



# Metropolis and its Others: Reading Women's Speech and Silence in the Naxalbari Movement (1967-1975)<sup>1</sup>

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The Naxalbari Movement:  
In Search of a Gender Definition

The Naxalbari movement occupies a unique position in the history of postcolonial India, particularly of West Bengal. Beginning as a land-grab movement of the rural dispossessed in a rural hamlet in the province of West Bengal—Naxalbari—in 1967, it soon developed into a nation-wide armed struggle, led by radical communists against the independent democratic state of India. This movement also signified major changes in the Left movement in India, included enthusiastic participation of the urban youth-student-intelligentsia in a peasant struggle, posed serious questions to the role of state in development programs, and challenged the prevalent knowledge-power nexus that had so far guided the middle-class intelligentsia.

After achieving independence from British colonialism in 1947, the nation state of India began its journey as a parliamentary democracy which relied on harnessing diverse political trends into a process of nation-building. Industrial recession, severe food shortage, unemployment, and government policy failures in alleviating poverty from the late 1950s, however, led to a rising popular discontent in the 1960s. The communists in India were in an ideological conundrum as the international Sino-Soviet

debate had its repercussions on deciding the proper course of radical politics. Twenty years after achieving independence from British colonialism, the Naxalbari movement became a moment of re-evaluating the benefits of independence from the point of view of the nation's poor—millions of marginal peasants, rural landless laborers, and urban proletariat.

In the context of multiple layers of political tension, the spark of Naxalbari in May 1967 initiated the violent release of anger and frustration. 'The disillusionment of the Midnight's Children (a generation so named in a brilliant stroke of apt self-description by one of its most inventive children)', writes Ranajit Guha, '[...] in the 1970s could truly be ascribed to a disillusionment of hope' (Guha 1997: xii). Guha elaborates that the revolt of the 1970s was actually 'youth calling age to account' and their belligerent assertion that tradition will no more go unchallenged. Maoism became a source of ideological inspiration for the vast section of leftist youth and students in West Bengal. The leaders of the Naxalbari movement considered the path of 'people's war' as the only relevant method of bringing in revolution in the 'semi-feudal', 'semi-colonial' condition of India. Naxalites (activists came to be known after the place Naxalbari) embarked on a journey of violent armed struggle against the state after forming the third communist party in India, the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) (CPI-ML), in 1969.

The spark of Naxalbari lighted fires in Srikakulam in Andhra Pradesh province, Mushahari in Bihar province, Lakhimpur-Kheri in Uttar Pradesh province, as well as in several districts of West Bengal—Medinipur, Bankura, Malda, Coochbihar, Jalpaiguri, Birbhum, Nadia, Howra, Purulia, North and South Twenty-four Parganas. The movement initially succeeded in generating a revolutionary consciousness across different social strata. The students responded with enthusiasm to the peasant uprising and started working in the rural areas of several districts to raise the revolutionary consciousness of the peasantry. Committed to the politics of violence, the Naxalites, however, spilled too much blood and their often irresponsible bloodshed eroded the popular base they enjoyed in the beginning. The

ideological foundation of the movement proved too fragile to accommodate the diversity of Indian social structures and power relations. Emulation of the Chinese revolution often contradicted the practical situations in rural Indian areas. The common people gradually felt alienated as dangerous fratricide ensued among various left factions and state repression became brutal. By 1972 most of the Naxalite leaders were either dead or imprisoned and the movement began to lose momentum. Disillusioned and factionalized, the movement carried on until 1975, but after the internal emergency was declared by the government in June 1975 to quell the political unrest, the first phase of Naxalbari was over.

Though the 1967 'Spring Thunder'<sup>2</sup> of Naxalbari was brief, it had deep and far-reaching impact on the social and political context of West Bengal in particular and India in general. Comprehensive reviews of the movement reveal that it succeeded in initiating certain fundamental changes, affecting, for instance the nature of political activism, academic analysis of the socio-economic structure, and the popular perception of the state. The Naxalites also laid bare the situation that all was not well with the 'world's largest democracy', and their challenge forced the democratic state to bare its teeth in the form of brutal state-terror (Chatterjee 1997: 96). After the first phase of the movement ended in the early 1970s, different Naxalite organizations and groups started consolidating scattered activists when the internal emergency was lifted in 1977. In Andhra Pradesh and Bihar these new groups continued with their activism among the rural dispossessed and still continue to exist (Bannerjee 2002).

The Naxalbari movement elicited remarkable academic attention. Partha Chatterjee writes that even 'if the decade of the seventies did not quite turn out to be the decade of revolution, it does seem to have ended up as the decade of books on revolution' (Chatterjee 1997: 94). Book length studies on this movement began to be written as early as 1971, when the movement was in full swing and continued till the end of 1980s. The unusually enormous academic attention to the Naxalbari movement was due to two central aspects of the movement: first, the Naxalite emphasis on capturing political power with a declaration that political power grows

from the barrel of the gun; and second, their method of achieving agrarian revolution through the liquidation of 'class enemies'. The interpretation of Naxalite politics and violence was thus a major concern of the academic studies. Different authors, for example, have indicated that the Naxalbari movement was not only a movement against state power, it had many 'authorities' to challenge, ranging from middle-class sensibilities and tradition, to tribal cosmology and peasant ideas about caste-based social stratification. Similarly, the participation varied from illiterate poor tribals to highly educated urban intelligentsia, covering a wide range of middle-class peasants, small-town based unemployed youth, and urban lower class. Thus Edward Duyker's focus on Santal Naxals does not make it a tribal movement (Duyker 1987), Rabindra Ray's interpretation of Naxalite ideology on the basis of Bengali cultural facets does not make it a regional movement (Ray 1988) or P.N. Mukerji's focus on the peasantry does not reduce it to an exclusively peasant movement (Mukerji 1979). All these categories act as different analytical points of departure to provide overlapping overviews of a complex social movement.

Since these categories are not mutually exclusive and none of them can claim to be the single original analytical framework to study the Naxalbari movement, it may serve better to merge them into a combined conceptual framework. Situating gender as the principal analytical framework helps to amalgamate these diverse concepts as the perspective of gender critically rearranges these concepts. In the process of rearranging, the gender perspective advances new theoretical vantage points to expand the definition of politics, to outline the interface between public and private domains, to reconsider the emotional content of the movement, and to identify multiple layers of the marginalization of non-metropolitan activists within the history and memory of the Naxalbari movement. In order to understand and interpret meanings of dispersed unequal relationships among Naxalites from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, we need to recognize the intricacies of various power relations within the discourse of Naxalbari. The perspective of gender allows us to identify how these

relations are interconnected, and how diverse backgrounds of Naxalites vis-à-vis their gender identities have intensified processes of marginalization within the movement. This paper is a rereading of the movement during its earlier phase from 1967-1975, from the point of view of gender, particularly through women participants' ways of remembering the movement.

There is little reference to either the absence of a theory of patriarchy in the Naxalite critique of bourgeois nationalism, or the role played by women in their strategy of agrarian revolution in the available academic historiography of the movement (Ram 1971; Johari 1972; Roy 1975; Bannerjee 1980; Bannerjee 1984; Samanta 1984; Duyker 1987; Ray 1988). The collective memory of the movement also rarely acknowledges the significant role played by women except for mere transitory mention of women's 'support' and does not engage with women's interpretation(s) of the movement, women participants' evaluation of their roles during the movement, and the gender politics within the movement.

The task, therefore, may seem 'all cut out' for a researcher engaged in reviewing the movement from the point of view of gender—recuperation of the 'lost' voices of women, who participated in the movement to narrate the different roles played by women participants. Considering the paucity of academic literature on women participants, I acknowledge, writing a compensatory women's history of this movement in itself can become an important project of research. But compensatory history (for women in this case) presumes an already existing, easily identifiable and coherent, but submerged alternative historical account, waiting to be recovered. However, 'women' do not constitute a composite, ahistorical, perennial 'other' with their distilled autonomous history, but their histories are inextricably mapped in the grid of class and caste relations, community life and collective mobilization, colonialism and capitalism (Talpade-Mohanty 1991).

The history of women's participation in the Naxalbari movement overlaps not only with the history of the communist movement in India

but also with a threefold development: the legacy of reformist movements during the colonial period and their impact on women's role and status in society; class-formation in twentieth-century India; and the dynamics of gender-relations in different social-strata in post-independence India. These complex overlaps produced contested notions of womanhood and the tension emerging out of such contestation shaped the contours of political participation of women in a radical movement. Capturing the continuous fluidity of domination and resistance in the lives of women belonging to various socio-political, cultural, economic locations demands an identification of both the subordination and expressions of defiance, imprinted in the micro-histories of biographies, oral traditions, legends and myths. It is necessary to focus on the multiple axes of exploitation, subordination and oppression which consolidate patriarchy at different moments of history as well as the traditions of women's agency that can be identified in an effort to outline the gender history of the Naxalbari movement.

This process of rereading the movement needs to take account of multiple variables that mark the category of 'women Naxalites' since the categories of caste, class, and region have been crucial in determining women's roles in the movement. It is true that gender did not feature prominently in either Naxalite ideology or their practice of revolution but gender relations are inseparably and intricately linked with the categories they were dealing with. A study of Naxalite ideology reveals that the primary category for them was 'class' and through a class analysis of the peasantry in the context of 'semi-feudal' and 'semi-colonial' socio-economic relations they were trying to forge a new alliance among the potentially revolutionary segments of society. In spite of the supremacy of 'class analysis' the Naxalite strategy of revolution demanded attempts to bridge several other social categories—between peasantry and intelligentsia, between city and village, between politics and revolution—in order to create a revolutionary front. Their new theoretical attempt, though completely taken from Maoism or what they thought to be Maoism, required thorough understanding of the categories of rural and urban,

particularly the divide between the metropolitan centre—the stronghold of their enemy—and the peripheral small towns and villages—their supposed mainstay of revolutionary activism.

Gender, as it has been inscribed on the rural/urban divide, is the focus of this paper because the role of Calcutta—the metropolis—on its hinterlands, villages and smaller towns—the *mofussil*<sup>3</sup>—has remained a critical axis of differentiation in the history of the movement. The centrality of Calcutta has been so enormous in the history and politics of Bengal since the colonial period that its dominance over the *mofussil* has been rarely questioned even in historical analysis. Though Calcutta lost some of its pre-eminence since the 1930s, when the *mofussil* became relatively important political centers, the cultural sphere of West Bengal was hegemonized by the metropolis since the nineteenth century. The particular cultural sensitivities of *mofussil*, the sense of inferiority to Calcutta's metropolitan glamour, and the inescapable dream of becoming a part of Calcutta has been a relatively less explored but powerful theme in the history of West Bengal. In the history of Naxalbari, except for a few studies, the voice of the non-metropolitan Naxalite is rarely heard.<sup>4</sup> The present popular image of the Naxalbari movement as a crusade of the disillusioned urban middle-class youth that had turned grotesquely violent lends itself to a curious fallacy. That a declared 'peasant revolution', a 'people's war' with a slogan of 'encircling the cities with villages' lives in popular memory as a period of bloodshed in the alleys of Calcutta, as a misguided self-immolation of brilliant middle-class youth needs to be closely scrutinized. Critical review of popular memory and academic literature indicates that two images of metropolitan Calcutta have consistently substantiated the cultural domination of Calcutta in the history and memory of Naxalbari. On one hand, Naxalites are remembered as brilliant students of eminent educational institutions of Calcutta who sacrificed their bright careers to bring in the revolution for the poor. On the other hand, urban Naxalites envisioned Calcutta as the murky centre of exploitation and village as the pure core of revolution. The dichotomy of these two images, however, is generated from two parallel identification processes with the metropolis.

Calcutta—the metropolis—is at the same time a decadent squalor of teeming millions and the very center of new ideas and new possibilities. The *mofussil* is always imagined in contrast to these images of Calcutta and continue to signify both simplicity and backwardness. If this popular memory is not interrogated with historical experiences of the movement in different districts, outside Calcutta, the investigation of the gender dimension runs the risk of being stifled within the boundary of the Calcutta-based middle-class.

Keeping in mind this vantage point of analysis it is important to briefly discuss the methodology of this paper. I have already mentioned the lack of attention to gender issues in the historiography of the movement and scant archival sources on the gender dimension of this movement. Oral history has been the principal method of gathering data and it is, therefore, necessary to consider the critical issues that arise in recording and interpreting oral history.

#### **Methodology: Critical Issues of Women's Speech and Silence**

Registering the unheard, marginalized voices of women have been scrupulously pursued by feminist oral history for the last three decades (Sunder Rajan 1993:84; Sangster 1998) and this is a space where imagination, in the form of memory, continuously contests, embellishes, and reconstructs history. As establishing objective truth claim has never been a consideration for oral history it is possible to explore the underlying assumptions that mold experience and *speaking* about experiences in definitive modes of expression. Such explorations probe not only *why* women describe the past in certain ways but also *how* they make sense of their pasts.<sup>5</sup> Interpreting the silences, pauses and repetitions are equally important as interpreting eloquence. Questioning the processes of construction and transmission of women's historical memory provides an insight into the normative and material frameworks within which women rationalize their experiences.



Approaching the issue of accessing and interpreting experience through oral history thus needs to be forewarned about the loopholes of the simplistic certitude of 'efficient-information-retrieval and talk-to-the-accessible' (Spivak 1981: 391). Though speech is often considered as an expression of agency and suppression of speech as a denial of right, their significance is not so unambiguous. Social constructions of women's speech as empty gossip, ignorance, rigmarole or hysteria invalidate women's statement, testimony and evidence in the public domain. Silence as a refusal of communication '[...] produces mystery and enigma; [...] it retains secret; it demonstrates self-discipline; [...] it is an index of heroism when maintained under torture' (Sunder Rajan 1993: 87). Thus women's access to speech is not always already agential and silence is not always loss of language. However, reading silence always as resistance and meaningful is obvious romanticization of subalternity. Gayatri Spivak's foundational essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* reveals the circularity of the logic which defines subalternity only in terms of a condition of silence and asks whether the subaltern still remains so even after the subaltern can speak. Spivak also recognizes the violence of silence, produced by repression that renders the gendered subaltern as a non-being. In other words, when silence fails to signify any content then its space, temporality and the surrounding normative and material frameworks make the representation of silence possible.

The secure ground of representing the respondent without encountering continuous ethical questions about appropriating and remolding the respondent's voice, however sympathetically, has long been displaced. It is no more possible, and indeed no more desirable, to occupy an unambiguous location as an ethnographer and represent authentic notes from the voice of the respondent/informant. The question, however, at the same time cannot escape the dilemma of how far this ambiguity can be productive in case of representing acutely marginalized voices.<sup>6</sup> In my view, feminist methodology exists and functions at this volatile juncture of representation. Maintaining a safe distance from the 'subject' comes, apparently, into odds with the strong commitment of feminist history to

recover and restore hidden women to their rightful place in history. But the zealous feminist theorists and researchers, who themselves are not subalterns, often begin to speak 'for' the gendered subaltern. Continuous critical reflection of this politics of intervention can displace the truth claims of the researcher/theorist and shift the attention to the question of power-relations inherent in knowledge production (Sangster 1998: 95). Awareness of the power-imbalances between the researcher and the subject of research enables the research to become more critical to the available facts. Continuous contextualization of the facts within the silences and gaps of narratives wipes off the ruse of authenticity from the facts.

This paper is divided into two sections. The first section deals with four rural women Naxalites' responses to questions on their memory of the movement. The second section focuses on the metropolitan Naxalite imagination of the 'village' or the periphery (*mofussil*) and how women were fitted into their imagination. Through these two sections I wish to elaborate the multiplicity of women's interpretations of their involvement in the movement and how rigid definitions of gender relations and womanhood have maintained a long silence regarding women's role in the movement.

### Section One: Words and Silences

Women played a pivotal role in the very first uprising at Naxalbari. They were some of the first victims of police firing, where seven peasant women were killed, during a mass meeting of the armed peasants in Naxalbari in 1967. A Mass song of Protest (*gana-sangit*)<sup>7</sup> was composed in their memory—

*Tera<sup>8</sup> is wailing*  
 My heart grieves with her,  
 Flaming fields of Naxalbari are crying out  
*For her seven slain daughters*  
 (Pandey 1997)

The presence of peasant women in strategic meetings, leading rallies, providing shelters, delivering messages and in struggling against the police and military during 'combing operations', finds passing mention in the historiography of the movement. Their continued presence in the later years and their different functions during the movement can be corroborated through the testimonials collected during my fieldwork: as local leaders in the adjoining areas of Naxalbari; as participants in the guerrilla squads in North Bengal; as organizers and leaders of armed processions of women in Birbhum district. Let me give two such examples.

S.B, a peasant woman from Hochaimallikjote, a small village in Naxalbari area, remembers<sup>9</sup>:

All our men had to flee to the nearby forest after repeated police raids and indiscriminate arrests. We, women took every responsibility of ploughing the captured lands, provided food to our absconding male comrades and acted as links among dispersed guerrilla groups. Galeswari Tharu was our leader. She organized meetings to continue our work. After learning about her able leadership and courage, the police once came with the sole purpose to arrest her. We were caught unaware but we had to save our leader. Galeswari was a tall, thin, woman with short hair as she was a widow. I made her wear a dhoti and she walked past the police impersonating a man, unrecognized!

R.H, a Santal peasant woman from Kushbona village, a tiny hamlet in the western part of Birbhum district said<sup>10</sup>:

I organized not only the Santal women in our village but also the Bauri (a lower caste) women. We, women organized a procession to Suri (the district Head Quarter) when one of our comrades, Naba Bauri was captured by the police. You know, that procession of angry women actually engaged in a hand-to-hand skirmish with the police and forcibly released Naba!

S.B remained at the front ranks of activists throughout the movement. She never took part in guerrilla actions but she was an important local leader and many a time prevented the police from entering their village with the help of other women peasants. R.H confirmed that she joined Naxalite politics by her own choice and there was no tradition of political activism in her family. She eventually became a recognizable leader of the area and represented her area during large meetings. These women have not found their places in the academic history and in the dominant popular memory, though they are considered as formidable women in their localities. Both of them said that they were committed to the movement and considered those days as the best days of their lives.

Let me contrast these responses with a very different reaction of P. B, wife of Babulal Biswakarmakar, who died during a gun battle with the police in 1967 in Hochaimallikjote, and has been recognized as a martyr in several Naxalite pamphlets. P. B refused to tape-record her response and so the following analysis is based on my own version of her brief rejoinders to my questions.<sup>11</sup> She said that she had to support the movement because her husband was a local leader but it had given her nothing but grief, poverty, and destitution. She remembered her husband as a fine young man who would never think about her and their little children but was concerned about other issues. A similar example comes from an interview with Nilmony, second wife of one of the major leaders of the movement, Jangal Santhal.<sup>12</sup> She repeatedly refused to comment about the movement or about her experiences as a party worker. During her interview, in fact, a very uncomfortable silence descended, as she remained seated with vacant eyes, apparently not listening to the questions. Her pregnant silence interrogated the nature of patriarchal status of a male, Naxalite revolutionary leader. Whether Nilmony was forced to join the politics of her husband, or what her own expectations were from a marriage, are potentially disturbing issues and have not been broached by the historians of Naxalbari.

Feminist investigation of Nilmony's silence and P. B's terse, fragmented speech reveals that multiple readings of their silence and

disjointed responses are possible. I have already indicated that reading all silences/refusal to give cohesive answers to questions as resistance can lead to lapses in analysis. But in these two cases, silence and fragmented speech allow for thinking of them as acts of resistance. The surroundings of both the interviews were congenial, facilitated by other participants, who willingly spoke about their own experiences. In those circumstances, silence and expressed refusal to communicate claimed a distinct status. It marked an opposition to the collective effort to remember the Naxalbari movement and silence became an expression of resistance.

S.B, R.H, P. B and Nilmony represent multiple dimensions of peasant women's motives and experiences about their involvement with the movement. While S.B and R.H epitomize women's agency in joining revolutionary politics, P. B and Nilmony expose the possibility that even the liberatory politics of Naxalbari was sometimes imposed by the patriarchs, however benevolent they might seem. Their responses reflect on both the processes of exclusion whereby the male character of the movement has been canonized in the historiography of the movement. The very process of canonization, however,—both contemporary and historical—has its roots in the metropolitan intelligentsia. The principal conceptualization of women's role in the movement was subsumed under a singular idea of being 'supportive', where women's independent decision to join the movement was as equally disregarded as their protests against a patriarchal imposition to work for the movement. The overarching emphasis on this particular role for women, therefore, failed to account for multiple possibilities of women's reactions to the movement. Interrogating this metropolitan conceptualization is necessary and to do so we have to focus on the way Calcutta-based or educated urban Naxalites visualized the rural society.

### **Section Two: Imaginary 'Village'**

Let me begin with the 'parable of the Elephant-Hunt' as Raghav Bandyopadhyay has termed the revolutionary strategy adopted by the

Naxalites in his memoir (Bandyopadhyay 2000: 16). The elephant signified the State—the massive conglomeration of social institutions and political apparatuses: police, military, parliament, bureaucracy, schools, colleges and all educational institutions which are employed to dominate and subjugate the common people. The motive of the movement was to destroy that gigantic crushing mechanism of oppression. It was believed by the activists, and they were not entirely wrong, that city was the nerve-center of this oppressive system and therefore to destroy it, the elephant must be taken into the villages. Villages were considered to be those muddy quagmires, where the elephant would be stuck and then small but decisive and swift strikes of sharp instruments in the form of guerrilla attacks would dismember the elephant. The parable was lucidly elaborated as *the* revolutionary strategy in Utpal Dutt's drama on the Naxalbari movement *Teer* (The Arrow)<sup>13</sup>, and its acceptance among Naxalites is substantiated in Raghav Bandyopadhyay's memoir. In Dutt's drama a villager formulates the strategy of elephant-hunt, but it becomes quite apparent from Bandyopadhyay's account that mainly the urban activists were enamored of this tactic. The following passage from his memoir further illustrates the point:

Village, village and village, which I have never seen, never known its culture, tradition, customs, dreams, nightmares—ruled my imagination. Calcutta was just a myth, a city without existence [...] In many of the popular pamphlets the city was an abstraction, a mere idea. But we did not forget urban people like the industrial workers and the mild, harmless middle-class *bhadralok*. They were scrupulously connected with our vision of liberated village. [...] The city had its own mass, sphere, dimension—all its geometrical existence, but it was absent in my intellect or perception. It had no reflection in mind and so it was a ghost city (Bandyopadhyay 2000: 17).

This idealized vision of the village and the 'non-existence' of Calcutta may seem a perfect contrast to the centrality of the metropolis in the historiography and popular memory of the movement. But, it is necessary

to emphasize that the village was an empty ideal, devoid of the perceptions of the rural society with its own dynamism. The existential world of Calcutta-based Naxalites, therefore, on one hand, denied the reality of the city, and on the other hand, was oblivious to everyday rural life. The revolutionary vision of Naxalites was populated by revolutionary axioms, propagated through their own pamphlets.

The gender aspect of these revolutionary axioms was mostly shaped by the social reformist movements during the colonial period and the subsequent nationalist construction of *bhadramahila* or the gentlewoman as the ideal of womanhood. The ideal of *bhadramahila* was developed through a reformist strategy to encourage women to inculcate the 'refined' values of docility, chastity, sacrifice, and caring through a moderate access to education, and to abolish the 'coarse' forms of traditional women's agency, represented through rural, oral subcultures (Chatterjee 1989; Banerjee 1989). All the reforms, however, were defined by benevolent male patriarchs and so women participated little in deciding the course of their progress to modernity. The communist movement in India bore the legacy of this benevolent patriarchal outlook and relegated the issues of gender to a secondary position to class-politics (Custers 1987; Stree Shakti Sangathana 1989; Kannabiran, V. and Lalitha, K. 1989: 189-203). It was argued that gender equality and women's emancipation would follow the establishment of the socialist state. Naxalites did not veer from the traditional communist movement in this regard. Though they made a significant theoretical breakthrough in conceptualizing 'semi-feudal' and 'semi-colonial' conditions, especially of rural society, they failed to notice the gender component enmeshed within that concept. The semi-feudal character was described in the official Political Resolution of CPI (M-L) as

landlessness of about 40 percent of the rural population, the back-breaking usurious exploitations, the ever-growing evictions of poor peasantry coupled with the brutal *social*/oppression ... reminiscent of the medieval ages (Ghosh 1992: 46; emphasis supplied).

It is instructive to note that this social analysis did not make any concession along the gender line.

Oblivious to rural women's participation in agricultural labor, their drudgery of domestic labor, their exploitation in the agro-industrial units like the innumerable tea-gardens in northern West Bengal or the rice mills in Birbhum district, Naxalites addressed women's issue from the typical middle-class concern of safeguarding women's honor and chastity. Let me give a few examples:

First, from an essay of Charu Mazumdar, the chief architect of the movement and its greatest leader:

I have seen the barbaric sexual torture of the class enemy on the newly-wed Muslim peasant-bride. I have heard the pleading of her unarmed, unfortunate husband, 'Can you avenge this, Comrade?' (Mazumdar 2001: 10).

This unproblematic emotional rhetoric fails to engage with the women's question seriously. The presence of armed peasant women in the flaming fields of Naxalbari, however, blatantly went against this simplistic idea of gender relations. They did not only claim to be an integral part of those landless and exploited 40 percent, the target population of the people's war, but also asserted their vindication of fighting against oppression. That this claim went completely unheeded reinforces the blind spot within the movement. Both theoretically and emotionally, the urban male cadres in rural areas failed to relate to the interconnected character of patriarchy with class and caste-oppression. Two examples will illustrate the point:

Ashim Chatterjee, perhaps epitomizing the 'brilliant' urban, middle-class, student, model Naxalite and who went to work in the villages of Debra-Gopiballabpur in Medinipur district said: <sup>14</sup>

[o]ften peasant women were ruthlessly sexually exploited in those villages. It was very surprising to us that neither they themselves, nor their husbands ever urged us to take any revenge for that. They were



far more occupied with the issue of capturing land. Sexual honor was important to us, but it was not a priority to them.

Shankar, a small-town-based local leader, but educated in Calcutta and attached to the Communist Party of India from the 1950s, in North Bengal said:<sup>15</sup>

[t]hough we had already read Engels' book and had a pretty clear idea about the way women became part of the male patriarch's property within the family, we never felt that we should make an extra effort to involve the women separately. Yes [...] you can say that we also treated the women as the property of our peasant male comrades. Now it seems strange that it never occurred to us.

A similar attitude is discernable in the Naxalite understanding of working-class women in smaller industrial towns. The only emotional recognition of women's agency within the Naxalite existential world referred principally to the model of mother, or the gentle, abiding wife, or loving sister—the ever-nurturing, hard-working, poor, apolitical angel. The complex history of women's participation in organized and unorganized industrial wage-labor was never even considered in Naxalite class analysis. Raghav Bandyopadhyay remembered that, while working in a small working class neighborhood near Katihar, at the West Bengal-Bihar border region, he used to live with a working class family. The woman in that family was a worker and though he never thought of including her in his political meetings, she always showed deep respect for him and his politics.<sup>16</sup> Abhijit Das, a student leader, who went to work in the rural and industrial areas bordering northern West Bengal and northern Bihar, supports this view.<sup>17</sup> He told that, while working with the peasants and workers, urban Naxalites always interacted with the male members only. Though the women of the shelter-giving families acted as their couriers and took great care of urban comrades, male activists never thought of 'giving politics' (the common terminology to denote the process of politicization) to these women seriously.

The Naxalites' engagement with the theme of sexual exploitation of working class women, therefore, was one-dimensional as their emphasis on securing women's honor was easily translated into chivalry. Several of their leaflets, distributed after annihilation campaigns, contain recurrent references to the victims as women's sexual oppressors. These persistent references to women as the hapless victims of sexual violence, whose honor must be avenged by the valiant male guerrilla squads, interpret women's existence as mere physical bodies in need of protection. For example:

At the end of her working day when one widow laborer was returning in the evening by the side of the local police camp, a few bloodthirsty, intoxicated, demons (*raktololup pishacher dal motto abosthay*) pounced on her and tortured her. When this news reached the CPI (M-L) activists, the revolutionary committee condemned those demons to death.

—CPI (M-L) Party on behalf of the people of Ranaghat<sup>18</sup>

Among the Calcutta-based Naxalite women who went to villages or smaller towns, several women shared the everyday life of peasants and working-class people with two chief objectives: to become a part of the toiling masses, and to bring more political workers within the fold from the people with whom they lived.<sup>19</sup> Their experiences differed from those of male activists significantly. For instance, R.D, a University-educated woman, worked as a laborer in a leather-goods manufacturing unit at Garia, then a poor neighborhood in the southern outskirts of Calcutta.<sup>20</sup> She found it very difficult to orchestrate the grievances of other women workers as her ideas of working-class women rarely matched those of her co-workers. She was, however, doing good work as she became close to her co-workers, talked to them about various issues, organized small-scale protests against the management's use of abusive language while addressing workers, and sensitized them to the sexual exploitation of the manager. This last task was the most difficult also. R.D noticed immediately after she joined work that one particular woman was ostracized by the rest as

she was allegedly the 'kept woman' of the manager. R.D began telling them that the girl was a victim who had to bear the manager's lust due to her poverty and others must sympathize with her. The interesting aspect of the incident was her late realization that others were actually jealous of that woman since everybody was equally poor but only that woman enjoyed an extra bit of help from the manager. The process of sensitization was therefore more difficult but in the end a little communication could be established.

It is interesting to note that the working-class women's problems are far more nuanced in R.D's experiences that go beyond the one-dimensional mother or sister model. It is, however, not intended to suggest that only R.D's womanhood was catalytic in her understanding but also to reflect on the circumstances that guided her observations, which possibly were absent in case of many of her male comrades. The chivalrous, protective spirit of male Naxalites clouded their vision and compelled them to stick to the particular image of woman that they were most comfortable with.

The emphasis on the 'supportive' role of women, therefore, was a self-reflection of urban male Naxalites. It was inevitable that their middle-class ideal would fail to conceptualize the agency of women like S.B or R.H. The remarkable aspect is that the silences of Nilmony and P. B also contest the Calcutta model of 'supportive' women. Their agency resides in their refusal to relate to the history of Naxalbari, which perhaps, for them was an extension of patriarchal domination coupled with apprehensions of maltreatment at the hands of the police. That they did not 'support' the movement echoes in their vacant or angry eyes.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, I argue that the reading of the Naxalbari movement from the point of view of non-metropolitan women entails accounting for their speech and silences as well as their resistance vis-à-vis the essentially male, middle-class, and urban construction of the history and memory of the movement. Any gendered reading of the movement bears a

responsibility to represent their own versions. This practice disqualifies the validity of *one* singular women's history where women can be projected as either agents or victims. This also confirms that the women's history of the Naxalbari movement is not parallel to its political history as gender is woven in the matrix of power relations within the movement.

Interrogating the metaphorical pre-eminence of Calcutta in this movement foregrounds the limitations of the metropolitan discourse of Naxalbari. These limitations disregarded women's capacity to act upon the situations that the movement had thrust them into, and foreclosed the investigation of internal dynamism of the movement. Until and unless the gendered historiography of Naxalbari dismantles the Calcutta canons, it will fail to engage with these multiple forms of women's agency intersecting within the movement.

### Notes

- 1 A version of this paper was presented in a conference on 'Maoist Insurgency: Comparative Perspectives', International Institute of Asian Studies, Leiden, The Netherlands in February 2006. I am grateful to the organizers and all the participants of that conference for their comments.
- 2 The Chinese Communist Party attributed this epithet to the Naxalbari movement. An article titled 'Spring Thunder Over India' was published as an editorial in *People's Daily*, organ of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on 5th July 1967. It was reproduced in *Liberation* vol.1, no.1, November 1967. It read: 'A peal of spring thunder has crashed over the land of India. Revolutionary peasants in Darjeeling area have risen in rebellion. Under the leadership of revolutionary group of the Indian Communist Party, a red area of rural revolutionary armed struggle has been established in India. This is a development of tremendous significance for the Indian people's revolutionary struggle.'
- 3 David Ludden (1999) borrows the definition of *Mofussil*—'The Provinces'—the country stations and districts, as contra-distinguished from the 'the Presidency'; or, relatively, the rural localities of a district as contra-distinguished from the *sudder* or chief station, which is the residence of district authorities—from the nineteenth century *Hobson-Jobson* dictionary to elaborate the penetration of modernity in the countryside through a close interaction between local traditions and British rule.
- 4 These few studies are Banerjee (1980; 1984); Samanta (1984); Duyker (1987).
- 5 The task of the researcher is to understand the 'pauses, the waverings, the incoherence [...] the real import of obsessive repetitions' and, in effect, to 'stretch the language to reach out to as yet unspoken areas of experience' (Stree Shakti Sangathana 1989: 27).

- 6 My methodology is informed by critical feminist studies on research that caution against the unquestioning authenticity of information and certitude of the method of data collection (Spivak 1981: 391). I accept that 'complete' recovery of any information is impossible but I also acknowledge that prioritizing the critical aspect of data collection must not impede exploratory research where new data form the basis of interpretation.
- 7 Mass songs of protest and awakening or *gana-sangit* are generally sung in chorus and carry anti-imperialist, socialist revolutionary messages. The nomenclature *gana-sangit* became popular from 1940s in undivided Bengal with the formation of Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), which was a forum of leftist intellectuals and artists. Song-writers, composers, and singers of this Association created a new genre of songs which became instrumental in spreading the message of Marxist ideas using specific historical references of people's rebellion. The tradition of these songs has been influenced by popular anti-colonial songs, composed in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and various traditions of folk songs. Song-writers of *gana-sangit* have always been, however, conscious of the international dimension of Marxism. Some of the most popular and successful composers of *gana-sangit* are Hemanga Biswas, Salil Chowdhury, and Jyotirindranath Moitra.
- 8 Terai is the name of the region in North Bengal where Naxalbari is located.
- 9 Interview with S. B, 8.10.2004.
- 10 Interview with R. H, 15.1.2005.
- 11 Unrecorded conversation with P. B in Hochaimallikjote village, 26.10.2004.
- 12 Video-recorded interview of Nilmony with Shahriar Kabir as part of the Oral History Project of International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, 1997.
- 13 Utpal Dutt (1929-1993) was one of the most important dramatists of postcolonial West Bengal. His commitment to Marxist ideology and the communist movement in India inspired him to identify himself as a political activist on the cultural front. He was an ardent sympathiser of the Naxalbari movement in 1967 and wrote *Teer* to impart the revolutionary message of Naxalbari among the metropolitan masses, but soon decided to part with the movement, calling his involvement as a monumental mistake. Dutt, later, nearly disowned *Teer* since he declared that he bore no identification with the movement and became an advocate of the democratic Left that came to power in the 1977 Legislative Assembly elections in West Bengal. The drama was published after his death in a compilation of his works (1995) and the editors of that volume have mentioned that they had to recover the entire script from disjointed jottings and perhaps some of the pages are missing. But this drama remains a significant document of the movement as well as of Dutt's life as a politically committed artist. See for the entire script, Dutt (1995: 217-326).
- 14 Interview with Ashim Chatterjee, Calcutta, 3.9.2004.
- 15 Interview with Shankar at his Jalpaiguri residence on 14.10.2004.
- 16 Interview with Raghav Bandyopadhyay, Calcutta, 15.12.2004.
- 17 Interview with Abhijit Das at his Calcutta residence on 15.11.2004.
- 18 Undated leaflet (Archives of West Bengal Home-Political Department, Intelligence Branch).
- 19 R.D in the suburbs of Calcutta, K. B in the rural areas of Hooghly district, and P.M, S.M, A.M in the villages of Birbhum.
- 20 Interview with R.D, Calcutta, 24.8.2004.

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### Visual Documents

(Video-recorded interviews with Naxalbari movement activists, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam)

Comrade Krishnabhakta Sharma, close associate of Charu Majumdar, went to China in the late sixties with a secret mission. Interviewed by Shahriar Kabir, in Naxalbari, on 17.4.97, Bengali. This tape also contains the interview of late Naxalite leader Jangal Santal's wife Nilmony.

Singer Ajit Pandey, former Naxalite activist, ex Member of Legislative Assembly (West Bengal). Interviewed by Shahriar Kabir, in Calcutta on 20.4.97, Bengali.