed its multifaceted beauty. To such an extent that the author would like to claim that this novel is as impressive and praiseworthy as

Nabarun Bhattacharya's *Herbert*. In fact – and this is no hyperbolic exaggeration – Mahasweta Devi's *Agnigarbha*, Nabarun Bhattacharya's *Herbert* and Swarna Mitra's *Grame Chalo* should find their deserving places in any estimate or evaluation marking out the best Bengali novels written after 1947.

While dissecting a work of art, the superb aesthete T.W. Adorno stressed the importance of the 'Wahrheitsgestalt' of the creative text. By 'Wahrheitsgestalt' we mean truthful structure or structure of truth which prevails as the base on which imagination rests and flowers. Even a surreal literary narrative is not far placed from this indispensable requisite. In fact, the surreal imagination of the artist seeks sustenance from the fundamental expression of truth.

In *Grame Chalo*, this truth revolves around the tense dialectic of everlasting hope and incessant despair. The main protagonist of the novel, Raghu, is constantly assailed by doubts. On the one hand, holding Mao's Red Book close to his chest, he passionately hopes that the ruthlessly exploited villagers will rise in revolt; on the other, he is baffled by their non-activism and inertia. Ultimately, activism wins when the persecuted peasants kill Satinath, the zamindar and trader. But in the very next chapter the old rebel 'Khuro' or uncle is killed by the police.

This dialectic races towards the desired synthesis when the other peasants who have rebelled, led by Satyaban, once again exhibit their steely resolve to fight further and avenge the death of their old mentor. The last lines of this remarkable novel ring with courage and resolution: "Armed people, in the midst the burning pyre of uncle on the right side. Satyaban's grave face, Kalipada's eyes full of resolution. And Rohini da's lidless stare towards the sun".²² This is however the aspired for end and it is preceded by repeated vacillations. For example, in Page 9, the baffled Raghu ratiocinates, "At times in the empty field, at times beside the rice field, in the midst of intense seclusion, he sits alone and thinks – why is it happening so? The peasants of the village – don't they want a revolution? Or perhaps the situation is not right for armed struggle? If that is so, how and why did the fire of revolution burst forth in Gopiballavpur".²³ This self-questioning runs like a leitmotif throughout the novel, with Raghu at times feeling tremendously enthused and in other moments submitting to profound despair. Moreover, the swing between 'hope, everlasting hope' (to quote Shelley) and deeply ingrained despondency constructs the 'Wahrheitsgestalt' of the novel. This intense struggle, this self-dissection reaches its apex in that particular section when Raghu's mentor Achintyo analyses the entire situation and inspires him to move forward. The brilliant dialogue between Achintyo and Raghu reminds one of the other impassioned dialogue seeking the truth between Alyosha Karamazov and the Great Inquisitor.

The quotations which I have already used in my review of the novel substantiate one pervasive quality – that is, the enviable prose style of the narrative. It is this sensitive, exact and colourful prose which has contributed primarily towards the overall, aesthetic excellence of the text. Either soft and muted as when the situation demands or self-agonising when the debate raises its head or effulgent and vibrant during moments of success, this distinctive prose will be cherished by one and all.

Indeed, while attending to this sharply-crafted prose, one comes to be aware of the lyrical trait which binds one chapter to another. The novelist responds to the changing seasons, to the sun and moon and the star, to the vegetation all around, to the barren fields, to the rivers – streams – forests, to create a poetic backdrop which links up with the tormented reality as its counterpoint. The poet inside Swarna Mitra is both reflective and ebullient. Two excerpts quoted below attest to this innate lyrical quality: "The dream-wet eyes sparkle in the moonlight. As if they will see in the front of their eyes, under the pure sky of autumn, the plant of golden paddy singing victory and coming forward towards them"²⁴ and the second excerpt: "The peasants of the village sit in the water/very carefully they pluck out the stalks of paddy ... in the watery field nearby the farmers are applying the

plough, once the field is fully prepared the planting of rice stalks will begin”.²⁵ This second passage lyricizes the cultivation of paddy. While concentrating on this second lyrical input, one is instantly reminded of a similar, effervescent description in *Khowabnama*. Both Akhtaruzzaman Elias and Swarna Mitra come breath close to each other when they celebrate the cultivation of paddy.

To be candid, there is only one drawback in the entire text. That is, the Bengali language Raghu employs to indoctrinate the villagers is a bit high-flown. The author should have chosen a much simpler diction. For example, one does not expect semi-literate peasants living in remote villages to understand the phrase *Sangrami Sahajodha* or fighting comrade. The astute critic Nirmal Ghosh has, nevertheless, found other faults. According to him, the novel is deprived of narrative craft, of the proper sequence of events, of logical progress and, above all, of comprehensiveness.²⁶ The author would beg to differ with this estimate. It is true that *Grame Cholo* like *Khowabnama* is to a certain extent stylized, but this has not interrupted the spontaneous outflow of cogitations and events. Logic and sequence are also not disrupted. From Raghu’s arrival in the village, his choosing the Santhals as his ally, his doubts and vacillations and ultimately the militant assault are finely intermeshed and they offer a steady and steadfast flow of the narrative.

The ending is also immaculately etched. There is an inherent tragic dimension in the death of ‘Khuro’ but this does not deter the others from advancing towards their cherished goal. At this final and mixed moment of death and resolve, what could be more appropriate than quoting from Mao-Tse-tung’s Verse?

2) Mahakaler Rather Ghora by Samaresh Bose

Was Samaresh Bose, the illustrious novelist, an arch-reactionary? Did he denigrate and even ridicule the Naxalbari uprising in his novels and short stories? Literary critics close to the movement like Nirmal Ghosh and Pulak Chanda would like us to believe that Samaresh, like quite a few bourgeois novelists, true to his class position, condemned the revolt in no uncertain terms. In fact, Nirmal Ghosh after analyzing the novel concluded his evaluation with the following words: “What he wants to say in actual terms is that the total movement was a childish affair. Some honest persons got linked with it and turned to be handicapped. He wants to show that there was no political theory behind the movement ...”.²⁷ What is important to stress in this context is Nirmal Ghosh’s open admiration of the novel’s artistic merits. In other words, the novel is a praiseworthy artistic product, which is however mired in erroneous politics. The exact words of Nirmal Ghosh are: “Whether you like it or not, you have to concede that Samaresh Bose has given us the fine art of story-telling in this novel. He deserves praise for this”.²⁸

The crucial question is – what does the text say? Are there specific passages in the text which condemn Naxalbari as something wayward, retrograde and destructive? Is the protagonist Ruhiton – he recalls the Naxal leader Jangal Santhal – shown as an adventurist criminal who has no sense of politics? Is the novelist sympathetic to him and his fate or highly critical of his actions and cogitations?

Even the most adamant critic of Samaresh would have to admit that the novelist did not denigrate Ruhiton or Jangal Santhal. On the contrary, a bond of genuine sympathy and admiration binds the novelist and his protagonist together. To such an extent that one feels that both of them shared the same Utopian longing and dream. The longing received the following expression: “The blind gets back his eyesight, the barren woman gives forth child, the landless gets land, workers rule the state. Ruhiton wanted to build this land of dreams, he gave forth all that was his to realize this dream”.²⁹ Not only Samaresh but other men of letters, who followed the uprising and wrote on it,

shared this intrinsic dream. As the eminent poet Sankha Ghosh said, “We had no division at the levels of dream and aspiration. We also longed for that world for which the young Naxalites were fighting. We only questioned their method and programme of action”.³⁰

The abiding asset of this novel is its deft and delicate interweaving of the past and the present. One can almost claim that Ruhiton is a divided personality, even a schizophrenic who exists simultaneously in the past and the present. At the actual level, he is a prisoner with the novelist meticulously describing his prison-existence. At the other level, he is an intense resident of the past recalling his revolutionary days which were inspired by the glowing dream of total liberation. He recalls with miraculous exactitude those heady days and nights of brave rebellion when he and his comrades posed a militant challenge to the power of the state. In point of fact, this simultaneous coexistence of the past and the present, this uninterrupted interflowing of the two time-frames tempts the critic to regard this novel as a product of magic realism where the present is suffused with memory and dream. Even the future has a role to play in this excellent narrative - how? While Ruhiton refuses to accept the compromising present, he remains fondly attached to his dream of liberation where and when the Utopia will turn into actual reality.

At the very basic level, the reality to which he returns is thoroughly petit-bourgeois and counter-revolutionary to the core. That state power which was the object of his challenge has in the meantime – that is during his long phase of incarceration – changed the contours of the village where he had once fought with stubborn grit and determination. The past, indeed, has been wiped out with the implementation of welfarist measures and no one, in this changed scenario, is keen to recollect the turbulent past. What remains in this new world is mere memory, Walter Benjamin’s hymnic memory, which acts as a balm. Moreover, this salvatory memory is tied to the Utopian longing. Recalling the death of his teacher and comrade, Diba Bagchi, the imprisoned Ruhiton ruminates: “The faces of all engaged got lost; only Diba Bagchi’s face was set alight. He was his oldest revolutionary friend who for the first time showed him the contours of a new life. The dream of that new life can never turn false”.³¹ This dream acts as a pulsating refrain in the novel pointing towards a resplendent future and it becomes an indispensable part of the reverberating memory which is sustained by the following words: “At present the friendless, alienated, lonesome life of this Party is as obscure as the gathering darkness. The life of the past glimmers all the time. In particular when the plan was made to surround towns and cities with villages. And as a part of this collective aspiration an enemy-less free region was built. You can call this a real war”.³² As opposed to this vibrant reminiscence stands the frank disclosure of his wife who refuses to share her husband’s vision. Her words are straight cut. “What is the use of remembering those days? I, at present, can hardly recollect the past”.³³

The novel ends on a rich and ambivalent note. Surrounded by evidences of a drastically different world, Ruhiton, at the dead of the night, goes to that particular spot where he had concealed a gun underground. He retrieves the gun from the soil and tries to examine if it is still an effective weapon, perhaps his only link with the world that he has left behind. The gun does not function. Thereafter he places the gun beside him and he lies down. Samaresh Bose’s prose at this intense, concluding point is simply inimitable. The magnificent prose, if not anything else, proves once and for all he is not an arch-reactionary who is determined to debunk the Naxalbari uprising. Lyric, which is an integral component of this elegiac section, blossoms in the last three lines: “The dark waters of the huge lake trembled in the wind. Now and then, suddenly a silvery streak is noticed in the dense plantation”.³⁴ These streaks bend into sharp lines in the deep black waters and in the plantation”. The dark waters of the lake, the vegetation which emits silvery streaks pay homage to the rebel, defeated but not vanquished. The author was elated to learn that Sankha Ghosh, the most

eminent poet and literary critic, supported his point of view. He said without hesitation, “This is a splendid novel. I liked it and did not think while I was reading that it was a reactionary piece. I even had long debates with those who opposed my view. I read this novel many years ago when it was first published. But even now I adhere to my verdict which says that neither the author nor his product was reactionary”.³⁵

There is a blatant contradiction in Nirmal Ghosh’s evaluation. He should have realized that if the author follows erroneous politics, it would not be possible for him to write a masterly novel. Samaresh Bose paid homage to Naxalbari in his own distinctive manner and this emotional homage has acquired the form of a remarkable novel. In this novel, well-structured form and correct political content, supplement and reinforce each other.

3) *Bashai Tudu* by Mahasweta Devi

Several critics have accused Mahasweta Devi of being far too ‘simplistic’ in her novels. Her prose style, they have described, as unimaginative and pedestrian, and the structure of her novels was labelled loosely knit and vaguely episodic in character. In fact, this accusation encompasses almost her entire creative output, from her early novel *Laili Ashmanar Aina* to her celebrated novel *Hajar Churasir Ma*, which focuses on the urban rebellion of the Naxalites. But one needs to pause here and reflect on the creative worth of a novel like *Bashai Tudu* which is by far her most moving text on peasant unrest, resistance and armed revolt. It is well nigh difficult to grasp and appreciate the beauty of this novel in a single reading. Even a perceptive reader has to read this novel thrice to explore and discover its many-faceted creative excellence. No wonder, a critic like Nirmal Ghosh has begun his appraisal of Mahasweta Devi’s Naxalite or pro-Naxalite oeuvre by evaluating this novel. He has written no fewer than ten pages to assess this singular creative product. Not only Nirmal Ghosh, but also the eminent litterateur Samik Bandyopadhyay has devoted a fair quantum of time to translate this novel into English.

The basic message that emanates from the storyline is essentially simple. It claims that peasant revolt in a semi-feudal society is of a perennial nature, that is, it never dies or extinguishes itself and the central hero of this revolt, Bashai Tudu, is also deathless. Indeed the iconic rebel Bashai Tudu rises no fewer than five times from extermination, like phoenix from the ashes, and guides the insurrections repeatedly. The power-wielders – jotedar, mahajan, jamindar, police, local bureaucracy – are left flabbergasted by this ‘deathless’ dimension of Bashai Tudu whose political standpoint is firm and unambiguous, which is neither the revolutionary dies nor the revolution. The flame, then, is extinguished only when naked and rampant exploitation terminates. In a few succinct lines, the novelist depicts this miraculous and surreal reality which witnesses the return of Bashai Tudu over and over again in spite of his corpse being identified: “Deadly, deadly, deadly tired. One has to return again. One has to identify Bashai yet again ... But now Kali has to sit for a moment. He enters slowly into the cave. Burial in soft soil. Expected, very much expected. Bandage in the corner. Blood-soaked broken ampoules. Kali collects carefully and places these in the grave. On the same night Bashai escapes. There is nothing comrade in the sixth, seventh, eight deaths, the problem is with existing life”.³⁶

This excerpt not only underlines the mysterious immortality of Bashai but also challenges censorious critics who question Mahasweta Devi’s style of the narrative. We encounter here an animated quality of prose that quivers with suppressed excitement. The suppression is broken by single, meaningful words and staccato sentences which combine to create a prose that is highly evocative and emotional. In point of fact, this superb prose ascends to the level of lyrical poetry a

few lines later where Bashai's return is again predicted by his friend and sympathizer Kali Santra. The lines read "... But Kali knew that this time too Bashai had strangled the darkness itself. There would come a day when he would wring the air and give it a body, wring the darkness to turn into fire. The night the sixth Bashai buried the fifth and left - how did he look? Let him be very beautiful. Very young, very dark, very beautiful, very young. Very ... Very ... Very ... He was falling asleep".³⁷ Excerpts such as these rich with phonetic splendour prove once and for all that Mahasweta Devi is a master of Bengali creative prose.

The accusation that Mahasweta Devi's novels are structurally infirm, even incoherent, is also misplaced. If one reads her documentary novel, *Aranjyer Adhikar*, a gripping narrative like *Hajar Churasir Ma* or a historical narrative like *Jhansir Rani*, one has to concede that these texts are all well-rounded and finely conceived. But nowhere is this more apparent or clear than in *Bashai Tudu* where one section or chapter flows seamlessly into the next; where past, present and future crisscross in rhythmic patterns and where events and debates are placed side by side thereby conveying the impression that the final verdict of the debate leads to rebellious action. The two protagonists, the rebel Bashai Tudu, and his counterfoil Kali Santra, a critical member of the bourgeoisified CPI(M) are locked in a non-antagonistic relationship and their reflective dialogues create the necessary foundation on which the revolt comes to be based. Chapter 5 in the novel running to twenty-one pages bears evidence of this patient interaction between the two friends which prove that revolt is and can be the only answer in the prevailing environment. But does Kali Santra propagate revolt in unambiguous terms? He does not, though he is not against it per se. He is still attached to the CPI(M) just out of a sense of loyalty. His heart lies where Bashai's heart lies.

Others, including the local bureaucracy, are aware of this deep communion and that is why whenever Bashai Tudu is killed, Kali Santra is directed to identify the corpse. Under pressure, he does the identification but lo and behold after some time he is asked to identify again. In other words, he serves as the palpable and real witness of Bashai Tudu's repeated reincarnations. He hates to perform this rite of identification, he finds it unholy: "Kali Santra knows that everyday he is dying, bit by bit. As he goes, he feels that he is only surviving, he is almost dead. He regards himself as unclean, unholy. What dirt is this that cannot be washed away while bathing".³⁸ This painful trend of self-questioning and self-evaluation reaches its climax in the last chapter in which Kali Santra indulges in a reverie or articulates a dream narrative. He sleeps and Mahasweta Devi ends the novel on an ambivalent and poignant note. Is Kali Santra also going to be arrested? While we ruminate over this question, a police force enters the forest where Kali is sleeping: "Kali slept. From the east, with their backs to the sun, a small police battalion entered the forest and moved with inhuman, uncanny skill towards where Kali slept. Their feet tramping on the wet earth moved silently".³⁹ The author is particularly drawn to those parts of the novel which (i) encase the arguments favouring militant or armed revolt against jotedars and their ilk (ii) clarify the prevailing situation on the basis of discussions, in particular, between Bashai Tudu and Kali Santra (iii) short lyrical interludes that smoothen the many rough edges of the text. These rough edges however have been deliberately incorporated to suit and buttress the theme applauding agrarian, revolutionary uprising. Both Kalipada Santra and Bashai Tudu agree that the CPI(M) and its peasant organization Kisan Sabha have done hardly anything for farm labourers and bonded labour. In order to win elections, it has supported the middle peasants who wield a considerable influence in the countryside. It has also 'forgiven' the big landowners who are the real ruthless oppressors. In such a desperate situation, autonomous revolt has broken out with Bashai Tudu taking on the role of the leader. The dialogues and scenes of violence create the basic fabric of the novel, rough and scarred, which is interspersed by softening lyrical pauses. One such enigmatic pause reads, "Dawn was breaking over a dripping

landscape, over an earth asleep in the cool morning breeze after a frenzied mating with the rains. Masses of turbid water swirled in rivulets between the rows of date-palms. They came and stood by the canal and watched the water, the sheer abundance of it”.⁴⁰ Lines such as those once again prove that Mahasweta Devi mastered the craft of literary narrative.

It is not surprising that this brilliant novel - novelette according to some – has attracted translators, critics and commentators. Samik Bandyopadhyay, the translator of the novel, has drawn our attention to its astounding linguistic felicity. His remark is revealing: “We find here a prose that is a collage of literary Bengali, street Bengali, bureaucratic Bengali, tribal Bengali, and the languages of the tribals, ... Other strands in the collage include ‘quotes’ from and allusions to a wide range of literature from the classics, both Euro-American and Bengali to popular crimes, from political tracts to legal documents; and to a similar range of ‘entertainments’ from the ubiquitous Tagore songs to film lyrics”.⁴¹ What does this remarkable felicity and plurality of languages achieve? In the words of Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak, “It evokes a modern myth of a tribal peasant revolutionary who teams up whenever the landless farm labourers are driven to a crisis, leads them to a revolt, gets killed and appears again at the next point and a dedicated communist journalist who has to identify Bashai Tudu’s body every time – an original mix of documentary realism and revolutionary fantasy, history and fiction, so characteristic of Mahasweta Devi”.⁴² Both Samik Bandyopadhyay and Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak have analysed the process of Bashai’s mythification. They say, “Once she (the author) conceives Bashai Tudu, she lets him grow into a myth, who dies at every encounter and is reborn to lead the next one. Even as the magic of the myth runs through the narrative and lends it coherence and unity, one has only to read between the lines to discern the revolutionary project that keeps the myth alive as a strategy by making it obligatory for every successor to Bashai’s image to take the place of the dead man”.⁴³ Observations such as these prompt the reader to designate the novel as an example of magic realism. The magic is embedded in the deathlessness of Bashai and the realism in the fierce diurnal struggle. For it is Bashai who changes society and comes to symbolize the time and place transcending his name and the local situation.

At this juncture one feels like asking, why other famous or not so famous Bengali novelists have not created their own Bashai Tudus? Mahasweta Devi is utterly perplexed at this dearth of existential interest and she observes, “What can be more surprising than that writers living in a country bedeviled with so many problems – social injustice, communal discord and evil customs – should fail to find material for their own work in their own country and people? Such indifference to people is possible probably only in a semi-colonial, semi-feudal country like India, still suffering from the hangover of foreign rule”.⁴⁴

Another litterateur Asok Mitra compared the pattern in the novel with movements of classical western music. He wrote, “What makes this work unique and memorable, however, is not so much the content or the political and social argument but the literary feat itself. There are no women in it, no eternal triangle, no elaborate description of the land and life led by the poorest of the poor. The entire story is woven like a double helix and the literary form takes the shape of a Bach suite, as it were for two musical instruments and a continue woven on two themes which turn round and round each other in Vivaldi’s ritornello-rondoform”.⁴⁵ The double helix is of course represented by Bashai Tudu and Kali Santra whose class positions and political standpoints are different but who are the deepest of friends.

Their relationship has been admirably described by another critic, Malavika Karlekar. She observes, “A legendary local hero who stands even beyond the Naxalites, Bashai Tudu has to die periodically to sustain the movement as well as ensure police involvement; and Kali Santra, his friend, is called to identify the dead body each time. At one level, Bashai Tudu is the story of

resistance in the forest of Charsa, while at another it is a convincing depiction of Kali Santra, an old style idealist, who gave his land to the Party. A lonely ailing figure dressed in the cheapest of shirts, a dirty dhotie and a pair of sturdy Bata sneakers, Kali is so like many one has known and wondered about ... Bashai's 'deaths' are skillfully interwoven with the present as Kali searches for the tribal who dies ever so conveniently".⁴⁶

Short Stories and Naxalbari

Like poems and lyrics, short stories on various aspects of the Naxalbari uprising, also experienced a remarkable efflorescence. One has to go through the relevant chapter of Nirmal Ghosh's book *Naxalbari Andolan O Bangla Sabitya* to measure the depth and breadth of this flowering of creativity. No fewer than 50 stories were written and the two primary themes that were explored were the deathless hope it inspired as well as the profound despair which marked the termination of this upsurge. If the author is asked to select the very best story that was written during this turbulent phase, the author shall hesitate for a few minutes and then come to the inevitable conclusion that '*Draupadi*' by Mahasweta Devi is by far the best story that came to be written.

The storyline is essentially simple. Draupadi or Dopdi, a fiery Naxalite activist, was arrested by the police and then gang raped by members of the security force. Thereafter, she chose to be naked and she confronted the commanding police officer in her naked state and started pushing him with her mangled breasts. The officer, perhaps, for the first time, felt afraid and did not know how to react. He was perplexed and unnerved. The last lines of the story record his fear and helplessness. Excellently translated by Gayatri Spivak Chakravarti, the last lines read, "she looks around and chooses the front of Senanayak's white bush shirt to spit a bloody gob at and says. There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed. I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do? Come on, *counter* me – come on *counter* me?" Draupadi pushed Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid.⁴⁷

This grim and dark story has its torn lyrical moments. The dastardly act of gang rape provokes the author to write with superb poetical irony, "Then a billion moons pass. A billion lunar years. Opening her eyes after a million light years, Draupadi, strangely enough, sees sky and moon. Slowly the bloodied railheads shift from her brain. Trying to move, she feels her arms and legs still tied to four posts. Something sticky under her arse and waist. Her own blood. Only the gag has been removed. Incredible thirst. In case she says 'water', she catches her lower lip in her teeth. She senses that her vagina is bleeding. How many came to make her".⁴⁸ A comparison in this context with *Bashai Tudu* is also highly relevant because Draupadi and her husband – he was killed by the police - appear for a brief moment in the novel as well. In fact, one has to take a short leap after reading *Bashai Tudu* to land in the equally hostile world of Draupadi. Moreover, if *Bashai Tudu* reads at times like the account of a game between seasoned actors, *Draupadi* is a violent, searching tale of one woman's answer to her repeated sexual abuse by the 'Special Forces'. In the words of the critic Malavika Karlekar, "There can be no end to stories which speak of the oppression of tribals, but only conclusions to yet another sequence of events. Mahasweta Devi's two superb narratives demonstrate the power of literature to keep alive the theme of injustice and of resistance."⁴⁹

Draupadi, which was first published in the autumn special issue of *Parichay* in 1977, travels far beyond the fate of a single rebellious woman. It has an unmistakable social dimension and is significant as the story of a brutal attempt to stifle a mass, underclass movement by smothering the body of one of its leaders. Indeed, this literary tour-de-force supplies the voice of dissent to innumerable individuals, systematically subdued by an oppressive establishment. As Shreya

Chakravarti observes, “Mahasweta’s preoccupation in this story was not with a rebellious female character but with a voiceless section of the society, the section which is not only illiterate, semi-literate and underdeveloped, but is completely dissociated from the mainstream society If the context forces an innocent girl raped by the landlord to become a prostitute, it is the same backdrop that produces sparks of rebellion in the form of rebels like Dopdi; such characters rise above their narrow gender stereotype to become the voice of human revolt.”⁵⁰ In short, Dopdi turns into an imperishable archetype of revolt.

In her brilliant introduction to the story that she translated, Gayatri draws a conscious parallel between the heroine of *Mahabharata*, Draupadi, and Dopdi who rebels in her own distinctive manner. According to Spivak, Mahasweta’s story rewrites this episode. She explains, “The men easily succeed in stripping Dopdi – in the narrative it is the culmination of her political punishment by the representatives of the law. She remains publicly naked at her own insistence. Rather than save her modesty through the implicit intervention of a benign and divine comrade, the story insists that this is the place where male leadership stops”.⁵¹ Let us close with the author’s final observation. Mahasweta Devi writes, stressing this archetypal trait and worth, “*Bashai Tudu* and *Draupadi* and their peers are the products of these events, and their makers as well, for it is they who change society and come to symbolize the time and place, transcending their names and the local situations”.⁵²

We now come to two remarkable short stories *Michiler Janyo Manush*⁵³ and *Janaiko Aniruddha*⁵⁴ written by Sandip Bandyopadhyay, which explore two typical existential situations spawned by the Naxalbari movement. While *Michiler Janyo Manush* records the decline of the upsurge, *Janaiko Aniruddha* analyses the doubts and vacillations as well as fear experienced by a family which probably has lost its younger son, who was an activist. Who will go to the police morgue to identify Aniruddha – that is the question faced by the family members and they indulge in a painful debate for a long time before the father decides that he would do the agonising task. In *Michiler Janyo Manush*, a killed activist is taken by the police to the cremation ground because no one could be found willing to organize a ‘michil’ or procession for this purpose. This meaningful absence indicates the impending downfall of the movement, expressed in a simple query voiced at the end of the story, which ends with the following words: “There was no michil’? ‘No, the permission was not given by the police. But even if they would have given the permission where could we find the people for the michil. There was none ready to fulfill this task”.⁵⁵

The story titled *Ekjon CRP ebong ekta Naxal Bhoof*⁵⁶ written by Jayanta Joardar has a faint streak of humour, mordant at times. A Naxalite who was killed by a CRP member appears as a ghost and indulges in a dialogue with his killer. The battalion to which this CRP member belongs has gone on a strike and the member is confident and assured that the battalion’s demands would be met by the higher authorities. Just the opposite happens when an army unit, much stronger, enters the CRP camp and forces the strikers to submit. The last words of this story are: “Surrender Suddenly a sharp searchlight pierces the darkness. Army, army has entered the barrack. Raghubanta raises his hand signifying submission. He tries to remember someone’s words which were – turn the rifle on the opposite side, turn the rifle on the opposite side”.⁵⁷

We could close this section by concentrating on the rough draft of a brilliant story penned by the martyr Timirbaran Singha. Titled *Surya Sena*, this story is symbolic in character. It describes the depredation of a huge vulture which used to descend on a village once every year, dig his claws in the soil and demand a virgin from the villagers. The vulture of course represents the merciless and tyrannical landlord who is also a feared rapist. After a time the villagers rebel and they say:

“No more remorse and lamentation. This is the day to burn like fire. No death will go unavenged”.⁵⁸ Timir a student of literature was a promising writer. The police destroyed his other

writings; only this draft survived and remained. He was killed in Berhampore prison on 24 February, 1971.

Films and Naxalbari

Neither is the author an acknowledged film critic nor a film historian. For this reason he thought of not taking the plunge. Further, quite a few evaluations of films exploring the Naxalite theme have already been written and he did not want to repeat what the others have said. He thought it best, therefore, to depend on an interaction and dialogue with the acclaimed film-critic Samik Bandyopadhyay. The dialogue which the author had with him on this particular subject follows.

Q. The Naxalbari movement inspired efflorescence in the sphere of creative literature. Was there any similar efflorescence in the world of films as well?

A. Quite a few good and memorable films were made dealing with the Naxalite experience. But there was no actual efflorescence. There is a serious reason for this, and this reason was strict censorship. During that specific period, the Film Censor Board was extremely active and it would have not allowed films exploring the Naxalite movement in a positive light. It was a period of strict and severe censorship. In fact, the makers and upholders of mainstream cinema did not have the will and courage to face the scissors of censorship. This explains the absence of efflorescence in the celluloid world.

Q. What did the non-mainstream filmmakers do? How did they react?

Indeed, an alternative path was chosen in that censored environment. By this I mean that the non-mainstream filmmakers who concentrated on the Naxalite experience, focused on the angry young man who challenged the status quo and powers-that-be. This image of the young rebel became a major feature; we meet him, for example, in Satyajit Ray's film *Pratidwandi* and in Suman Mukherjee's film *Herbert*. I was particularly struck by the last sequence of Ritwik Ghatak's *Juktitakekogoppo* where a young fighting Naxalite takes on the security forces and is killed by the latter. Before this death of the rebel, Neelkantho, the protagonist, engaged in a serious discussion with the rebel and he told the latter to restructure his ideology, commitment and practice. He also stressed the absence of mass support and asked the Naxalite to draw common people into their orbit. This last sequence is touching and melodramatic.

Q. Would you construct a separate niche for Mrinal Sen?

A. The more serious engagement at different levels, I would ascribe to Mrinal Sen, whose Kolkata trilogy (*Kolkata 71*, *Interview* and *Padatik*) is, in one word, remarkable. In this trilogy, Mrinal Sen explored the reasons which inspired the Naxalite uprising, dwelt on alternative strategies and created a moving cinematic document. In fact, Mrinal appeared to be obsessed with the major issues – poverty, class injustice, discrimination – and there was a welcome break in *Padatik* where he squarely confronted the crucial gender question. The house where the protagonist took shelter belonged to a sensitive woman living alone and their close conversation opened a new terrain when the Naxalite movement was drawing towards a tragic termination. We are prompted to rethinking and reconsidering issues by these three films.

Take, for example, the last sequence in *Padatik* where the conscientious father of the protagonist belonging to an earlier generation said he had also registered his protest by not signing on the dotted line of a document prepared by the management of the company where he was

working. Thus the protests of the father and the son join hands, as it were, to voice the single, unified protest against the cruel establishment.

In short, the young rebel embodied the rebellious spirit of the times and he was present in the films made by others like Gautam Ghosh and Utpalendu Chakravarti. But these did not attain the quality of Mrinal Sen's pathbreaking trilogy. The Bengali mainstream cinema, as it has already been said, played safe.

Q. Which film would you consider to be the most sensitive and memorable?

A. If I am requested to select one single film which best pictured the agonising moment, I would choose *Padatik*. Artistically speaking it was complex and the theme was very delicately handled. Ultimately the police nabbed the protagonist and his tragic end as well as his doubts and vacillations urged a radical rethinking on the part of the audience.

Q. Any other film or films which you would consider fascinating?

A. I must admit that apart from *Padatik* I do not cherish any marked fascination for other films which belonged to this particular genre. It is true that the angry youth and rebel were valorized by the middle class audience from a distance. There was a definite attempt made to romanticize the entire political struggle, and in the process actual politics itself was slurred over. There is however one film which I found most unsatisfactory and that is Govind Nihalini's *Hajar Churasir Ma*. The irony is that Govind after reading my translation of the Bengali novel (writer is Mahasweta Devi) into English felt inspired to recreate it in celluloid. He did nothing more than NGOizing the Naxalite experience.

Q. How would you measure Suman Mukherjee's contribution ?

A. I must draw your attention to two more films which were genuine artistic products. I am referring to Suman Mukherjee's films *Herbert* and *Kangal Malsat* which were based on two remarkable novels written by the talented Nabarun Bhattacharya, which carried the same name. In both these films Suman adopted a bold creative position and he fashioned a new language and idiom which brought forth the complexities subtly though clearly. In point of fact, he created a new Bengali screenplay which underlined his intense creative engagement. The historical rise, fall and the collapse of the movement – its deep intricacies – were brilliantly captured by Sumon which accounted for his earnest, creative engagement. Ultimately, the Naxalite movement was turned, twisted, appropriated before its total erosion or eclipse. While Sumon engaged himself in post-modern historicisation of the total movement, Govind's film strikes me as an example of unwelcome dehistoricisation. If you ask me point blank I shall say that Mrinal Sen's *Padatik* and the two films made by Sumon will stand the test of time.

Q. How would you describe the relationship between the middle class audience and Naxalbari-inspired films?

A. I would like to close this discussion with a statement on the liberal-left identity of the Bengali middle class. This identity is deeply embedded in the Bengali psyche, and it prompted them to applaud the films on Naxalbari experiment. But everything stopped with this applause. They did not cross the river to offer more concrete and tangible support. Indeed, their position was highly ambivalent. On the one hand, they did greet the films and, on the other, their approval and support ended with words of praise. This ambivalence has been clearly recorded in Subhas Mukhopadhyay's

iconic poem *Chele geche bon-e* or the son has gone to the forest to fight leaving the father who is tied by his middle-class bonds. It is undeniably true that a large section of the middle class felt a respect for the young rebels, exhibited even a reverence for them and was in awe of them. But this regard did not inspire them to cross the Rubicon because they were incorrigibly middle class. And from this vantage point of safe distance they soaked in the warmth and even heat generated by Naxalite films. Perhaps, who knows, what would have happened if the middle class or bourgeoisie turned out to be more supportive in concrete terms and more engaged.

Cultural Policy and Implementation

No evaluation of the creative-cultural dimension of the Naxalite movement will be complete if one does not address the specific, even unique – not always in a positive light – cultural policy of the activists and its implementation. When state repression, police and para-military action in particular, cornered the cadres in villages and countryside, the latter began to return to Kolkata and other urban centres. That was in 1970 of the last century. Many reasons were given to explain this withdrawal but the primary reason according to the expert Nirmal Ghosh was “Intensified operations launched by the police and the paramilitary cornered the urban cadres in villages who were compelled to leave the villages and return to urban areas.”

The students and young activists were restless after their return. They wanted to strike without any further delay. In fact, their yearning for action was so intense that they formulated their own scheme of ‘revolutionary’ engagements: (1) They decided to launch sudden, almost guerrilla assaults on educational centres like schools and colleges (2) They made a bonfire of American and Russian publications (3) They demanded the inclusion of Mao’s writings and thoughts in the M.A. syllabus of Political Science (4) Last but not the least, they began to demolish, behead or disfigure the statues of icons like Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, Rammohan Roy, Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Thakur.

The logic behind these actions was simple. They blindly accepted Mao’s dictum that the more one reads in bourgeois ambience, the more one turns ignorant. Therefore, attacks on educational institutions – all a part of the semi-feudal and semi-colonial order – were justified. They launched sudden assaults which involved destroying property and acquisitions of the educational centres, roughening up the teachers and employees and burning official documents. They even hoisted the red flags atop the schools and colleges and left the premises as soon as possible. The energetic cadres also ransacked the famous Baker Laboratory of Presidency College. These mini blitzkriegs provoked an intense inner-party debate. While Charu Mazumder and Saroj Datta supported these depredations, another leader Sushital Roychowdhury opposed them. Charu Mazumder’s defence, in this context, is worth recalling. He said, “Young men are most energetic between the ages 18 and 24. But in our wretched country, these useless schools and colleges sap up their energy and initiative and turn them into parrots. So, it is really a good sign that our young cadres have decided to attacks schools and colleges”.

It needs to be stressed that the urban bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie vehemently criticized this destructive programme. They had expressed some sympathy when the cadres compelled medical practitioners to charge less. But this sympathy waned fast when the cadres targeted schools and colleges.

The bonfire of Soviet and American publications did not raise many eyebrows but the pressure to include Mao’s thoughts and texts in Political Science M.A. syllabus provoked an exciting debate. At the very beginning, Naxalites and progressives in the academia together decided to

overhaul the syllabus which was considered narrow and reactionary. They proposed the inclusion of Mao's *New Democracy*. Thereafter the Naxalites in particular demanded the inclusion of Mao's *On Practice* and *On Contradiction*. Recalling those moves, Professor Sobhanlal Dattagupta, eminent political scientist, said, "At first we were fighting together for the new syllabus. The syllabus-makers also responded positively, and incorporated quite a few changes to update and modernize the syllabus and Mao's thoughts became a subject for teaching".⁵⁹ Another teacher, Professor Samir Das described the situation thus: "We teach theories of Marxism in the class and Mao's thoughts, especially his essay *On Contradiction*, has been included. It all depends on the teacher concerned. If he while lecturing explains the other two texts *On Practice* and *New Democracy* he has the full freedom to do it. What is crucial to note is Mao has indisputably entered the syllabus."⁶⁰

We now come to 'beheading'. What brought the Naxalite theoreticians and the cadres to the forefront of public attention was their reckless demolition programme. This specific engagement also alienated the bourgeoisie who refused to brand their revered leaders and icons as submissive agents of British imperialism. Paying absolute homage to Mao's dictum, "you have to first destroy, then create anew", the cadres unleashed a destructive agenda against Gandhi, Vidyasagar, Rammohan and Rabindranath – or better said against their statues. Once again, this activism fomented intense inner-party debates with the important leader Sushital Roychowdhury labeling this activism as "adventurous, uncalled-for and self-defeating". He did not oppose the disfigurement of Gandhi because the latter's non-violent politics was firmly opposed to Naxalite politics dependent on violence, but he squarely blamed their efforts to decapitate the statues of Vidyasagar, Rammohan Roy and Rabindranath. Sushital Babu classed these three as representatives of the advancing national bourgeoisie. He was severely attacked by Charu Mazumder himself who said, "This critique questions our basic theory. We cannot regard them as high and mighty spokesmen of the national bourgeoisie because they were comprador to their bones. They supported the British rulers all through and they tried to initiate social reform with their help and under their patronage". This entire attitude, nihilistic and iconoclastic, was summed up by the eminent historian Gautam Bhadra in his younger, impressionable days when in reply to a query he said, "It does not matter in which year Rammohan was born, 1772 or 1774. He was a born comprador and two years earlier or later would not have altered his ideology".

By far the most vocal support was provided by Saroj Datta. He stressed, "For years the common people have been told to revere and offer flowers to these so-called leaders. They direly need a shock therapy and this therapy was provided by the iconoclasts. Their action would provoke the commoners to think afresh and in new digits. Ultimately, the sharp controversy reflected two contending schools of thought. One was keen on paying homage to the compradors while the other exposed their limitations and aspired to replace them by the statues of Mangal Pandey, Titumir and Rani of Jhansi".

Needless to say, members of the Central Committee of CPI (ML) and other influential comrades endorsed the logic or illogic of Charu Mazumder and Saroj Datta. The urban bourgeoisie however condemned this iconoclasm, they preferred to remain acolytes. In fact, the shock therapy turned into a boomerang. If one adds the killing of constables to this web of suicidal, urban action, one realizes why the urban support waned so fast and decisively. This reality has been excellently projected by Sandip Bandyopadhyay in his story *Micheler Janyo Manush*. The story says that not a single sympathizer was present to form a funeral procession to honour a dead Naxalite. The story ends with the agonizing query, "Where are the people for the michil?" The one-time red heroes proceeded to death unsung and deprived of adulation.

Interview with Sankha Ghosh

Interview with Sankha Ghosh, the most eminent poet and litterateur, on the subject researched.

Q. What are the reasons for this creative efflorescence?

A. Dreams – the educated, middle class youths aspired to establish an egalitarian society. They dreamt of a new world free of exploitation and class injustice. And these young men wrote what they felt and transcribed their dreams into creative writings. Their poems, novels, short stories and plays expressed the dream of change and transformation. Established and well known writers were also moved by the heroic self-sacrifice of the activists and they themselves wrote novels, short stories and poems. Mahasweta Devi above all, Samaresh Bose, Birendra Chattopadhyay, Samaresh Majumder, Sunil Gangopadhyay responded in their own distinctive ways and this double effort of activists and non-activists explain the upsurge of creativity, of efflorescence.

Q. How would you measure the literary or aesthetic quality of this efflorescence?

A. Not all, but nonetheless a substantial amount attained literary excellence. For example, the poems of the activist Dronacharya Ghosh were moving and intense. He did use slogans but these were given an aesthetic dimension. The novel *Mahakaler Rather Ghora* by Samaresh Bose attained a high literary quality. One should also make a special mention of Birendra Chattopadhyay who wrote rousing poems against state terrorism. And last but not the least, Mahasweta Devi enriched the oeuvre with her brilliant short stories and novels. Her novel *Bashai Tudu* and short story *Draupadi* have withstood the test of time.

Q. Good that you have mentioned Mahasweta Devi. Some critics are highly critical of her creative statements and they say that her Bengali prose is not up to the mark. Also her novels do not have a coherent structure.

A. Mahasweta Devi's creative output, in terms of quality, is a bit uneven. On the one hand we have remarkable stories and novels written by her which explore the Naxalbari movement; on the other hand we have works which are a bit sketchy and not exactly memorable. But even after saying this I would like to emphasize that she remains the best creative chronicler of the movement.

A Note on Mahasweta Devi's Creativity

It is hundred percent true that Mahasweta Devi, and no one else, is the greatest chronicler of agrarian revolt. She has focused on the tyranny unleashed in the villages of Bihar, but Bihar remains as the microcosm of the entire rural India, which serves as the macrocosm. She has explored, analysed and dissected the greatest contradiction prevailing even till now, the contradiction between feudalism and semi-feudalism on one side and the sharecropper, landless labourer and bonded labour on the other. If *Bashai Tudu* lives as the most powerful example of a novel devoted to this subject, *M.W. Act and Lakhindar* stands as an equally powerful example of the short story devoted to this theme. Indeed, Mahasweta Devi's novels and short stories demand an entire, separate chapter. This chapter will be positively included in the book the author intends to write on Naxalite creativity. Apart from focusing on this primary contradiction, she has repeatedly stressed that the class contradiction reflects the caste contradiction as well; they represent two sides of the same coin. Stories like *Bichon*, *Jal*, *Draupadi* bear out what he claims. Evidently, she remembers in this context E.M.S. Namboodiripad's faultless assertion that caste and class constitute one indivisible crucible.

Mahasweta Devi is also the best and most astute chronicler of urban Naxalism. Recall her unforgettable *Hajar Churasir Ma*. In the years 1970-1973, she saw and responded to what was happening in Kolkata and its suburbs, and she wrote scintillating stories which explored this intense phase with profound sympathy and penetrating insight. In a word, her astounding creativity captured the entire movement in a string of creative texts. In the section on short stories the author have focused primarily on her texts.

Conclusion

One has to admit that this varied, sensitive and searching creative endeavour branching into several directions like poetry, novels, drama, short story and film is hardly read, watched and discussed in the present situation. We are all victims of collective amnesia. It is difficult to categorize the reasons for this indifference. Perhaps the times have changed inexorably in our globalised world. Perhaps our priorities have changed and we are no longer disturbed or bothered by revolutionary creativity. Perhaps we are keen to maintain the status quo in the countryside and town as well as cities and therefore we are most reluctant to accommodate the signs and symbols of defiant, bloody protest.

However we cannot afford to forget the innate Utopian longing strongly present in the creative statements. All the writers of Naxalbari revolution dreamt of another, better world and this dream, recognized or forgotten, has survived. Not only do these forecast a humane future but also unravel the criminality of the powers that be. The dream of this new world, which will feature the new human being has been brilliantly defined by Samaresh Bose who was not a Naxalite himself. As long as injustice, tyranny and exploitation persist, this dream will serve as an antidote inspiring us to battle again. A change was perceptible in 2016 and 2017. Quite a few books on the Naxalbari movement were published during this phase. A two-volume documentation, a detailed work on drama and dramatic representation and a comprehensive anthology of Naxalbari poetry were published. We can only hope that this trend will continue.

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Notes

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¹¹ From a conversation with Sankha Ghosh and Alokeranjan Dasgupta.

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- ⁴⁶ Malavika Karlekar on Mahasweta Devi's novel, p.196.
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- ⁵¹ Spivak, p.xvii.
- ⁵² Mahasweta Devi, p.xxi.
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