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The significance of Naxalbari: accounts of personal involvement and politics in West Bengal

Occasional paper

The significance of Naxalbari :[1]
Accounts of personal involvement and politics in West Bengal

Introduction

This article is part of a project on politics and the effect of the Naxalite movement on perceptions and political involvement among ordinary urban Bengalis. It therefore deals with accounts of personal involvement in the politics of the radical left in Calcutta, and explores 'Naxalbari' in relation to organisational and leadership ideals, personal sacrifice, and local politics in retrospect. Based on interviews with former activists, the 'Naxalbari path' of revolution is described in hindsight, and a particular form of narrative interpreted in the light of personal as well as cultural expectations. These are depicted as part of a political process of 'democratisation', during which the space for a new form of mass party politics emerged.

Though West Bengal is among the more stable states in the Indian republic since the Left Front government led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)) came to power in 1977, this has not always been the case. On the contrary, the decades leading up to the emergence of the ultra-Left were fraught with conflict and violent clashes of political opponents (see Franda 1971). With the Maoist movement, which became known as the Naxal movement or 'Naxalbari', militancy and terrorism reached an unprecedented high and not surprisingly images of the following years of political violence are still present in discussions of 'democracy' and 'politics'.

Among the Bengali middle-class, contemporary politics are interpreted through the filter of these experiences, whether Naxalbari is seen as a

period of 'terror', or a prelude to the state repression extended during the Emergency. 'Naxalbari' and references to the 'Naxal movement' occupy a special place in the imagination of the Bengali middle-classes, and provoke mixed responses in contemporary urban Bengal. Although intensive discussions of the events, about the involvement and effects of the 'period of unrest' or 'terror' are rare, even a cursory glance at recent political debates and participation in conversations about politics in West Bengal reveal that 'Naxalbari' has become a metaphor for political violence and state repression. In political speeches and publications, it signifies violent politics, disorder, party rivalry, and the need for a strong state, and is evoked by ruling as well as opposition parties to either defend or denounce the 'law and order situation' in the state.

Within this discourse the rise of the CPI(M) is represented as the result of Naxalbari – either as a necessary effect of militant policies, or a reaction to the suppression of civil rights during the 1970s. Proponents of the first view, most prominently members of the ruling CPI(M), often downplay the violence perpetrated by party members and blame the state and its counterinsurgency measures. However, equally often the support of local communities for the militants is pointed out, sometimes by the same people, and it is emphasised that Naxals did not experience any social discrimination as a result of their actions. Thus, whereas Naxalbari is often cited by leaders of various parties as an exemplary period of politically-motivated violence, ordinary Bengali middle-class citizens of Calcutta may even refer to the positive aspects of Naxal policies. In various contexts the generally accepted well-meaning, paternalistic view of young idealistic cadres misled by older leaders serves equally often as a pretext for further remarks and verbal challenges of CPI(M) rule. Thus, though the CPI(M) successfully portrayed itself as a guarantor of law and order in the state, many blame the leadership for what they see as a loss of control over cadres, which in their view explains the decline in public services and increased corruption.

Naxalbari: Events

The Naxalbari movement was inspired by a revolt in north Bengal and is well-documented by observers and former Naxalites.[2] In 1967, tribal workers forcibly took land on tea plantations in the Naxalbari area of the Siliguri subdivision under the leadership of the local CPI(M). This was, as various commentators pointed out, not a sudden outburst but the result of long-standing communist agitations in the region (see Ray 1988; Basu 2000). Bengali communists had organised cadres in the region from the 1930s onwards, and could now draw on the experience of various mass struggles, most prominently the Tebhaga movement. In the meantime, sharp divisions within the Communist Party had caused a first split between the CPI and the CPI(M). The events in Naxalbari increased the strength of conflicts in the CPI(M), when those who supported the armed uprising and the confrontational politics of leaders Kanu Sanyal and Charu Majumdar opposed the policies of the United Front Government, in which the party was involved. The uprising in Naxalbari increased the pressure on the United Front, which already had to deal with numerous other problems, including a food crisis, protests over tram fares, student strikes and labour disputes. Soon the failure to solve the law-and-order problems led the Governor to dissolve the elected government, while in the meantime comrades in favour of a more radical line, especially regarding land reforms, started a revolt within the CPI(M). Their position was strengthened when the Beijing leadership acknowledged the 'spring thunder' of 'revolutionary struggle' in the region.[3] The support of these Chinese observers provided the background against which a further split among the Indian Communists occurred, when supporters of the 'Naxalbari path' formed the All India Committee of Communist Revolutionaries (AICCR) in 1968. As more and more organised Communists sided with the rebel faction in the

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[2] This necessarily brief summary does not highlight all aspects of the movement, or even the most important events. For detailed accounts of the emergence of the movement and politics of the Left in India and Bengal more generally, see Franda 1971; Nossiter 1988; and Basu 2000. For accounts of the ideology, structure and repression of the Naxal movement itself see Dasgupta 1974 and Ray 1988. A webpage containing relevant documents including translations of most of Charu Majumdar's writings on strategy is provided by the Maoist Documentation Project at http://www.maoism.org/misc/india.

[3] Chakrabarti provides details of the Chinese involvement with the Naxals, which included ideological guidance and travel to China, and discusses the widespread interest in everything Chinese in the context of Bengali novels and plays (Chakrabarti 1990).

Bengal unit, the next step was the foundation of a separate party (CPI(ML) - Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist)), which was supported by leaders from different regions. While campaigns to recruit landless labourers and peasants proceeded in rural Bengal, Calcutta became the centre of urban Maoist activities and guerrilla warfare. Hundreds of students joined the CPI(ML) under the leadership of Charu Majumdar, who inspired the youth to follow the example of China's Red Guards. According to the Naxal ideology India was not only comparable to pre-revolutionary China (ruled by petty-feudal landlords supported by a bourgeois leadership), but had reached a stage where a key element of a successful revolutionary strategy was the formation of cadre groups in the cities and the mobilisation of peasants for militant struggle. Young, mostly male cadres in Calcutta were recruited directly from schools and colleges, where campaigns to boycott examinations, ransack educational institutions and attack teachers and professors were under way. But soon these comparatively common forms of protest were dominated by the 'annihilation line', which proclaimed that through the killing of 'class enemies' including teachers, professors, policemen and politicians, the revolution would progress. Following the example of the Red Guards, the activities were planned and conducted by small groups and only loosely co-ordinated with the various committees, until the increasing pressure of counterinsurgency measures made rigid organisation necessary. As more and more areas in the city came under the control of the Naxal groups, the Central government led by Indira Gandhi dissolved the elected state parliament, and 'President's rule' was imposed, which persisted until the Left Front came into power in 1977. With the launch of massive counterinsurgency measures and under pressure from rival parties, the movement deteriorated rapidly, and the CPI(ML) ceased to exist as a political force in West Bengal following the death of Charu Majumdar in police custody in 1972. Within a couple of months thousands of alleged Naxals were arrested and many remained in prison until the CPI(M)-led Left Front granted a general amnesty in 1977. The majority were held on terrorist charges but trials did rarely come to court.[4]

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[4] It is significant to note the number of prisoners involved here - Nossiter states that by 1977 about 18,000 arrests had been made under the 'Maintenance of Internal Security Act' in West Bengal (Nossiter 1988:136).

Remembering Naxalbari

The CPI(M), which came to power as part of a Left Front government in the aftermath of Naxalbari and the Emergency in 1977, has since then received much praise for the relative stability which followed the 'unrest' during the decades leading up to Naxalbari and the politics of democratic reform initiated (see for example Kohli 1987). The experience of the Naxal movement did not only affect the youths who were involved in the political parties, many of whom were imprisoned, vanished or went underground. It also drew their families, neighbours and friends into politics, who experienced violent party rivalry, police raids, abuse and violence at the hands of police personnel on a daily basis. The political development was accompanied by the more mundane complications of everyday life Calcuttans were forced to put up with, like the suspended public transport in certain areas, disrupted electricity and water supplies, extortion and dysfunctional educational institutions. Thus, although a sizable minority of Calcuttans were actively involved, an even larger number witnessed clashes between parties and the extensive counterinsurgency measures employed by the state, and participated indirectly in the politics of the time. Not surprisingly official accounts of Naxalbari differ significantly from recollections marked as 'private', where a variety of personal representations and contradictory assumptions exist.

One common way to think about 'Naxalbari' is through written sources, many of which have long since become part of the canon of what is called 'Naxal literature' in Bengali (*naxal sahitya*), or the scholarly writings on the emergence, significance and strategies of various left-wing parties (see Franda 1971; Dasgupta 1974; Ghosh 1974).

As Iguarta and Paez have demonstrated with reference to the Spanish civil war, works of art are particularly useful to provide a symbolic reconstruction of a violent political past, and provide the ground for coherent, readily available and intergenerational collective memories of traumatic social events (Iguarta and Paez 1997). With respect to the Naxal movement, literature plays a major role in the construction of 'Naxalbari', as autobiographical accounts of political activism have became seminal texts not only among those who consume highbrow literature, but can be accessed in the form of movies and popular plays (i.e. Mahasveta Devi's 'Mother of 1084'). These works of art represent

part of the shared framework through which different generations have interpreted the period and political activism in general. Not surprisingly they help to perpetuate various myths, for instance the notion that most Naxal activists belonged to the elite among the students of the time and therefore maintained an elitist outlook. However, memories of political events like 'Naxalbari' are not only present in the form of 'literature', or the learnt dispute of social scientists, but are transmitted as part of family histories and recollections of political involvement among ordinary people. And this includes the ways that former activists, their families and neighbours, whose personal histories, experiences of politics and maps of their environment resonate with memories of Naxalbari, talk about it and evaluate its impact on their lives.

In the course of this article I will take a different route and focus on the accounts of former activists and their recollections thirty years after the event. Many of these could usefully be interpreted together with the testimonies of personal involvement presented below in conjunction with the growing body of work on political memory, historical crisis, and state policies towards particular groups of citizens (Butalia 1988; Chatterjee 1992; Tarlo 1995; Panjabi 1997; Menon and Bhasin 1998; Kaul 2001). But there exist considerable differences, as the representations below differ from the cited examples of work on crisis, political upheaval and memory in that I am neither concerned with the facts, nor are these accounts testimonies of a marginalised group which has been silenced. They do, however, draw attention to the basis of processes which constitute certain memories and forms of commemoration as obvious and legitimate, and others as subaltern, and illuminate the ways in which 'privatised memories' can still be used to reconsider political processes.

Those in doubt regarding the relevance of a project dealing with memories of 'Naxalbari' are advised to take a cursory glance at newspaper articles published before the elections in 2001, and will surely be convinced that at the very least they exhibit a well worn trope for decay, political instability and unjustified attacks on rival parties. But the importance can be even more readily discerned during brief conversations with middle-class Bengalis, who refer to this recent political history in a wide range of contexts. Compared to the polished autobiographies of writers and film makers, the events relating to

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political activism and events discussed below are dispersed and often less self-consciously presented. Thus, for example, in conversations with middle-aged housewives about different types of marriage, one of them explained to me that her marriage had been a so-called love marriage. When asked why she had married without consulting her parents she replied that during the 'time of the Naxals' everybody just 'revolted'. In another instance, a friend was going through photographs of a wedding reception with her adolescent daughter, to whom she pointed out that the bearded young man seated next to her was her *mama* (mother's younger brother), who was shot during the Naxal period. Though the presence of other family members normally prevents more detailed discussions of political issues, which are generally seen as 'dirty', even younger people are aware that the present is still constructed as the aftermath of Naxalbari. The metaphor is particularly prominent before elections, during which all parties represent themselves as guarantors of law-and-order and evoke the history of militant politics in West Bengal as a case in point (see Mitra 2001).

Personal involvement

Personal involvement can take multiple forms, and by focussing on the activists the accounts presented below are certainly more politically pronounced than the more anecdotal reference in other types of narratives. However, the fact that so many were involved in the movement at the time ensures that these accounts reflect many common sense views held by Calcuttans more generally, and it is in this sense that these personal stories, and the high-culture treatments of the subject are part of everyday political discourses at least among the middle-classes.

As Halbwachs observes, historical memory or the narration of national events rest as much on lived history as on personal memory, which is particularly apparent in accounts of political involvement (Halbwachs 1980:56).

In the accounts of former activists (not though of those still actively involved) the political themes, i.e. the question of authority and leadership, are embedded in the evaluation of personal relationships with kin. In all cases political involvement resulted from discussions with parents or relatives living in the same household, who were depicted as

role models. Furthermore, their guidance and values, rather than their own political activities, are cited as reasons for individual young men to join politics. In a typical example one of those interviewed described his relationship with his mother and gave an impression of the middle-class family environment in which many activists grew up in his own words:

'I was born in a middle-class family of Calcutta in 1952. We were not affluent, but we had a smooth lifestyle. My mother was a nationalist and had a genuine love for literature, that had influenced us all to come out of the narrow domestic boundary. Even after a day-long hard domestic labour, she used to read some sort of literature… I can remember, I used to argue with her. And this process had ultimately injected some literary taste in me as well. The life of us - myself, my brothers and sisters - six in all - moved around our mother. My father served in a British firm - he was a meticulous professional, and remained aloof to household affairs. My elder brother is an engineer, he was a brilliant student and was never involved in politics. After graduation he had founded a small scale industry. Hard labour and professional skill brought success to him. The next is a lecturer in philosophy in a Calcutta college, who once was involved in fancy politics and at present keeps a distance from politics. The third born was deeply involved in Naxalite politics, had great potential and resigned from service for the cause of politics. At present he leads the life of a private tutor - and that's all. His, as well as my participation in the Naxalite movement had invited oppression by the administration on our family, which virtually destroyed normal life. And as a consequence, my mother died a premature death of infinite mental stress. From my early boyhood days I was a sort of romantic fellow, who has a mystic world of his own. This compelled me to get thoroughly involved in the political whirl in such a boyhood state. Browsing different leftist journals, I had a hazy idea of socialism. There was the influence of my brothers on me. Above all, the food movement in Bengal and the Leftist movement in support of the heroic struggle of the great Vietnamese people had allured me to join a popular political movement'.

Some dominant themes, which still frame the assessment of personal involvement into the Naxalbari movement are outlined: the continuity of nationalist thought, which led him and others to develop into political activists and the tension between devotion to parents, filial duties and

the individual decision to join the militants. This commitment did, however, substitute one type of authority for another, since many of the leaders were teachers and professors, and Charu Majumdar himself was revered as a father figure:

'I got myself associated with the new organisation in 1967, which was formed right after the incident of Naxalbari, to assist the struggle and promote the ideas it upheld. Its name was 'Naxalbari Krishal Sangram Sahayag Committee' (Committee for Providing Assistance to the Peasant Struggle of Naxalbari). To be specific, the committee was dedicated to organise the peasants' struggle and propagate the politics of Naxalbari and to unite the communist revolutionaries of India. It was the moment that I met comrade Charu Majumdar for the first time at a meeting where his overwhelming personality thoroughly inspired me. It was then I decided to dedicate myself to the cause of revolution. I started working with the local unit of the committee. Our specific task was to (1) exhibit posters, (2) to organise street corner meetings, (3) selling political newspapers, (4) establishing political organisations among the working people, (5) organise working-class movements and (6) support the workers in the movement. Apart from these we held political classes and debates to enhance our knowledge and consciousness. Thus our organisation developed quite rapidly. We had something new to say, we stood firmly beside people in struggle. So, people in general were eager to listen to us. Gradually our effort had culminated in forming a new organisation, namely "Coordination Committee of the Communist Revolutionaries". Our political views too became much more consolidated'.

Consequently, among the themes touched upon by him and others are the inter-generational conflicts within the party and the role of leaders as teachers, who can either bring enlightenment to the pupil, or ruin his developing character.

Education and family: self sacrifice and self worth

Though many of the senior party members were fulltime CPI(M) workers when they joined the movement, a large number were employed in educational institutions, and used their positions to recruit pupils and students.

The pursuit of education and the value attributed to the participation in the life of educational institutions is beyond doubt one of the hallmarks of Bengali middle-class identity. It is therefore not surprising that the majority of informants claim that their interest in politics was stimulated by positive or negative experiences of formal education. But during the 1960s, although high school education was a passport to a successful career in government service or a private firm for some, the prospects for the majority of pupils and students graduating from smaller colleges and universities in West Bengal were bleak. Sporadic outbreaks of violence and 'student unrest' had become common and protests included marches, *gheraos*, and violent fights among rival student organisations. But unlike today, students were expected to be involved in political debate, associations and activities, and many guardians as well as teachers agreed that learning and knowledge were increasingly narrowly defined by degrees and success in a corrupt and highly unpredictable system of job allocations.

But the fact that the activists were pupils and students has to be seen as more than a political statement, and the consequences of political activism extended beyond the sphere of student protest: since activism was not limited to the school and the campus, it affected the family life of the activists in irreversible ways.

This was particularly serious in the case of lower middle-class parents, most of whom struggled hard to provide a son or daughter with higher education, who began to realise that students involved in the new radical movements were prepared to forego education and careers for the sake of revolution. This realisation was followed by years of uncertainty about the safety of sons and daughters, worries about their future, and in many instances the impact their activities had on others in the home. Not surprisingly the rupture associated with 'Naxalbari' in autobiographical accounts is not confined to the period of political

unrest and repression, but had an impact on social relations in the wider sense and is very often associated with conflicts within families. These stem in many cases from the fact that students were willing to make sacrifices, which fed the worst fears of parents, namely losing the support of a son in old age.

This theme is pervasive in kinship relations more generally and is, as Lamb pointed out, often used to characterise modernity and change (Lamb 2000: 88-99). Sacrifice for the sake of politics, which had been largely acceptable in the context of the nationalist movement, became in the context of 'Naxalbari' among the Calcutta middle-class, a signifier of personal failure, of 'a lost generation' – wasted, as some activists explained it in English.

Thus, with reference to Naxalbari, the notion of domestic conflict, and the lost opportunity to live a more fulfilled life within one's family, is noteworthy.

In a typical example, L., a soft-spoken man in his early fifties is the youngest of three sons, and is today employed as an administrator in a research institute. He lives with his brothers and their families as well as his wife and son in a spacious house in North Calcutta. Like many others, he interprets the movement and his own involvement almost entirely in terms of personal relationships.

After the formation of the CPI(ML) he decided to devote his life to the party and the revolution, and left school following the example of the Red Guards only months before his final exam was due. But although the boycott of examinations was a strategy propagated by the CPI(ML), he had to rethink his decision when his mother threatened to commit suicide. Confronted with his dilemma, his superiors in the party decreed that it was a sign of strength to do his filial duty and resist the temptation of selfish rebellion.[5] He reluctantly obeyed the party order to put his mother first, and followed his comrades into a more adventurous life and ultimately to prison, once he had completed his exams. After his return from prison, he married and the couple reluctantly moved in with L.'s family. Like most former Naxal activists, L. experienced

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[5] Though L. insisted that had it not been on his own initiative the party would have never interfered with the individual decision, this and comparable instances demonstrate how the CPI(ML) established a hold over the personal lives of its members.

financial hardship and depended on his father for some time, during which he was engaged in attempts to mobilise peasants in another state. But he had to give up because of the difficulties he and his comrades encountered in supporting themselves in remote villages, and he comments on this by saying:

'This was the hardest bit, I had already been back to ask my father for money to support myself, and it was still not enough to survive there, so we had to give up'

Upon his return, he joined a private firm as a clerk but had great difficulty in adjusting to this inferior position and went back to college. After completion of a BA he found employment in a research institute and the couple had a son which, in his words, made all 'these problems much more easy to bear'.

In this as in other cases difficulties in the family during the time of involvement and imprisonment were enhanced by disillusion and conflicts in the aftermath of release from prison. Apart from a small elite, who went into politics after the amnesty of 1977, former Naxalites experienced financial hardship and social problems after their return to 'normal life'. Though accepted as victims of political persecution by most, individual suffering was a common result of aborted education. Excluded from competing for the much sought-after government positions, many were forced to set up small businesses, in some cases with funds belonging to the CPI(ML).[6]

This was, however, also precisely the crucial point where differences between groups of former activists appeared, since those belonging to the older generation often returned to an active role in legal politics, with high incomes and promising careers, because their former allies during earlier struggles, notably the CPI(M), were now in government. Their younger comrades, on the other hand, attempted to adjust and many failed to turn personal political experience into political capital.

Organisation, leadership and authority

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[6] The party extracted money from businessmen, especially those belonging to the Marwari community, and is said to have received moderate funding from the Communist Party of China (Chakrabarti 1990:75).

Recollections of political involvement in the movement, whether presented in written form or in the course of interviews, are often based on the contrasting representation of an older generation of leaders and the younger activists, a relationship which forms a crucial part of common discourses on victimisation. Many activists shared the opinion that gullible and idealistic youngsters were made into reluctant revolutionaries by a ruthless leadership of Communists who joined the CPI in the 1930s and 1940s. These (almost exclusively male) cadres were experienced organisers and were well-connected within the Indian Left. Consequently the difference in age and their skills and experience formed the basis for the ubiquitous hierarchy within the party. Leadership of youth, and the expectations towards those who deal with young people more generally, are a running theme in recollections of 'Naxalbari' since, in the eyes of the public, youths were seduced into an increasingly violent movement.

The questions of leadership, authoritarian measures, and personal cult, have been debated ever since the collapse of party organisation (see Ghosh 1974:95-139), and there can be no doubt about the hierarchical nature of the general organisation of the CPI(M) or its predecessors. But although the leadership defended the activities of young cadres and sometimes encouraged them, the activists interviewed also agreed that the senior members never managed to control all the campaigns carried out by the hundreds of small groups formed during the early stages of their political campaign. In fact, many of the policy statements issued by Charu Majumdar testify to the action-driven nature of the organisation, which justified some events only in hindsight. Former leaders acknowledged the disciplinary problems and futile nature of their attempts to control the enthusiastic younger comrades. But in the course of discussions with former activists, two striking tendencies were apparent: first, that they interpreted this leniency and propagation of strategies like the 'annihilation campaign' and 'revenge killings' as gross neglect of their leaders' duties as seniors, rather than moral failure; and second, that they today argue that the party as a whole was ill-prepared for the massive attacks by rival parties, police and army personnel. It became apparent in the conversations with activists as well as during discussions with former leaders that criticism of the leadership is not directed against the latter's authority, but at the failure of their guidance.

This emphasis on personal integrity among the Naxals was in all accounts related to the way they treated younger cadres, in particular during the long prison sentences many endured. The ideology of sharing explored by Ray (Ray 1988) was pervasively expressed in the context of everyday practices like food exchanges, and sharing of accommodation, which according to the then junior activists were signs of a truly revolutionary spirit.[7] Sharing provided closeness between younger and older cadres, and the bonds formed during the recruitment phase were strengthened in the course of underground organisation and imprisonment. Furthermore, during this later phase, these intimate relationships were extended to include the families of those imprisoned, who often dealt with the police and prison authorities collectively. For the activists, family and party began to overlap, both drew on the same kind of morality and hierarchy and commanded the same type of loyalty. This was aptly expressed by an otherwise extremely critical former cadre, who commented on the morality involved by citing a common phrase: 'Just as one should not drink water after consuming fruits to avoid irritations, one should not bring what is said inside the house into the outside world'. Loyalty and trust are seen by commentators like Ray as reasons for the emergence of the CPI(ML), because lack of trust '…not in its theoretical or strategic capabilities or perspectives, but its *morality*…' (Ray 1988:117) brought the CPI down. These kind of evaluations have entered the general political discourse in Bengal (see Dasgupta 1996; Banerjee 1999), where personal integrity is seen as a prerequisite to successful leadership, though not to politics *per se* (see Ruud 2000).

The importance of the special ethos allegedly found among former activists was discussed on numerous occasions in the course of more private conversations, for instance with former activist D. who, after raising several very serious critical points with regard to leadership and authority, remarked about one of his former superiors, that in spite of his mistakes he deserved respect because instead of accepting funds offered by the party, he had relied on sporadic support of individual comrades since his release from prison.[8] This comment also reflects

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[7] Ray explores the notions of sharing involved with reference to kinship and shared substances, which informed the rhetoric of revenge killings (Ray 1988:66-67).

[8] Party funds are still available to members in need.

another common theme, namely the problematic position of many Naxalites in the aftermath of their release from prison.

The CPI(M) did partly manage to insert itself positively into this discourse by emphasising the absence of corruption among its leaders, in particular the Chief Minister Jyoti Basu, who for a long time was depicted even by Congress supporters as 'not corrupt' in the narrow sense.

New political practice

It is often assumed that although the nationalist movement provided the model for the Naxalite forms of organisation and ideal of sacrifice, their internationalism and hostility to the agencies of the state implied an anti-nationalist stance (i.e. Chakrabarti 1990:3).

However, discussions with former Naxalites suggest that their use of nationalist imagery, ideologies related to earlier struggles, and sense of political commitment, enhanced the importance of debates on political leadership and nationalist heritage.

Looking back, former Naxal activists see the Naxal movement as a continuation of earlier struggles including the nationalist movement, and represent their own political views based on a critical evaluation of nationalist motifs and ideas of political participation. If the 'student society' (*chatra samaj*) of Calcutta had acquired a reputation as the centre of a cultural elite and political avant-garde during colonial times (see Berwick 1995), and had been at the forefront of nationalist politics in Bengal, the typical organisational forms and particular discursive practices that had emerged in this environment were part and parcel of left-wing politics.

This has been pointed out in come detail by Dipesh Chakrabarty, who asserts that a culture of democratic discussion emerged. Sudipta Kaviraj desrcribes how from the 1940s onwards leisure spaces like parks and coffee houses become the location of such discourse, frequented by male, bourgeois Bengalis (Chakrabarty 1999:132-135; Kaviraj 1997). However, though I would agree that new forms of 'democratic' speech developed, and students' meeting places became the training ground for intimate intellectual collectivity as practised in 'adda', I would maintain that other forms of public speech like the talk given, the lecture performed and the competitive formal presentation

were equally popular among the same group of middle-class men. Indeed the importance of this type of 'oratory' as a practice opposed to *adda*, was emphasised by the Naxal activists interviewed and non-activist observers alike. Secondly, it appeared from the data that Maoist political practice relied on specific forms of sociability, since the former cadres maintain that it was the opposite of the 'free-flowing conversation' of the *adda* which provided the space for participation (pace Chakrabarty 1999). In their representation and the preliminary findings from interviews with non-activists, it was the 'practical', intentional direction of Maoist talk and forms of socialising that attracted those who joined – again an element appropriated rather successfully by the CPI(M).

A further important aspect of the new political practices represented here was the local appeal of meetings and readings devoted to specific subjects, which were intentionally addressing practical concerns of specific people and localities.

In the view of the former Maoists and others, their strength lay in the local embeddedness of their organisation and the resulting involvement in particular problems. Thus, I would argue that the Naxal period and the accompanying violence are part of the larger development of a discourse on Left wing politics as organised local participation and a history of 'getting things done' based on local organisation. This associational political space was again successfully exploited by the CPI(M), but in the view of the activists and many others it first developed in the course of the Naxal movement.[9]

Various authors commented on the local involvement of Naxals in particular areas (i.e. Dasgupta 1974:102; Ray 2001), and to date the political organisation of local residents to tackle common grievances is among the most outstanding features of CPI(M) mobilisation in West Bengal. For the Naxals, local links were of prime importance, since they depended on their families, friends and neighbours, and residents of various localities for their own safety. This perspective can be traced in most of the accounts of political involvement, for instance in the comments by D., a Naxal of the older generation, who received me and

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[9] The fact that associational life predates the CPI(M), and that in particular the refugees from East Bengal joined mass-based organisations under the banner of various Left-leaning associations notwithstanding, the process is represented as a more recent phenomenon.

a former comrade in his house in a neighbourhood of north Calcutta, owned by him and his brothers:

Sitting on the concrete floor in the traditional reception room, he proudly recounted the time when Charu Majumdar himself was hiding here in the family home. According to him, this was possible because he and his comrades could count on the support of the whole neighbourhood:

'In this locality, everybody supported us, we could go to any house and hide and the women would feed us and the men would guide those who searched for shelter through the backyard. This used to be a no-go area for the police, they dreaded coming here and we were always warned long before they actually approached the house […]. It is true, we lost the support of the masses due to unwise revenge killings, but even then many provided us with money and food. Though they said that they were not behind the violence directed against policemen and teachers they sympathised with our plight, and we were like sons and brothers. At that time everybody wanted change.'

Small groups of political activists, often Naxalites depending on pre-existing networks in specific neighbourhoods, took on the concerns of the majority of the residents in the area. One unit could for instance consist exclusively of recruits from a particular locality in North Calcutta, who were linked as students and teachers, and worked successfully together, because they could build upon a strong degree of trust and loyalty among themselves and extended these relationships to the local residents. In turn, they engaged in activities which were designed to drive out local criminals, who in many localities dominated the political scene and controlled access to services supplied by state agencies, the prime targets of different forms of urban protest.

Conclusion

The 1970s have been described as the period when the 'fragmentation' of the political landscape provided the basis for conflict-ridden, but increasingly diverse party politics. By the 1990s, a discourse of victimisation prevalent among the middle-classes from the time of partition onwards, and enhanced through the state repression between 1970-1977, had become the basis for political organisation in many

urban centres.[10] But whereas a profound distrust of idealistic politics forms part of the legacy of 'Naxalbari', new political spaces and modes of participation emerged which drew a large number of middle-class persons into party politics (Corbridge and Harriss 2000).

The paper touches upon themes, which have dominated Bengali politics and in particular the political views of middle-class Bengalis. Starting with a short summary of the events, different ways of remembering 'Naxalbari', which by no means exhaust the possibilities of such an inquiry, have been identified.

The arguments explored are based on the accounts of former activists, and are therefore necessarily selective; however, not only are such autobiographical accounts of political involvement widely accessible, they reflect collective ways to memorise and forget political events and evaluate the political present. In the accounts of cadre organisation and leadership which drew young students into the organisation highlighted in this paper, the failure of the movement is often represented as a strategic problem, but as I pointed out, the activists and public discourse see these as moral rather than technical issues. The criticism of Naxal leaders inside the party is not mirrored by the assumed complete disjunction of youths and their actions from the leadership, which dominates public discourse. Furthermore, I would like to argue that organisational forms adopted by the Naxals have given rise to the later successful closely-knit form of organisation employed by the CPI(M).

The second point to be made situates the meaning of sacrifice as one of the core values among those who joined politics at the time in the context of educational expectations and kinship, through which the events and consequences of 'Naxalbari' are represented. Thus all activists position themselves and by extension their families and communities as victims of circumstance and suffering endured as the result of missed educational opportunities. These representations reflect subjective experiences, of violence, of state repression but also – prominently of a very specific political culture. If as Veena Das argues in her work on partition, political violence transforms the relationship

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[10] This process is certainly not unique to the Bengali population. Recent work on partition suggests that the symbolism, political experience, and ideals of community were shaped in significant ways much earlier (see Chatterjee 1992; Kaul 2001).

between social forms and subjectivity and extends a crisis of representation into the intimate sphere, we have to look for the significance of Naxalbari in detailed accounts of personal involvement (Das 2000: 210).

Lastly, one has to acknowledge that the Naxal movement focused wider processes of democratisation. The implications of the movement for contemporary politics can not solely be interpreted in terms of its political success, but also the public negotiation of personal involvement in specific political practices, including forms of organisation, speech, authority and local involvement.

The material also suggests that some elements of what was to become the praised participatory political culture of the ruling Left in Bengal, can be traced back to the Naxal movement, in particular the importance of local involvement. It is in this 'quasi domestic' arena that Naxal politics had the strongest impact.

Khilnani rightly observes that 'Democracy as a manner of seeing and acting upon the world is changing the relations of Indians to themselves' (Khilnani 1997:17). The accounts of personal involvement in militant politics and a critical look at the life histories of activists help us to reflect upon the intimate aspects of this process.

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