

Echoes of Naxalbari

Sunday 18 April 2010, by [BHADURI Aditi](#), [MITRA Joya](#), [MITRA Sanjoy](#), [SANYAL Kanu](#) (Date first published: December 2007).

In 1967, Naxalbari, a village at the northern edge of West Bengal, witnessed a peasant uprising that inspired similar movements across India. With the slogan Land to the Tiller!, the Naxalite movement attracted many urban youth inspired by the call for social justice. Aditi Bhaduri recently spoke with several political activists who, while having taken varying paths over the past 40 years, say that their early activist experiences continue to resonate in their current undertakings.

Kanu Sanyal

In 1967, Kanu Sanyal and Charu Majumdar, leaders of the Naxalbari movement, split from the Communist Party of India (CPI) and founded the All India Organising Committee of the Communist Revolutionaries of India. On 22 April 1969, Lenin's birthday, Sanyal announced the formation of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), with Charu Majumdar as secretary. Sanyal, now 79, is still leader of the CPI (Marxist-Leninist) – though this party was founded in 1978 and is, Sanyal emphasises, different from the original. Sanyal is also deeply involved in the struggle at Singur against land acquisition by the West Bengal government. Though frail, the fire clearly still burns within him, and passion continues to resonate in the voice of this leader who was once much feared and has long been revered.

Aditi Bhaduri (Himal) - What motivated you to start the movement?

Kanu Sanyal - I believe that the reasons for the Naxalbari struggle still exist today. If you go to the villages, you will find the situation just like it was in 1967. As long as there are imperialists, feudal landlords and monopolistic capitalists, exploitation remains and the relevance of Naxalbari also remains. From a struggle against feudalism, this is now a struggle against imperialism – as is being witnessed in Singur and Nandigram.

When you look back, what went wrong?

We were members of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) in those days. But there was a revisionist movement, and the CPI (M) was trying to forge an alliance with the Congress party to contest elections and come to power. They did that in both the 1967 and 1969 elections. The CPI (M) was in power when the Naxalbari uprising and police massacre of 11 people took place in June 1967. Also, the CPI (M) had accepted the land ceiling of 25 acres imposed by Congress, whereas Charu Majumdar and myself believed that land should be given to the tillers – should be owned by them, and not by the landlords. In general, the CPI (M) was not fulfilling the party programme after coming to power. There was also a lot of infighting. Then we went wrong strategically, calling for a boycott of the elections in 1967 and 1969. But the communist movement teaches us that boycotting or contesting elections depends on the situation. If people are in a mood to struggle, then you can

boycott elections. Otherwise, you take advantage of elections.

By killing individuals we did not destroy the system. So, despite killing landlords, we did not destroy feudal relations. The individual killings were wrong, and went against the Naxalite struggle. There were two lines of Naxalbari theory: first, organising the people; and second, annihilation of class enemies. We had to seize land and distribute it to landless peasants. But we failed to understand this imperative when we formed the CPI (ML). We also faced some leftist adventurism under Charu Majumdar, which saw the indiscriminate killing of individuals. This alienated many ordinary people, and reduced popular support for the movement. Another mistake was that Charu Majumdar launched an armed struggle immediately, instead of educating and mobilising the masses. These were grave mistakes. We should fight against the system, not against individuals.

What about the current Naxalite movement?

They are making the same mistakes: indiscriminate killings of individuals – landlords, police, ordinary people suspected of being collaborators. Hence, they are alienating the common people. They are not trying to mobilise the people, and hence it is not a mass movement. We have no difficulties in taking up arms, but we have to mobilise the people and explain to them the reason behind taking up arms: it is to fight the system and defend ourselves, not to kill police or landlords or individuals. If we have to deplete the arms of the enemies, we have to attack the enemy stealthily, on the strength of the masses.

Sanjoy Mitra: Encountering the real India

Sanjoy Mitra began his political activism in 1961. An ardent champion of Adivasi rights, he was naturally drawn into the whirlwind generated by the Naxalbari uprising. Today a civil-rights activist, filmmaker and photographer, the 64-year-old Mitra lives in Calcutta, and is actively involved in the Citizen's Initiative on Nandigram.

Aditi Bhaduri (Himal) - How did you get involved in the movement?

Sanjoy Mitra - In 1959, the Food Movement had begun in West Bengal. Farmers had come to Governor House to protest, and there was a lathi-charge in the heart of the city. I was 16 years old at that time, and this made a deep impression on me. My actual political life started in 1961-62. I was studying engineering at Jadavpur University, and found the communists to be special people – I respected them for their simplicity and integrity. I became close to the party, eventually joining the CPI, which at the time was trying to organise bidi-workers. Around this time the war with China broke out, and there was a divide amongst comrades with a pro-China line and those with a pro-Soviet orientation.

In 1964, the CPI (Marxist) was formed after a split from the CPI. Later, the Antor Party Sodhonbad Birodhi (Inner Party Struggle against Revisionism) was also created, which was trying to network with other like-minded groups in Bengal and neighbouring states. Soon after, two major incidents occurred, the Vietnam War and the Naxalbari uprising. Reminiscent of Nandigram, 11 women and children died in police firing. Immediately, a solidarity committee, the Naxalbari Sahayak Samiti, was formed in Calcutta, and I was one of its founder-members. Since we thought that the Chinese model was the most applicable one to India, we followed the Maoist strategy of organising the rural areas. I quit my job at that time, and became a full-time activist.

Though the Coordination Committee was trying to form a party, we had ideological differences with Charu Majumdar, who said that feudalism was the principle contradiction. Instead, we felt that imperialism was the principle contradiction. Similarly, some of us felt that the question of

nationality, as seen in the struggles of the Nagas and the Mizos, was part of the same struggle, but Charu Majumdar said that it was not a class struggle. We believed that armed struggle could change society, but we also felt that we had to go through a democratic process, through trade unions and mass organisations. But Charu Majumdar's group believed in the annihilation of 'class enemies'.

We were a small group, and were expelled from the Coordination Committee. Charu Majumdar's group then formed the CPI (ML), and our group formed the National Liberation and Democratic Front (NLDF). We decided to work in rural and tribal areas. Jharkhand was very suitable for us, and we started working there. I became involved in the wage movement of the bidi-workers in Singhbhum, Jharkhand. In 1969 I was arrested and taken to Hazaribagh jail. Three hundred of us were tied to each other with a cow rope. We were not given any water, nor were there toilet facilities - we were told to pee into each other's mouths, which would also quench our thirst. I was set free in March 1970, but when I came to Calcutta in August the same year I was again arrested on false charges of possessing explosives.

I was again released in April 1972, at a time when there was massive repressions in Calcutta and all over West Bengal. There were 23,000 people in jails; almost 200 died in custody, and many more killed in 'encounters'. They were all CPI (ML) people, but both CPI (M) and CPI (ML) were under attack. No democratic movements were allowed. For me, this was a turning point, and in late June we formed the Association for Protection of Democratic Rights, the APDR, in an attempt to organise legal aid, recognition and release of political prisoners.

We organised the first demonstration in early 1973, for the release of political prisoners. It was a demonstration of 34 women - mothers, wives, sisters of the arrested, and a few men like myself, ex-prisoners. My mother also took part, the very first demonstration she had ever participated in. Four hundred armed police stood on guard. Our office was shut down, and I had it moved to my residence. For the first time, Amnesty International sent a representative to Calcutta. Till then, Amnesty's policy had been not to speak on behalf of people who supported violence.

By 1974, we were able to hold regular programmes. But then the Emergency was imposed, at a time that we were in the process of publishing a book on state atrocities. I went underground, but we managed to publish the book in hiding. Eventually I was arrested again, and was released only after the Emergency was lifted.

What went wrong with the movement?

Well, the spirit of the movement was right, but there was a lack of mature leadership. Most of the CPI (ML) leaders were newcomers to political movements. There were few communists among them. Leadership was like that of Charu Majumdar's - at most from a district committee. Even state committees had limited knowledge of the Indian state.

Then there was the wrong tactical line of boycotting mass organisations, of going for 'annihilation', secret individual killings. There was massive infiltration by the police, and many of Naxalite activists, when arrested, would also become informers. Though Vietnam influenced us, there the struggle was led by communists, whereas here we had splintered into the Maoist movement. Though there were a few changes in the old line, like moving away from the annihilation of landlords to more encounters with state and state agents, there were no mass movement or over-ground activities. This was a weakness - action has to be on both fronts.

Yet, I am extremely glad that I participated in the movement, because I came to know the 'real' India. The best part of my life was the time I spent living and working with the Adivasis. Sixty years after Independence, the poor, the rural people have been more marginalised. There is hardly any

scope for democratic movement in any area, and the crisis has deepened with globalisation. This makes many of the youth today attracted to Maoist organisations.

You are now involved in Nandigram?

My activism came to an end in 1986, partly due to family obligations and partly due to my disillusionment with the activist world. However, after events in Singur and Nandigram, it was impossible to keep myself aloof from the social movement. As an individual, I do not endorse killing and violence, but I do believe that people have a right to protect themselves.

The events at Nandigram are much worse than those of Naxalbari, where it was the police and activists who were involved in encounters. Here, the nexus is between the state machinery and the ruling party. This is a new phenomenon in Indian politics. Nandigram can be compared to the Bangladesh razzakar movement. The greatest irony is that the CPI (M), since its inception, was never pro-Chinese. But now, the CPI (M) is copying the Chinese capitalist model, which is the worst kind of capitalism. Nandigram has shown the total callousness of the so-called 'left'. It is really a civil war.

Joya Mitra: Going through the cycle

Joya Mitra joined the Naxalite movement as a 17-year-old. During her prison term, from 1970 to 1974, she wrote Killing Days: Prison Memoirs. Now 57, she lives in Asansol, in West Bengal, and is actively involved in women's and environmental issues.

Aditi Bhaduri (Himal) - How did you get involved in the movement?

My mother came from a family of freedom fighters, and was a very liberated person. We were brought up to never think of ourselves as weak just because we were girls. At that time, there was a youth movement all over the world. The Food Movement in West Bengal had also started, and in 1966 there was a student agitation. We read the newspapers, and we saw the first 48-hour bandh in Calcutta. There was something in the air, and we were drawn into the movement with the dream of changing the world.

Tell me about your experience in the movement.

I joined the movement immediately after my graduation in 1967. I was 17 years old. I was drawn to one particular person on the Naxalbari Krishal Sangram Sahayak Committee. He talked to me about Marxism, and I joined the group. We got married soon after, though the marriage broke up within a year. My younger brother also joined the movement - my mother had sent him to keep an eye on me, but he too got involved. He was arrested in 1972 and tortured, before he was even 17 years old. I spent more than four years in the movement, living in villages in West Bengal and then Bihar, and the education I got was more than what I would have received from attending many universities.

Being a woman, I could enter spaces where men could not - in homes and families, where the inner coterie was all women. I received a lot of love and affection from the village communities. Theirs was the real protection I had, which made it possible for me to dodge the police. A blind boy used to sleep just outside my room. His hearing was excellent, so if the police came looking for me, he would wake up immediately and warn me.

Armed struggle was the philosophy then, but I don't believe in it now. When we are able to give up our most precious possession - life - it was also because we believed in life, we wanted to protect it from aggression and injustice. But we understood that we were going about it in the wrong way, by indiscriminate killing. But mistakes and doing things that one later terms 'wrong' are part of the

process. We needed to come to individual understandings.

What went wrong?

When I look back, I don't think anything went wrong. All things have to go through a certain process, a cycle. When something is born, it matures and then slowly gives way to another cycle. This is the rule of history: everything dies out, but at the same time the event has not ended. A wave surges and then ebbs, but its vibrations are felt as long as causes are not eradicated. All over the world, those who were participating in the movement in the 1960s and 70s must now be nearing 60 years of age, but are still present in some human-rights movement or another. That generation has shaped – and continues to shape – subsequent generations.

P.S.

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