

Fifty Years of Naxalbari Uprising: Looking Back

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Abstract:

The Naxalbari uprising was an event of great significance not only in the history of the agrarian movements but also in the subsequent movements also. After this movement the name 'Naxalbari' became a well-known place in the political atlas in India and abroad. The present paper is an attempt to look back on the problem of peasant mobilization in pre-Naxalbari days in the light of recent available documents after five decades.

Keywords: *Adhjar system, Terai, Kisan, Panchayat, Labours, Tribes*

"Fifty years later, Naxalbari is getting restive again. A local youth was allegedly picked up last week by border security guards on what villagers suspect are trumped-up charges of drug-dealing. The villagers are in foment....the next time a border security person enters the village, they vow to tie him up and thrash them. But they appear unsure and a mention of the scary consequences is enough to expose their desperation.

No one is willing to listen to us babu. What about the local leaders? The Panchyat? The Police? No one. We have no leader. The Naxalbari uprising is history. Charu, Kanu and Jangal are all dead. And a new revolution is nowhere in sight."

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Fifty year ago on 24th & 25th May, 1967 an agrarian movement broke out at Naxalbari and its adjoining areas on the outskirts of Siliguri of the northern part of Bengal known as *Naxalbari Movement*, which rocked the whole world. The Naxalbari uprising was an event of great significance not only in the history of the agrarian movements but also in the subsequent movements also. After this movement the name 'Naxalbari' became a well-known place in the political atlas in India and abroad. The present paper is an attempt to look back on the problem of peasant mobilization in pre-Naxalbari days in the light of recent available documents after five decades.

The local jurisdictions of Naxalbari and its adjoining Khoribari and Phansidewa Police Stations were the scenes of the series of movements. These three police stations form the extreme southern tip of Darjeeling district of West Bengal. The total area covered by these three PSs will be about 274 square miles, with a population of about one lakh and fifty thousand, out of which about fifty thousand were labours engaged in the 32 tea- gardens located within this area. The topography of this area is an admixture of jungles, bushes and tea-gardens on a fairly flat landscape. Cultivation is practically confined to paddy and the yield is of an average type. This area has borders with Nepal, Bangladesh and Bihar.¹ Here the peasants are mostly comprised of the subaltern- Santals, Oraons, and Rajbanshis, formed a large portion of population.² These people were exploited by Jotedars under the '*Adhiar System*'. It means the landlords provided seeds, ploughs, and bullocks, in exchange, of which they cultivated the plots and got a share of crops. The peasants were least satisfied with the 'Adhiar System' because they felt exploited in the hands of the jotedars.³

The movements of the peasants took place not only over specific issues and demands of the peasants, but also against defective land-tenancy system introduced by the British Indian Government. The formation of an organization of the peasants in 1937 marked a turning point in the history of the peasant movement in Bengal. Between 1937 and the end of the British rule in 1947 peasant revolts and resistance occurred in waves. Under the leadership of *Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha (BPKS)* the peasants were drawn into struggles which were not only unique in character but had no parallel in the previous history of the peasant movement in Bengal.⁴ While previous peasant movements were movements of a local and sporadic character, the movements led by the BPKS were more stable, organized and widespread. A large section of the peasants were involved in such movements and they had behind them the support of the largest section of the rural people. The style and methods of the protest adopted in these movements were also unprecedented. These were not merely constitutional agitations: these included violent demonstrations, armed insurrections and courting of arrests.⁵

Mahasweta Devi, a social activist and creative writer, also pointed out in the preface of her novel '*Agnigarva*' (in Bengali),

"...the main causes of the grief of these areas are the land owned by the tea-gardeners. Here, almost all the labourers are brought by the tea-gardeners from outside. These outsiders have become local settlers with the passage of time. They have always faced disaster due to severe exploitation. The tea gardeners here had surplus land and they distributed it among the labourers fully loyal to them. The Government witnessing this transaction deliberated over the question of taking over this surplus land, but the plan of doing this was later for shaken which generated disaffection in the community of the labourers. In the mid 50s these tea-garden adherers began agitating against the tea-gardeners. Mainly the demand was bringing

the surplus land of the tea garden owners within the Government control and thereafter the distribution of this surplus land among them. This agitation became vehemently violent after 1959. Consequently, tea gardeners drove out the adhiars from the tea gardens, demolished their hutment with the elephants. The result was that the peasants and labourers of these areas took up arms against this and protested in an organized manner...."⁶

The fact is that Naxalbari, Khoribari and Phansidewa areas of Darjeeling District witnessed continuous peasant movement since 1946. In an article published in 1973 titled '*Report on the Peasant Movement in the Terai Region*', Kanu Sanyal, one of the architects of the peasant movement of the areas focuses on the various phases of the peasant movement. It was during the *Tebhaga Movement* of 1946 that the bargadars were first drawn in the peasant movement in 1948-50. The *Tebhaga Movement (three parts)* demanded the reduction of the share of the landowners from one half of the crop to one-third. The peasants were allowed to cultivate the fields and the land owners snatched away two-third of the harvested crops to their granaries. The movement spread like wildfire from village to village from Dinajpur and Rangpur in North Bengal to 24 Parganas in the south of the province. Although, primarily launched on economic demands, the rebellion in some areas led to the flight of landlords leaving the village at the mercy of the peasants, who often virtually turned them into *liberated areas* administering affairs in the villages through Kisan Sabha.⁷

From 1951 onwards, there was a continuous peasant upsurges. The Kisan Sabha built up its organization during 1951-54. From 1955 to 1956, the demand for bonus of tea-garden labourers and the peasant movement went on simultaneously. Responding to the call of the BPKS, the Naxalbari Unit carried on the movement for the occupation of the '*benami land*' during 1958-62. Naturally, clashes unleashed between the

jotedars and the peasants, and about two thousand peasants were arrested in 1958-59. Apparently, the Kisan Sabha carried on a long and patient campaign to woo peasant support. Kanu Sanyal claimed that "*these struggles could be organized because there was a leading team of self-sacrificing cadres.*"⁸

Until the events of 1966 and 1967 which reached its crescendo by the uprising at Naxalbari the general belief was that rural India had always been a mass sleeping villages accepting and acquiescing in every form of injustice and oppression. This belief, contrary to the actual history, was nurtured by the values preached and the stresses laid by the Indian bourgeois leaders, both during the anti-British movements and after the transfer of power of 1947.⁹ While Gandhiji no doubt was the first among the Indian bourgeois leaders to highlight the depressing poverty of the rural masses and recognize the need for utilizing them in the national struggle. Nirmal Kumar Bose, one of Gandhi's most brilliant disciples, said that, "*the ancient tradition in which people answered hatred by love, anger by calmness, or in other words, invited self-suffering instead of inflicting suffering and punishment upon other for the vindication of a just cause....found a new expression....under the leadership of M.K. Gandhi.*"¹⁰

Thus the militant actions by the peasantry were discouraged by the Congress leaders. Naturally, violent expressions of the protest by the peasants were underplayed in official histories of the national movement. Conflicts between the feudal landlords and the peasants were ignored and harmonizing aspects of the rural tradition were upheld. The ideal view of the '*Panchyat*' as they concord of all rural classes was counter posed against the grim reality of class antagonism in the villages.¹¹

In 1974, Kanu Sanyal gave an account of the background to the Naxalbari peasant uprising. He also indicated the beginnings of his differences with Charu Majumdar and provided the basic theoretical scaffold to the movement. According to Mr.

Sanyal, the communists of North Bengal built up the peasant's organization in Naxalbari during 1951 and 1954 by fighting against the petty oppressive acts of the jotedars. Later, between 1955 and 1957, the tea-garden labourers were organized and rallied along with the peasants. In 1958-62, the Naxalbari movement embarked upon a more militant phase when the total peasants' organization under the leadership of the communists gave the call for the harvesting of crops and their collection by the tillers, hoisting of red flags in their respective fields, arming of the peasants for the protection of their crops and defense against police attacks.¹²

Dr. A.P. Mukherjee, the then Superintendent of Police, Darjeeling District, and noted academician also raised the unsatisfactory land settlement behind the peasant unrest. He suggested the Cabinet Committee that *"....to induce sincere and emergent administrative measures to look into the alleged unsatisfactory land settlement operations in the affected areas and also into the alleged misappropriation of vested lands by certain jotedars and also into the prevalence of benami lands as well as eviction of bargadars.....In the first place, we must be morally, and not simply legally, convinced that a sincere attempt has been made to sort out the alleged misgivings of a section of the agitated peasantry. Any police officer who has had occasion to serve in rural areas knows only too well that the majority of the cases of the murder and deadly rioting in the rural areas primarily originate from our unsatisfactory land tenure system and land settlement administration..."*¹³

In the pre-Naxalbari peasant movement women also played a vital role. But till now their role was not highlighted by any scholar. Before the Naxalbari uprising many women were connected with the peasant organization. Among them one was Galeswari Devi. Since 1955 she had been a member of Krishak Samity. From that time onwards till her death she went on fighting against the rowdies of the landlords. She had 20 bighas of land of her own and she fought many legal battles against

Tinkadi Kundu of Siliguri in connection of her land ownership. She had to tackle a series of police vandalism. As a leader of Krishak Samity of hatighisa she had conducted many agitations. During the Naxalite struggle her house was used as a centre of liaison.¹⁴ The activities and the programmes of the leaders like Shanti Munda, Lila Majumdar (wife of Charu Majumdar), Galeswari Tharu and many others set an example and imparted courage to them. These women were the active members of women's wing of the Communist party of India (CPI). At this time the ultra leftist leadership of the Mahila Samity comprised the mother of Jangal Santal and Babulal Biswakarmokar, Barki Devi, Galeswari Tharu, Leela Majumdar, etc. These women crossed the villages in processions with their supporters with red flags in their hands. From her teenage Shanti Munda, known as Lungi Munda, engaged herself with the duty of convincing women about the struggle for occupying ownership of excess lands from the Jotedars, inequal distribution of crops and other problems. From that time her political consciousness began to grow and take shape. In the Peasants' Struggle of Naxalbari of 1967 she actively participated.¹⁵ It may be recalled here that among the women who participated in the armed peasant struggle of Naxalbari, she is the only one surviving till now. Presently at the age of 74, Shanti Munda walks with a hunch and her coarse cotton saree clashes violently with the trendy jeans and buzz cuts of her grandsons. She is still living in her ancestral village of Hatighisa, around 10 K.M. away from Naxalbari, a pristine region of rolling greens and tea gardens cradled by the Himalayas—in another world, this could be paradise.¹⁶

In September 1966, during the 16 day strike in the tea plantations, the ground was prepared for the peasants' uprising. At the beginning of 1967, the Siliguri Sub-division peasant convention gave out the call to i) establish the authority of the peasant committees in all matters of the villages, ii) get organized and be armed in

order to crush the resistance of jotedars and rural reactionaries, iii) smash the jotedars monopoly of ownership of the land and redistribute the land through the peasant committees. The convention further brought to light the peasant struggle against feudalism would have to face the repression of all reactionaries.¹⁷ Suniti Kumar Ghosh, an old age Leftist leader and renounced academician also pointed out in his book "Naxalbari: Before and After" that "*the peasants of Terai....swept into the dust the political, economic and social authority, dignity and prestige built up in the villages by the landlords and jotedars, who represent feudalism, and established the rule of the peasant committees in the villages through their armed revolt*"¹⁸

In the meantime, in the Assembly poll in West Bengal the Left Parties came out in flying colours with convincing majority and formed the 14 Party United Front Government. The U.F. Ministry tried to arrest the peasant movement which was taking the form of forcible occupation of land in the Naxalbari, Khoribari and Phansidewa areas.¹⁹ Mr. H.K. Konar, the new Land and Land Revenue Minister and a Veteran CPI(M) peasant leader arrived at Siliguri, called of Kanu Sanyal and announced a policy of quick distribution of surplus land among the landless and stopping of eviction of sharecroppers. Later in may 1967, in an interview with his party's Bengali mouthpiece '*Ganashakti*' he said that the government had decided to distribute the land among the landless and the poor peasants on the basis of consultation with the members of *Gram Panchyat*, representatives of *Kisan Sabha*, *M.L.A.* and *Anchal Pradhans*. But the demonstrating peasants refused this proposal on two grounds: *Firstly*, Mr. Konar promised to distribute the land, but he was not sure how to recover the land transferred malafide by the landlords. He admitted in the same interview, regarding benami (malafide) transfers, the Government had not yet been able to take any decision. *Secondly*, the demonstrating peasants also began realizing the rural landlords, who were in possession of surplus land, could always

take the help of the law to delay the seizure of their land, and thus postpone for an indefinite period distribution of the surplus land.²⁰

Thus, the Siliguri Unit of CPI(M) (Naxalbari, Khoribari and Phansidewa falls under Siliguri Sub-division of Darjeeling District) chose to reject this proposals and decided to continue the movements. The movement became violent and finally set an example for militant activities which in West Bengal people never witnessed in the peasant front. It became electric and spread different parts of the country.

The incidents of 24th May of 1967 rocked the whole world. Till today the circumstances that led to this incident and the incidents themselves are a mystery to many of us. On the 24th May 1967 a big detachment of the police entered the villages of Naxalbari to resist the peasants from carrying on with their armed looting and a plundering. The police had at that time an additional responsibility to save the jotedars too. When the police tried to enter through the Vijayanagar tea garden at least 50 to 60 women led by Krishnamaya Charjon and Sabitri Das obstructed them. When this obstruction was underway the police beat with batten, a pregnant woman named Padma Karigar died of bleeding due to miscarriage. This triggered a counter attack by hundred of armed peasants who were equipped with bows & arrows, stick and lances, clubs and spears. Due to this attack of peasants, Sonam Wangi, a police officer died on the spot. Narayan Chakraborty, SI of police was pierced by a number of arrows. Seeing that the situation was taking an untoward direction other policemen got back. But the next day i.e. 25th May, an innumerable policemen and para-military forces made forays into these villages killed indiscriminately eleven people. Among these eleven people nine were women, a child and a peasant.²¹ After this brutal incident, the Naxalbari peasant movement was well-known all over the world.

Thus, it may be summed up that the pre-Naxalbari peasant unrest prepared the stage for 'Naxalbari Uprising'. It was basically a movement of the agricultural and tea-garden labourers and their militant association in the limited areas of North Bengal. Its success was limited and was less significant from the point of view of the total success of the peasant movement in the countryside. It had openly instigated the peasants into violence and terror and made an attempt to usurp party leadership, to violate all norms of peasant and organization. But after five decades some of the agitators realized their blunder. Shanti Munda was one of them. In the words of Shanti Munda *we got a stupendous support from people in 1967 but we do not get it now any more. People fear us and avoid us. Definitely, we have committed certain blunders.*

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