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### CASTE QUESTION AND NAXALITE POLITICS IN BENGAL: A STUDY OF THE MOVEMENT'S CASTE DYNAMICS IN URBAN AND RURAL SPACES

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#### Abstract

What happens when a movement that brooks no compromise finds its inception in a State that 'sees no caste?' The infamous Naxalbari movement has always had a curiously intriguing relationship with its birthplace of Bengal. The intent of this research is to analyze the dynamics of the Naxalite movement in Bengal. This essay seeks to contextualize how the Naxalite movement tackles the challenges of caste politics by providing a brief overview of the movement's inception, a summary of the general Marxist outlook on caste in India, the unique position of Bengal and its CPI(M) regime with regards to the caste question. This research then studies the Naxalite movement in the urban and rural communities, focusing on its composition, recruitment patterns, leadership style, plans of action and general reception in each of the two sectors of Bengali society. It seeks to also analyze and nature and significance of the Bengali social category of the 'Bhadralok' and explore the caste dynamics that covertly dominated the social hierarchy of the Naxalite movement. Finally, it shall try to understand the unique position that the Naxalbari movement holds in the discourse of caste-based emancipation in Bengal.

**Keywords:** *Naxalite Movement, CPI(ML), Caste-Dynamics, Bengal, Peasant Agitation, Social Revolution*

#### Introduction

There are few other social uprisings that have carved so deep a mark in the history of the Republic of India than the Naxal movement. What started off as an armed peasant revolt on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of March 1967, in the eponymous Naxalbari village in the Siliguri subdivision of the Darjeeling in West Bengal, soon spread like wildfire of tribal rebellions and radical communist militancy steering along Maoist lines across the states of Odisha, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and several other states of India. The area of the nation where the Naxalites exerted their influence is today called the Red Corridor of India, which has experienced a characteristically high degree of instability, political violence and left-wing extremism (LWE).

The defining feature of the Naxalite movement was that it was an organized peasant resistance along Maoist lines against the Indian bourgeoisie state. However, one of the more overlooked aspects of this movement was the caste dynamics that dominated its structure. Overtly, the movement was not casteist nor anti-casteist rather it touted itself to be against oppression of all sorts, and being that it was designed and propagated along Marxist-Maoist lines the dominant forms of oppression that it championed against were along the lines of economics and class. Over the course of the years since its inception, a significant

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number of academic inquiries have been made upon the nature of the caste dynamics that were at the core of this movement, in particular focusing on the geographical areas of Bihar (Singh 2005 & Nayak 2012), Andhra Pradesh (Gudavarthy 2005) and other parts of South and Central India (Srinivasulu 2017). This research intends to explore the nuances of caste dynamics that covertly existed in the organization of the Naxalite uprising in the state of West Bengal where it first started.

The political party that pioneered and spearheaded this movement, the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) (CPIML) was formed by the radicals of the CPIM. Its leaders Charu Majumdar and Saroj Dutta, were both disillusioned by the parliamentary character of its politics. These radicals accused the more conservative members of the CPIM was resorting to revisionism. Upon being purged from the CPIM, these radicals then formed the CPIML on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of April, 1969.

### **The Inception of the Naxalite Uprising and the Birth of CPI(ML) – A Brief History**

The roots of the ideological dissension between the CPIM and the Naxalites could be traced back to 1964. In November of 1964, the Seventh Congress of the CPIM held in Calcutta characterized the Indian state as “the organ of the class rule of the bourgeoisie and landlord, led by the big bourgeoisie, who are increasingly collaborating with foreign finance capital in pursuit of the capitalist path of development” (Chandra 1990, p.23). This program envisaged the creation of a people’s democracy based on the coalition of all genuine anti-feudal and anti-imperialist forces led by the working class of idea. It called for the displacement of the bourgeois-landlord state by a working class-led worker-peasant coalition. The program held that the democratic revolution of India could only be successful if the country was steered on the path of socialism (Chandra, 1990, p.23).

The program, however, could not satisfy the radical members of CPIM. Sushital Roy Chowdhury wanted the program to characterize the Indian State as a “neo-colonial” state and adopt “armed struggle” as a means of achieving the socialist revolution (Chandra 1990, p.23). The radical members of the CPIM also pointed out the reluctance of the ruling capitalist bourgeoisie classes to relinquish their power voluntarily. Thus, the radicals believed that it would be necessary for the revolutionary forces to orientate their activities so that they could face up to all potential contingencies.

However, the Calcutta Congress of the CPIM rejected such radical amendments and set forth its journey for the next five years with suppressed radicals and dissenters within its ranks. The radicals soon started becoming more and more disillusioned with the trajectory that the CPIM had taken. They took umbrage to the CPIM leadership’s ambivalent attitude towards China and accused its leaders of breeding revisionism through the Program of 1964. One such radical, Charu Mazumdar, between January of 1965 and April of 1967, wrote his historic eight documents which were later published by the CPIML in the form of a booklet named ‘The Historic Anti-Revisionist Eight Documents’. In summary, these documents declared that the Indian revolution must take the path of armed struggle, it should be organized on the pattern of the Chinese revolution and that this armed struggle should assume the form of people’s war as led by Chairman Mao Tse-Tung. Mazumdar, a veteran of the Tebhaga Peasant agitation of 1946-47 (Sen 1995), had previously been involved in organizing radical peasant movements in Bengal. Mazumdar repudiated the CPI(M) leadership, though he still held faith that the party could be transformed into a real revolutionary party (Chandra 1990, p.24).

The incidents that followed are well chronicled in the annals of history (Bannerjee 1980 & Chandra 1990). On the 18<sup>th</sup> of March, 1967 a peasants' conference led by Kanu Sanyal, a member of the Darjeeling Secretariat of the CPI(M) and tribal peasant leader Jangal Santhal was held under the auspices of the Siliguri sub-division of the CPI(M) leadership in the Darjeeling district, which gave a stirring call for "the ending of monopoly ownership of land by the landlords, redistribution of land through peasants' committees and organization and arming of the peasants to destroy the resistance of landlords and rural

reactionaries" and also cautioned the landless peasants that "their anti-feudal struggle would have to meet the opposition of all reactionary forces in the country in a protracted armed resistance" (Chandra 1990, p. 25). Following a series of clashes with the police in the next two months which culminated in a violent encounter which claimed the lives of nine and one child on the 25<sup>th</sup> of May 1967, the lines were drawn. The CPI(M) supported the central government in its call for the arrest of the rebels involved in this uprising. On the 18-19<sup>th</sup> of June 1967, the CPI(M) West Bengal State Committee expelled dissenting members such as Shushital Roy Chowdhury, Charu Mazumdar, Saroj Dutta, Kanu Sanyal, Soren Basu, Asit Sen and Parimal Dasgupta from the party. These dissenters went on to form the splinter faction called All India Coordination Committee of Communist Revolutionaries (AICCR) on the 12<sup>th</sup> of November 1967 which openly denounced electoral politics in favour of an armed revolution. Finally, on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of April 1969, through the AICCR, the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) was formed by Kanu Sanyal, Charu Mazumdar and Saroj Dutta.

### **Indian Marxism and the Caste Question**

Prabhat Patnaik has been candid enough to admit that there has always been a long-standing debate between the Indian Marxists over the privilege of class over caste. Dalit intellectuals have often accused Indian Marxists of dogmatically underplaying the significance of the latter in its role in shaping the dynamics of social change in India (Patnaik 2006).

According to Jayantanuja Bandhyopadhyaya, Marx was the first political thinker to draw attention to the "highly deleterious impact of caste on Indian society and its causal link with the relations of production" (Bandhyopadhyaya 2002). Caste formations are not identical to class divisions. There is a caste structure within each class and a class structure within each caste in Indian society. They generate different forms of sociopolitical belonging, loyalties, and consciousness. Often, identifies Bandhyopadhyaya, caste consciousness proves to be "antithetical to class consciousness and stymies the growth of proletarian class solidarity" (Bandhyopadhyaya 2002). The unity of the working class in India is constantly vitiated by the caste consciousness and caste loyalties of the peasants and workers. Therefore, to traditional Indian Marxists caste has always been an issue of contention that was best circumnavigated rather than contended head-on.

### **CPI(M) and its Caste-blindness in Bengal**

A quote by Chief Minister Jyoti Basu illustrates the general outlook of the upper echelons of mainstream Communist politics in Bengal about the caste issue: "Caste is a legacy of the feudal system and viewing the social scene from the casteist angle is no longer relevant for West Bengal. (Basu 1980; Shinharay 2012, p. 26)

The communist leadership had always sidestepped the importance of the caste dynamic in the political landscape of Bengal due to both ideology and convenience. The traditional Marxist intellectuals of India have always opined that caste oppression just like every other form of oppression of the feudal age will eventually cease to be relevant with the progression of capitalism and instead become merged with class oppression. This opinion is understandable from an ideological standpoint. However, if one were to analyze the ground-level reality of the Marxist political parties of Bengal one would also notice that the leadership of the leftist parties even in the present day, much more so in the 60s when the Naxalbari uprising first took place, was almost exclusively dominated by the individuals belonging to the upper caste gentry (Chandra & Nelson 2012).

Sarbani Bandopadhyay points out that Indian "Communists were usually the loudest in proclaiming the irrelevance of caste in the struggles of the downtrodden" (Bandopadhyay 2012, p. 73). Banerjee also states that the party's image as an ideological bastion helmed mostly by progressive intellectuals was

fueled created due to fact that most of the CPI(M) leaders belonged to the 'bhadralok class' (Chandra & Nelson 2012). For them, the question of caste was that of superstructure (Bandopadhyay 2012, p. 73). Atul Kohli highlights that, during its initial years, the CPI(M) followed clear a class-based mobilization strategy (Kohl 1983, p. 791). It attempted to mobilize the lower and lower-middle classes like the agricultural workers and small and marginal farmers by claiming to represent their interests (Guha 2021, p. 54). However, over the years the ideological orientation of the CPI(M) gradually shifted from revolutionary to parliamentary reformism. The party started to give greater prominence to electoral calculations over theoretical orthodoxy (Guha 2021, p. 54). Subsequently, the CPI(M) did not focus its attention towards the extreme lower rungs of the rural hierarchy, pragmatically recognizing their lack of electoral presence. This shift is what caused the growing tensions amongst the more radical members like Mazumdar and Sanyal towards the CPI(M) leadership, leading to these radicals decrying the latter as revisionists.

The lack of caste-based articulation and aggregation of political demands in West Bengal has been attributed to the dominant role of the Communist Party of India (Marxist). It has been opined that the poor achieved the benefits of gaining access to government machinery and found the CPI(M) to be protecting their claims and entitlements (Guha 2021, p. 50-51). Therefore, they chose to ignore the social interventionism of the party and its overwhelmingly upper-caste character (Bhattacharyya, 2011). However, the non-politicization of caste in Bengal is not necessarily seen as an outcome of deliberate efforts directed towards subversion of lower-caste assertion (Guha 2021, p. 51). Rather, it is characterized by a more patronizing outlook by upper-caste political echelons to impose their political ideals upon the lower-caste bastions. Such impositions inherently veer towards a more idealistic and homogenous direction. It makes the task of governance more simple. Dalit activist Kancha Iiah Shepard bluntly highlights (Shepard 2018) that the act of simply not recognizing caste is effectively a subversive mechanism of the Communist leadership, who are almost exclusively well-educated individuals belonging to the upper castes, to ignore their own innate social privileges. Since the appeal of leftist politics is that they tend to sympathize with and champion the causes of the underprivileged, it in effect, helps masquerade a social rift that they themselves are on the advantageous side of.

The CPI (ML), in this regard, despite being more radical than its parent party, is also guilty of being piloted almost exclusively by upper-caste intellectuals as we can tell from their surnames alone. Even in the Naxal movement, one can see a division of labour and status in the internal organization which comprised of "upper" caste leaders and "lower" caste cadre. The former engaged in the high intellectual endeavours of theorizing and the latter materialized the said theories into action (Bandopadhyay 2012, p. 73). The Naxalite militants in the rural sectors on the other hand relied more upon organization, planning and operating on a grassroots level. The leadership was more decentralized which while at times led to instances of disorganization, also gave the movement a far more democratic flavour. The local leaders were the ones who had a better understanding of the terrain in which the young revolutionaries were conducting their activities. The younger cadres were encouraged to blend in with the rural peasantry. This served the dual purpose of masking their presence from the police radar as well as helping them empathize with the peasantry, the tribals and the lower strata (Bannerjee 2008, p. 12).

### **Naxalites in Urban Spaces: The Dichotomy of Brilliance and Hooliganism**

From the get-go, the Naxalite propaganda machinery had sought to paint the CPIM administration as being elitist in nature. Therefore, the onus was upon the Naxalite to embark upon a more inclusive course of action. Charu Mazumdar emphasized the need to create "a 'new man' from the blood of martyrs" (Bannerjee 1980, p. 262). The fiery war cry of the Naxalite movement during its inception was that "he who had not dipped his hand in the blood of the class enemy could not be regarded as a revolutionary" (Dasgupta 2006, p. 1923). This quote alone establishes the fact that the main calling card and appeal of

this new movement was a blatant rejection of parliamentary politics in favour of open violence and a strong appeal to emotion. Charu Majumder called upon the youth to always be courageous and prepared to make sacrifices, and “actively resist injustice and indignity” (Mazumdar 1970, p. 91). This resonated across the radical student circles of Calcutta. Scores of young men from urban institutions and rural communities flocked to join the revolutionary banner of the Naxalites. In the early phase of Naxalite activities, many ordinary people impressed by the youth’s courage, selflessness and idealism came forth to help them by providing shelter and basic necessities (Dasgupta 2006, p. 1922). It is important to note that the youth and student participation at the moment was not monolithic in nature. Different sections of youth were drawn to the Naxalite uprising for different reasons. A study of their composition offers interesting insights with regard to the challenges of caste dynamics that the movement faced following its inception in urban spaces.

Rajeshwari Dasgupta opines that the general “sense of disillusionment with the existing educational system and the socio-economic conditions” of sterility and stagnant that prevailed in the urban areas acted as the catalyst behind these students joining the movement (Dasgupta 2006, p. 1921). Following the Indian Independence (1947), student movements hit an era of stagnation and inaction for the next two decades which was not broken until the food movement of 1966 (Dasgupta 2006, p. 1921). The youth felt convinced of the ineffectiveness of constitutional politics, which appeared to them as contrived, uninspired and banal in the resolution of the pressing socio-economic problems of the time. The fiery call for revolutionary action provided these students with a sense of purpose and oriented them towards armed struggle, which appeared to be more radical, decisive and egalitarian in nature. The participation of some of the most brilliant students of the generation from institutions such as Calcutta University, Calcutta Medical College, Jadavpur University and the Presidency College, selflessly casting aside their exceptional career prospects for the revolutionary cause brought a certain degree of glamour to the movement. This in turn served as the calling card for the youth of the following generations and their peers.

Now it must be noted that this core of dedicated students was well-versed and well-saturated in the radical Marxist-Leninist ideology. However, along with them, also came a cadre of teenage dropouts and hoodlums who did not share the ideological know-how or commitment of the former category of youth. To quote Biplab Dasgupta, “In contrast to the brilliant students from colleges, the dropouts were generally academically backward. The Naxalite movement gave them a sense of importance, a sense of belonging to a large organization” (Dasgupta 1974, p.95). This category was more than glad to take up a banner and shout slogans in support of an ideology that they barely understood. The movement also provided a convenient cover for numerous anti-social elements among the youth who went on to engage in hooliganism and harassed individuals with whom they had personal vendettas (Dasgupta 2006, 1921). The lion’s share of these students belonged to the lower economic strata of the urban spheres. Raghav Bandyopadhyay notes that many poor lower-class and lower-caste youth joined the movement driven by a desire to rub shoulders with students from the upper echelons of urban society. This acted as a form of boost to their self-esteem, as many lower-caste students felt neglected and cast aside during their academic careers, and this common cause allowed them to carouse and build a camaraderie with peers situated higher in their social stations outside the movement. It provided them with a chance to bask in the reflected glory of the upper-class youth who led the Naxal movement (Bandyopadhyay p.17).

Thus, we notice that Rajeshwari Dasgupta’s article (2006) clearly illustrates the caste dynamic that governed the student composition of the Naxalite uprising. The main ideological fuel was provided almost exclusively by those who came from backgrounds of caste privilege, the star cadres of these ideological bastions were also from the same background. In the gravest of ironies, the movement that heralded itself as the champion of the underprivileged, held its own underprivileged composition in low

regard and relegated them to the role of mere tow-along. The exemplification of the revolutionary personality of resilience, self-sacrifice and self-abnegation was highlighted by the privileged upper class, and by extension, upper caste cadres giving up their urban, middle-class comforts and integrating themselves with the underprivileged proletariat. Yet those urban cadres who were not as privileged in the first place were never considered to be the glamorous constituents of this movement. A starving son of a cobbler or a washerman, who barely could make ends meet academically to make it past the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, leaving school to join the Naxalites simply did not make a palatable enough anecdote as an exceptional Brahmin prospect at the Calcutta Medical College doing the same.

### **Exploring the Identity of the *Bhadralok* and Caste-dynamics of Radical Protest**

Exploring the social dynamics between both the requirement process of the Naxalite movement as well as its reception amongst the urban gentry, we stumble upon a key aspect that coloured the popular urban Bengali social consciousness: The identity of the *Bhadralok*. The term *Bhadralok* has appeared numerous times over the course of this research, thus it is important to now understand what this category signifies to the social dynamics of Bengal. The *Bhadralok* can be described as both a “status group and a social class” (Guha 2021, p.62). According to Broomfield (1968), *Bhadralok* is a status group in the Weberian sense since the most important attribute of this group is social honour. Being a *Bhadralok* involves the maintenance of certain values attributed and commonly associated with this social stature, and the observance of certain social properties. The *Bhadralok* value system and *bhadralok* mode of social behaviour are equated with a fondness for intellectual activities, a desire for the acquisition of and generally excellence in higher education, non-engagement in, and aversion for manual labour, sophisticated speech, etiquette and lifestyle and a preference for refined cultural and artistic which includes poetry and philosophy. Scholars like S.N. Mukherjee (1977) and Bidyut Chakraborty (1990) have identified *bhadralok* as a class, the middle class. As a class, being a *Bhadralok* denotes having a combination of “economic power, market chances, occupational prestige, and style of life” (Guha 2021, 62). Its members are also conscious of their separate existence and exclusiveness from other social groups.

The *Bhadralok* and the *Bhadrasamaj* are the self-proclaimed be-all and end-all of urban Bengali society. The Naxalite movement in effect, due to its radical and militant nature, was the virtual antithesis of the reserved and genteel society of the *Bhadralok*. The Naxalites called for violent social change which was an affront to the more conservative *Bhadralok* who in turn lived with utmost faith in the parliamentary procedure, rule of law and the social status quo that held him in such high regard. The students who had left their careers and studies to join this militant uprising did so to the utmost displeasure of their parents (Dasgupta 2006, p. 1924). This aspect too runs contrary to the careerist and family-oriented value system of the *Bhadralok*. The Naxalite modus operandi was for their cadres to integrate themselves into the lives of the proletariat, to engage in harsh rural and industrial labour, in an attempt to understand and empathize with the living conditions of those they sought to fight for. The *Bhadrasamaj* considered itself to be above such activities, it could never debase itself by mingling with the lower classes. Yet, despite such strong differences, the Naxalite movement possessed strong underpinnings of the *Bhadralok* consciousness. As established previously, the main ideological vanguard of the movement was entirely composed of middle-class, upper-caste intellectuals. In decrying revisionism and parliamentary compromise as the killers of revolutionary spirit in his words to the revolutionary students and youth (Mazumdar 170, p. 91), Charu Mazumdar presents revolutionary self-sacrifice as though it was a privilege granted to only the true revolutionary (Dasgupta 2006, p. 1922). Such an ideal is inherently biased towards those who ‘have’ the privilege to reject. To someone who has actually grown up in abject poverty and faced numerous hardships by the virtue of their birth, such an idea is thoroughly obtuse. Underprivileged men and women tend to spend their lives with aspirations of enjoying the privileges and

luxuries that are often denied to them by circumstances beyond their control. Mazumdar even declared that the cadres, upon their arrival in villages, ought to embrace suffering as a means to prove their own revolutionary spirits and “compete with one another in enduring hardships” (Mazumdar 1970, p. 91). This manner of fanatical, almost religious zealotry in self-abnegation can be interpreted as a demonstration of intellectual idealism attempting to compensate excessively for actual ground-level differences. This manner of voluntary suffering would do very little in tempering the revolutionary character of the urban cadres, on the contrary, this wore heavily on the nerves and spirits of the young men and women who were generally used to the comfort of urban life. In effect, the spirit of self-abnegation was merely a show of zeal without substance. It was men of privilege deliberately and voluntarily abandoning some material privileges and then cheering themselves for such as a ‘valiant demonstration’ of austerity. It was the self-imposed trials of the *Bhadralok* that were celebrated, a series of trials that sought to prepare them to lead the common masses in a revolutionary struggle. It was once more an imposition from above rather than a change from within. Similar to the hubris demonstrated by the *Bhadrasamaj* during the advent of liberalism in urban Bengal that took place in the previous century, it was the educated middle class positioning themselves as the self-proclaimed saviours of the lower classes. It was an exercise in the voluntary rejection of the archetypical *Bhadralok* values by a small renegade section of the *Bhadrasamaj*. The aforementioned distinction between the brilliant young men, the rejected dropouts, and finally the anti-social hoodlums (Dasgupta 2006, p. 1921) is also seen through the lenses of the *Bhadralok*’s social perception. The proverbial Naxalite hooliganism that outraged the genteel sensibilities of the urban Bengali gentleman was actually an upper-caste condemnation of the rebellious section of the lower strata of society exercising their agency. The terms of acceptable political engagement are always drawn out and demarcated along the lines of what the upper-caste gentlemen find acceptable. Mass politics thus becomes a rowdy and dirty affair, in contrast to the sophisticated and refined bureaucratic practices dominated by the *Bhadralok*. Sumanta Banerjee dubs the chronicles of the Naxalite attempts at bringing about a revolutionary transformation in society as both “heroic and loutish” (Banerjee 2006, p. 3154).

### **‘Soldiers of a Cause’: Analyzing the Leadership Style of Charu Mazumdar**

The Naxalite youth were soldiers in the revolutionary cause. They were supposed to exhibit unquestioning loyalty and obedience to the party directives. Dilip Bagchi, a former Naxal, recalls in his memoirs, Charu Mazumdar’s own authoritarian style of leadership that called for absolute obedience to his own decrees and plans of action (Bagchi, p. 47). Bagchi recollects that Charu Mazumdar would openly rebuff attempts at having his methods and plans questioned (Bagchi, p. 61). He refused to provide justification for his decisions and even the abrupt changing of the very same decisions (Bagchi, p. 63). Bagchi laments that whether or not a cadre blindly followed Mazumdar or not became the only measuring rod to judge whether or not the person was worthy of being in the party (Bagchi, p. 64). The Naxalite youth were to regard Mazumdar’s words as the final say in decision-making—Mazumdar in his own words to the Revolutionary Students and Youth (Mazumdar 1970, pp. 4-5), openly decries doubt and dubs ‘doubtism’ as another form of revisionism. Mazumdar considered doubt to be a form of germ, highly contagious and poised to harm the revolutionary cause (Mazumdar 1970, pp 4-5). His verbiage starts to border upon that of a fanatical cult leader or a religious zealot, with merely the terms ‘party’ and ‘revolutionary’ replacing any mention of divinity. On one hand, he calls for constructive criticism of revolutionary workers at the same time he sets up a vague barometer for the validity of criticism by saying that the cadres should never direct their criticism in a manner that destroys the Party. He states that since their party is the true revolutionary party, it stands beyond criticism (Mazumdar 1970). These utterances reflect nothing but autocratic delusion and sheer hubris. Even Mazumdar’s own former comrades in arms Promode Sengupta and Asit Sen attest to this assessment of Mazumdar’s style of leadership which they consider to be full of contradictions, a clear deviation from both Marxist-Leninism and Maoism, attempting to hold his own revolutionary party as an alternative to mass organization,

backed by a “romantic view of revolution” (Chandra 1990, 38). Having studied Dilip Bagchi’s personal accounts of his authoritarian behaviour, we can summarize that Mazumdar was, in effect, declaring himself and his brand of revolutionary leadership to be beyond reproach. This runs parallel to yet another instance of the *Bhadralok* intellectual (indeed as Mazumdar himself was one) attempting to impose their vision, their ideals, their way of thinking, and their plan of action upon the impressionable masses. The few enlightened leaders were to steer the minds and actions of the many towards a common cause, towards a trajectory of change dictated by them and them alone. Any form of dissent, revision, initiative or compromise was seen as a form of distortion or dilution of the great ideals. Here, the upper-caste leaders once again are at play, using the directives and modus operandi of direct action, and turning what was meant to be a more egalitarian and democratic movement in reaction to parliamentary elitism, into an even more autocratic and insular structure of power. Men who boasted caste privilege were to be the creators of knowledge, men of equally high standing its interpreters and it was the lower castes that were once again expected to merely absorb their decrees in toto.

Mazumdar openly prohibited any attempts at forming any alliances with any other groups: “Various groups mouthing different revolutionary slogans are seeking to form a united front with Our Party. You, the revolutionary students and youth should not allow yourselves to be misled by this. Never forget that the real united front can only be one for carrying on a revolutionary armed struggle. To form a united front on any other basis means opening wide the doors of our Party, the fighting Party of armed struggle, and allowing counter-revolution to flood it” (Mazumdar 1970, p. 5). His words denote that Mazumdar actively considers every other political group, no matter how progressive, to be counter-revolutionary and thus present the potential to dilute the Naxalite cause. While the archetypical zealotry and insularity of these statements have already been pointed out previously, we once again find a curious similarity to the *Bhadralok* social ethos. Mazumdar’s doctrine makes it plain that the Naxalite revolutionaries are aware of their ‘special place’ in the path of their political revolution. Mazumdar considers himself and his group of revolutionary student cadre to be the exclusive harbingers of the revolutionary spirit, solely capable of instilling in the masses the necessary revolutionary fervour. They stand separate from other social and political groups and ideologies. They are conscious of the fact that they are different, they are separate from parliamentary politics which they consider to be elitist. They are separate from other urban political groups whom they consider to be bourgeois, they are separate from their predecessor the CPI(M) whom they consider to be revisionists. They are separate from the working classes because the latter can only become ‘truly’ revolutionary through their enlightenment, they are separate from even the peasantry whom they consider to be innately passive and conservative. Their own ideological dogma is the be-all and end-all of their goals. To mix or ally with other doctrines to a grave sin to Mazumdar. Almost in the same way that the social snobbery of the Bengal *Bhadralok* class prevents them from mixing with the lower classes and castes in order to insulate their own worldview, Mazumdar also intended to insulate his cadres from ‘ideological dilution’. The ‘new man’ that Mazumdar wanted to forge from the blood of the martyrs was insular, elitist, opinionated, and subservient to a singular dogma. Despite being far more direct, more crude and more violent than the parliamentary and bureaucratic attempts at reform, the Naxalite initiative at emancipating the lower strata of Bengali society still reeked of the *Bhadralok* saviour complex.

### **Naxalites in Rural Areas: The Dichotomy of Kinship vs Ideology**

Even in the rural front, the supporters and sympathizers of the Naxalite movement were unevenly distributed. When in 1967 some rural sections of West Bengal became strongholds of Maoist revolutionary activities, the peasants initially failed to understand that the Naxalites lacked cohesion. The urban-born cadres had nothing in common with the peasants with regard to religion, culture and language. Even the language of the urban Naxalite elite and their rural cadets differed profoundly. The plural nature

and the diverse caste structure of the rural society and its social-infrastructural tensions made it very doubtful that any consistent changes could be brought about. The Naxalites were ill-organized and scattered and therefore the lack of common cause with the rural populace became even more prominent as time went on. (Jawaid 1979, p. 203)

The CPI(ML) characterized the social relations in the Indian countryside as predominantly semi-feudal (Srinivasulu 2017, p. 48). Caste has been the site of coercion and oppression in rural Bengal. Caste-based occupations and caste hierarchy have determined the form of social and customary obligations of labour services that were rendered by the landless peasants and lower caste agrarian labourers to the landlords. The caste-based division and prejudices were more overt and distinctive in the rural communities in comparison to the urban ones. It is in these rural frontiers that the revolutionary dynamic of the Naxalite uprising was put to test. Theoretically speaking, the CPI(ML) initially sought to understand the potential for their operations in rural Bengal by assessing its society in class terms. In a typical fashion, they chalked out the social dynamics of the villages in simple, dualistic class terms that they were most familiar with. The landlords and the agrarian poor were classified into the two poles of social stratification with the landed peasantry comprising the intermediate layer. Srinivasulu opines that this form of categorization was simply inadequate in handling the nuances of social divisions that the rural peasantry was used to (Srinivasulu 2017, p. 47). In contrast to the routine theoretical assessments, the Naxalite leaders on the ground level were more pragmatic with their attempts at integrating into rural society. This task demanded a greater sensitivity to caste. They soon recognized that the caste divisions were the actual lived reality of the everyday life of the subaltern classes. This brought about a strange rift between the theoretical-ideological perspective and the actual mobilization politics at the grassroots level in the movement. Tactical advances in addressing the caste reality in practice were reflected in the successful mobilization of the most subaltern sections of the rural society. The Naxalite leaders who succeeded on this front effectively ignored the consternations of a rigid theoretical paradigm. It highlighted a spirit of compromise and initiative which runs contrary to the cult of absolute obedience that was prescribed by Charu Mazumdar, as discussed earlier. Srinivasulu, however, highlights the absence of a corresponding theoretical articulation of the caste question (Srinivasulu 2017, p. 47-48). It must be noted that what distinguishes communist parties from others is the fact that they tend to view politics and interpret political developments in a long-term historical context and read such developments in a dialectical theoretical mode. Therefore, while in practice the Naxalites were pragmatic enough to incorporate caste as an important factor in their efforts to mobilize the rural masses, the CPI(ML)'s intellectual bastions could never incorporate the said development into their theoretical paradigms, as doing so would be to accept that their parent doctrine of class-based revolutionary mobilization was simply inadequate in the rural Indian context.

### **Dissonance in Theory and Practice**

While the Naxalite leadership under Charu Mazumdar held that the peasants would constitute the mainstay of the Naxalite movement in what was essentially an agrarian revolution, there was a tacit understanding that the peasants could become a revolutionary force only after the revolutionary youth instilled in them the revolutionary spirit. The Naxalites considered the peasants to possess a revolutionary potential that could be only realized through the intermediation of the Naxalite intellectual bastions. According to this perspective, the rural peasantry was only a recipient of knowledge that was to be passed down to them by the intelligentsia whose primary task was enlightening the peasantry with Maoist ideology (Dasgupta 2006, p. 1924). Kanu Sanyal went so far as to admit in his Terai Report: "We now admit frankly that we had no faith in the heroic peasant masses...we, the petty-bourgeois leadership, imposed ourselves on the people. Whenever the heroic peasant masses took the initiative and wanted to do something, we of the petty-bourgeois origin opposed them" (Ghosh 1992, p. 359). According to

Rajeshwari Dasgupta, “the intellectuals within the movement established their ascendancy and perceived the peasantry to be a passive force” (Dasgupta 2006, p. 1925).

This perspective is inherently patronizing and condescending in nature. It infantilizes the peasantry and denies the peasantry and the members of the agrarian castes their own agency within the Naxalite movement. Naturally, this modus operandi received a lukewarm reception in the actual ground-level operations in the rural spheres (Duyker 1987, p. 101). The hardworking peasantry had no use nor respect for a bunch of college-educated urban youth lecturing them on obscure, complex and incomprehensible concepts and theories. In order to politicize the peasantry, Charu Mazumdar called upon the Naxalite youth to carry the teachings of Mao to the villages in which they were to be integrated (Dasgupta 2006, 1923). Ex-Naxalites such as Dilip Bagchi and Purnendu Chatterjee attest to the strong rapport that the cadres were able to build with the rural peasantry: Bagchi acknowledges that in most quarters sympathetic peasants provided the Naxalite cadres with food and shelter (Bagchi, p. 43), while Chatterjee recalls that the Naxalite youth would hold political classes with the rural labourers (Pandey, 2004, p. 94). However, such convoluted theories and complex political concepts would often fall upon deaf ears of the rural peasantry, who had spent most of their lives concerning themselves with simpler and more pertinent concerns such as how to make a daily living. The cadres often found far better reception after they started to integrate themselves “with the local language and culture” (Bagchi, p. 43) and started discussing their personal problems first before gradually shifting towards politics (Dasgupta 2006, 1923).

To further establish the dissonance between the ideological ordinances and the ground realities of the Naxalite operations, Edward Duyker, in his book, *Tribal Guerrillas: The Santals of West Bengal and the Naxalite Movement* (Duyker, 1987), highlights how the Santals of Birbhum and Midnapore were not simply passive followers of the directives of the Naxalite high command but rather they would actively negotiate the terms of Naxalism in order to further their own local interests (Dasgupta 2006, 1924). Duyker states, that for the Santals the critical point of focus was not to hitch their lot behind some day-dream ideal of revolution that some urban college-educated intellectuals had conjured up but rather a strategic alliance with the Naxalites for “the ideological expression” of their own goals that would further “tribal self-determination and security” (Duyker 1987, p. 101). In Duyker’s words, the Santals were not interested in being reduced to “being pawns of ‘dikku’ (outsider) radicals” (Duyker 1987, p. 101). Duyker’s work shows that bonds of family and kinship were a key factor that determined alliances in the hot spots of Birbhum and Midnapore and not the directives of the Naxalite leadership that urged the rural peasantry to organize themselves on the ideological basis of class (Duyker 1987, p. 14). Kinship ties also determined the hierarchy of power and leadership in the Naxalite movement in the tribal areas, where the Santals reorganized themselves along lines of the natural authority of elders in their family, a dynamic that they were more used to. Duyker states that the Santal peasants in Midnapore “provided food and shelter to the Santal activists out of kinship obligations rather than for ideological reasons” (Duyker 1987, p. 104). Furthermore, the Naxalite activists had adopted a particular kind of violent tactic that was known as “annihilation of class enemies” - a term popularized by Charu Mazumdar to describe the need for “liquidating the feudal classes in the countryside (Bannerjee 2006, p. 3160). However, many cadres who went to these tribal villages found that the peasantry there was unwilling to massacres and killings as the urban leadership had intended (Pandey 2004, p. 77). Here, the closely knit nature of their village communities and strong kinship bonds prevented these peasants from killing and harming members of their own communities on the mere say-so of a bunch of urban upper-caste elites.

Thus, what we see here is effectively the subaltern peasantry and the tribal locals wresting control out of the hands of an insular high command composed entirely of educated upper-caste men of privilege. This is the instance where the Naxalite movement becomes truly democratic, not through the design of the intellectual ranks of the CPI(ML) but rather through initiatives taken at the grassroots level. The Naxalite

ideology demanded that its followers would be primarily loyal to the party but in the case of tribal peasantry their loyalty primarily lay with their family; their allegiance to the Naxal movement and its ideology was contingent on how that would benefit their tribal community (Dasgupta 2006, 1923-1924). We have already discussed in length regarding Charu Mazumdar's autocratic style of leadership. Here, we witness how his 'my way or the highway' approach was hurled into the highway by the tribal peasantry who could care less about his high and mighty ideals.

The Naxalite cadres in the Birbhum and Midnapore areas had to refine their strategies because of "local considerations that often went against the established Naxalite directives" (Dasgupta 2006, 1924). The students had to appeal to the tribal sentiments by propping up their legendary figures of Birsa Munda, and Shidu and Kanu. Former Naxalite Pradip Banerjee says that the cadres had to assure the tribals that they (the Naxalites) were the ideological successors of Sidhu and Kanu and that "the 'New Democracy' was no different from what they (Shidu and Kanu) had fought for" (Duyker 1987, p. 118). This illustrates two aspects of the Naxalite leadership in the rural, tribal domains. One, the natives of these lands cared little about the ideals and personas of Charu Mazumdar or even Mao. Instead, they preferred interpreting the movement based on their own traditions and ideals. Secondly, it also highlights how the thoughts and theories of the CPI(ML) were diametrically different from the life experiences and worlds of the very same peasantry that they intended to make the mainstays of their movement. The tribals felt a stronger personal connection towards leaders like Jangal Santhal and Gunadhar Murmu because the tribals shared a common social base with them, compared to leaders like Charu Mazumdar and Kanu Sanyal. There are numerous instances where they outright rejected the Naxalite leadership and the direction provided by the urban students and intelligentsia. For example, Biplab Dasgupta goes so far as to comment that "the tribals resented the leadership of the students and others from the plains and claimed leadership for themselves" (Dasgupta 1974, p. 52). In the villages of Jhargram and West-Midnapore, the tribals complained that the students were trying to dominate them" (Dasgupta 1974, p. 58). This illustrates the example of a 'political vanguard' that was totally out of sync with the very people that they sought to fight on behalf of. At the end of the day, the lower-caste peasantry understood their own interests far better, than the urban revolutionaries could ever presume to.

## **In Conclusion**

According to Sarbani Bandopadhyay, if any regime had secured the dominance of the *bhadralok* in West Bengal it would have been the Left Front regime because "it made illegitimate the language of caste" (Bandopadhyay 2012, 73). The CPI(ML) in this equation, became the renegades, a section of radicals disillusioned with the proceedings of a *bhadralok* regime that postured as the champions of the underprivileged but in the end, it too could not rise beyond their own middle-class consciousness despite their zeal. At the end of the day, no amount of voluntary hardship will ever negate one's innate social privileges. The act of selfless revolutionaries migrating over to rural life and spreading their revolutionary consciousness amongst the rural masses is still an exceptionally patronizing position. It becomes upliftment from above rather than emancipation from within. The only way that such emancipation is possible is by enabling the lower castes to have a voice of their own, to allow them a forum to participate in political struggle for their own rights and political entitlements instead of trying to do something on their behalf. Such representation was only visible in India during the 2011 assembly election with the Matua community fighting on their own behalf. This development was the first time that caste dynamics figured into West Bengali electoral politics in such an overt manner. It was the dreaded nightmare of the traditional communist political bastions, a dilution of their imposed binary of class struggle.

Throughout the course of our study, we see that even at the hands of the more radical CPI(ML) caste remained a contentious issue. In a strange, it was both more reactionary and emancipatory with regard to lower caste agency at the same time. Unlike the states of Bihar, Andhra, Jharkhand etc., the caste

dynamics in West Bengal are expressed in a far more covert manner. Caste hierarchies and caste discrimination in Bengal are hidden behind euphemisms between the binary of the *Bhadralok-Chotolok*. The Naxalite champions of the 'New Democracy' lacked self-awareness about their own caste privileges. Despite their years of experience in organizing peasant agitations, their strong commitment to the revolutionary cause, and spending decades demonstrating perseverance in the face of extreme hardships, there is no denying the fact that both the key leaders of the Naxal movement; Charu Mazumdar and Kanu Sanyal, were born and raised in positions of privilege. Mazumdar was born in a Zamindar family in Siliguri while Sanyal was raised in a middle-class household in Kurseong (Paul 2014). Both the ideals and the prescribed modus operandi of the Naxalite movement were impositions from above. The upper castes created the dictums and lower castes, whether it was the 'urban hooligans' or the rural peasantry, were meant to follow them. When it became truly democratic, it was mostly through a spontaneous initiative taken at their lower rungs rather than through the volition of their high command. Sumanta Banerjee (1980, p. 71 & 256) points out that the distinctive feature of the Naxalite youth's violent activities in urban space was the spontaneous nature of most of their acts. Whether it was the wanton acts of hooliganism, attacks on government offices or educational institutions or the denigration and vandalization of the images of Gandhi, Tagore, Vidyasagar and Vivekananda; the youth took their own initiative to express their agency. Likewise, we have already discussed the instances where the tribal peasants deviated from the Naxalite high command's directives to reclaim the movement in their own way. Any political movement that is extremely centralized runs the risk of becoming totalitarian. The Naxal movement, in effect, de-centralized itself as it progressed. At the end of the day, it is the dissonance between the ideals and theory on one end and the live experiences of the low-rung 'soldiers' on the other that exposes the true caste dynamics of the Naxalite movement and in both urban and rural areas, we witness the privileged intellectuals trying to maintain firm control over a movement that was, in reality, a spontaneous conflagration of peasant unrest and those very same lower-caste soldiers pushing aside the hegemony of the revolutionary '*Bhadralok*'.

The Naxal movement continues to remain a complex and controversial fixture in the political history of India. In many ways it has brought forth the issues and grievances of tribal and rural peasantry into the limelight, issues that the Indian government and society were all too glad to ignore until this violent uprising forced them to take notice. However, upon analyzing the caste dynamics of this uprising, the drawbacks of a 'vanguardist' movement in accomplishing caste emancipation become obvious. For the lower castes of Bengal to truly empower themselves, they must be afforded a platform to formulate and articulate their own dreams, wants and political aspirations, instead of a small group of elite outsiders attempting to act as their saviours.

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