

Naxalbari and Popular Movements: A Conversation with Ranabir Samaddar

[Ranabir Samaddar holds the Distinguished Chair in Migration & Forced Migration Studies at the Calcutta Research Group. He was actively involved in the student movement of Presidency College in the late-'60s. Subsequently, he was involved in organizing work in the Debra region of Mednipur district, where he was captured by the police. The primary objective of this discussion was to understand the Naxalbari movement, the time of the late sixties, as well as its subsequent legacy. Participating in the conversation on behalf of the Calcutta Research Group were Samata Biswas and Sandip Bandopadhyay. Samata teaches English at Bethune College. Sandip has for long been studying and writing about partition, people's movements, and similar issues and is a well-known human rights activist. The text of the interview, conducted in Bengali, has been translated by V. Ramaswamy.]

CRG: You entered the students' movement and the larger movement during the sixties, in the climate of Naxalite politics. You were then a student of Presidency College. Could you please tell us something about the relationship between the students' movement of Presidency College and other movements of the time? For instance, did you participate in the Bangla Bandh¹ of 22-23 September 1966?

RS: Shyamal Chakraborty, Dinesh Majumdar, Biman Bose and Paltu Dasgupta were the leaders of the two student federations, but like them many others were also providing leadership then to the students and youth who were in the food movement. The CPI's student front, the All India Students' Federation, was the mother organization. The name "CPI (M)" was not yet in currency, they were called the Left CPI. The latter was more militant and they had greater presence in the trade unions. The CITU had not yet been established, but left-wing workers' organizations were very powerful.

After March 1966, when the food movement erupted, there was a rapid radicalization over the next three or four months, and students participated in the Bandh of 22-23 September. Presidency College, caught in the maelstrom, was the elite college of that era. But besides Presidency, there were other important colleges as well in Calcutta like Bangabasi, Surendranath, City, Manindra Chandra, then Narsingha Dutta and Lal Baba in Howrah, Dinabandhu in Garia, Peary Mohan in Uttarpara, Hooghly Mohsin in Chinsurah and Rashtraguru Surendranath College in Barrackpore. When the boys and girls of all these colleges heard that Presidency College had joined the movement, it became a matter of joy for them. They began to think that their movement was so strong that even the boys and girls, who were the cream of our society, academically speaking, had entered the fray. So they began to come to our college. We too used to go to all those colleges.

CRG: In what way did the students of these other colleges ally with you?

RS: The Students' Federation was already there. By then the Students' Federation in Bengal had been split into the left and right factions. Saibal Mitra and others tried to get organized separately. We lived in the Hindu Hostel then. The entire responsibility

for College Street came on the shoulders of the organization of the students of Presidency College. Students of Calcutta University were also with us, just as boys and girls from Surendranath, Vidyasagar and Bangabasi used to come frequently. Biman-da (Biman Bose) too used to come regularly. During the hunger strike in Hindu Hostel, Biman-da used to come every evening and advise us on how we should proceed.² Boys from Maulana Azad College, who lived mainly in a separate hostel, also used to come. Having control over a hostel in College Street meant possessing a striking force of students. It could be said that one of the reasons for our being thrown out of the college was that we had the striking ability to create disorder in the college. Perhaps the authorities would have tolerated that, but an even more important reason was that Presidency College was turning left-wing. And leftist politics was being organized extremely militantly. I don't mean that the children of affluent people were chanting Marx from time to time. There were strikes, processions of boys and girls used to go to factories. That is when we decided that the people of "boipara", the books district of College Street, had to be organized. That boipara was not like the boipara of today because text books and such like were not sold that much then, in that boipara old books were really sold; so unionizing them, and then going to the various small factories and workshops ... all that started, and these efforts began before word about Naxalbari reached College Street or Presidency College.

During the Bangla Bandh of 22-23 September, we set out with a squad from College Street. Biplab Halim was with us. Biplab was a student leader of City College and a great organiser; he was the son of the communist leader, Abdul Halim. He was arrested together with us. Kaka (Ashim Chatterjee) and Amal-da (Amal Sanyal) were also arrested.

CRG: *What happened after you were arrested during the Bangla Bandh of 22-23 September 1966?*

RS: They took us to the lock-up in Muchipara Police Station, and a case was registered against us. We had to stay in the lock-up for quite a while. Biplab Halim then communicated with the party, Abdul Halim had passed away by then, but Abdullah Rasool sahib, unless I'm wrong, was in charge of the legal cell of the party. They arranged for our bail. We were charged with various offences. And the case dragged on several months.

CRG: *Was bail obtained?*

RS: Yes. But after all we were then studying in the most famous government college, and all of us had now cases against our names ...

CRG: *You became branded ...*

RS: Yes. There were cases against us. And we had also gheraoed the principal; I'm not saying that all this happened within three-four months. The agitation in Hindu Hostel, the demand for Haraprasad Mitra, the Superintendent of the Hostel, to step down, class lectures everyday in college, and strike, processions, organization, meetings, study sessions, etc. Unions began to be formed outside the college, in the neighbourhood of College Street; there was a protest demanding an end to goondaism; we became foot-soldiers of the food movement during the Bangla Bandh of 22-23 September. After that, there was an agitation in the college asking why shouldn't college teachers participate in the movement of the ordinary school teachers...

We had started winning overwhelmingly in the student union elections; Amal Sanyal became the general secretary at that time, and after that there was a movement within the college too, demanding that a cheap canteen be started. A 'Magnolia' canteen was started, that was kicked and broken down, we didn't want such a "sahebi" canteen, and costly at that; we wanted a canteen where ordinary boys and girls could eat. After all these protests culminating in a demonstration before the Principal's chamber, we were expelled from the college, and this led to the probably the most famous student movement in the second half of the twentieth century in Bengal – the Presidency College student movement against expulsion.

After that the United Front came to power, the CPI as well as the CPI (M) were in the United Front. Our old demand was that the rustication order had to be withdrawn. The order was withdrawn and in that sense, a small victory was achieved. Had we been rusticated, we would not have been able to study anywhere else. Meaning, 'rusticated' is not like getting a transfer certificate. So that was later changed to "transfer certificated", and the seven of us were split between three colleges. I took the B.A. Part II examination from Vidyasagar College. The students' movement of Presidency College was later written about in the journal, *Anustup*. All the information can be found there. Sabyasachi, Pratul, Subrata Sengupta, Arun, Amalda, and I were given transfer certificates. Sudarshan-da (Sudarshan Roychoudhury), Saradindu-da (Saradindu Roy), and Kaka – their post-graduate studies through Presidency College was blocked. I may be wrong in recollecting names and numbers. It was after all fifty one years ago!

The importance of this movement was much more than anything I have said. The foundation of the subsequent rebellious youth and student movement had been laid by the anti-expulsion movement. I won't say any more about this because there has been some good writing about it. Dipanjan-da (Dipanjan Roychoudhury) has written, Kaka has written.³ Achintya Gupta and Swadhin-da (Swadhin Dey) have written.

CRG: *Could you say something about your relationship with the United Front government?*

RS: I want to emphasize that a major section of the students was becoming radical on account of being associated with the communist movement. Peasant comrades in villages set up peasant organisations, worker comrades engaged in worker movements. The Left movement, the communist movement, had by then started becoming radical in a new way. We were waiting to know what the CPI (M) would do next. The presence of the CPI (M) in the government was something radical. Besides, leaders like Dinesh Majumdar were very good people, at a personal level. We had no political pedigree at all, yet we would be taken along to party meetings, we used to have meetings with all those who were big leaders of the party at that time. We used to be invited and taken to the Cal DC (Calcutta District Committee). Krishnapada Ghosh was then the secretary of the Cal DC. We had come from outside to study in Calcutta, and so, having been thrown out of college, we had no place to stay. We used to go to the District Committee's premises in Taltala then, to sleep at night.

CRG: *But had you not been given membership of the party then?*

RS: No, some people were party members. But I was not. Many were 'candidate members' then; we were 'party SG' i.e. sympathizers' group and so on, as it existed in the party structure. When the United Front govt. came, it was not as if there was great hope on the part of students about what the govt. would do and how far it would go. However, let us remember, as far as we were concerned, there was no other party other than the CPI(M), after all this was our party. But it is also true that we had a big grievance that while they had directed the Presidency College students' movement, they were responsible for putting an end to it. I won't say they incited us; our responsibility was ours alone, after all no one else could be responsible for us. But they did not take the movement as far as it should have gone. The party's position was: how much longer will you agitate, after all you have to reach somewhere; you have to arrive at a settlement. And this demand for revocation of the expulsion of students and their return to Presidency College, had been made from the Calcutta Maidan, from such a huge rally ... Formally speaking, the CPI(M) did as much as a party of that time could do, but we had a big grievance that the movement could have carried on. We ourselves had taken the initiative and made all the arrangements for an all-Bengal students' agitation, we worked very hard, there were a large number of boys and girls, so why had the party put an end to it midway? Subsequently when the party came into power they did not bring us back to Presidency College, so that grievance was also there. That was the first time we felt that the party had compromised.

CRG: *That was completely reasonable.*

RS: Meanwhile, the situation around us was in a radical mode, there used to be a lot of secret discussions; secret documents and secret periodicals used to come into our hands. I used to go to the National Book Agency to enquire about new radical books that were available. And the age-old debate: whether there was any path other than

that of armed struggle. The party had begun to say that they had captured power and the CPI had publicly stated that there was no path other than the non-violent one. And the section within the party that was progressively become militant was saying that there was no other path than that of armed struggle. Hence, what was the road to revolution? With students, with peasants, with workers – everywhere, it was the same question. The CPI (M) was full of ifs and buts then, I mean they never said that armed struggle was not the path, after all, the war in Vietnam was going on, and Vietnam had a big impact. Consequently, until Naxalbari happened, our attitude towards the party was a mixed one. This was the party, but there seemed to be something wrong ...

CRG: *But the party was compromising ...*

RS: They were compromising. And they had come into government, so the question was, will this party take adequate steps now that they were in power?

CRG: *They were 'revisionist' in the language of those days ...*

RS: Yes, the CPI was reformist, that was what we thought, and the CPI (M) was neo-revisionist.

CRG: *So, these people were revisionists.*

RS: That term was not used widely at first, but gradually it gained currency ...

CRG: *It was not used. In those days, if someone was called 'revisionist' that was a nasty term of abuse...*

RS: Two terms were used, the first was social imperialism, referring to the Soviet Union, and CPI was reformist.

CRG: *Was that term used against you people?*

RS: We were called extremists. But we used to say the charge against us was not correct. We were called followers of Che Guevara – we had never criticized or abused Che⁴ – we did not know how many groups and factions there were bearing these kinds of nomenclatures, and I was very young then, I knew little about various wings and factions...

CRG: *You must have been twenty years old then?*

RS: No, even less... do you know why I came to Calcutta for my studies? Because I was underage, because there was an age restriction in Delhi University; one could not join a college before one was seventeen. We had the old higher secondary

examination then, and I had passed the higher secondary at the age of fourteen, and so as a result I had to come to Calcutta. Otherwise there was no need to come to Calcutta. But of course life took a different turn in this city ...

*CRG: Let us ask you about something else. What happened after the formation of the All-India Coordination Committee of Communist Revolutionaries?*⁵

RS: In the All-India Coordination Committee too, the old-timers, who were leaders of the CPI (M), the left-wing, I mean all those who were militant leaders – they wanted to bring back the party structure. We felt that they were less inclined towards open mass movement. They called for a boycott of the mass organizations existing at that time, which meant boycott of elections, of trade unions, of the old peasant organizations, student unions, etc. We were not in favour of such abstention or withdrawal policies or steps, we opposed them. We felt that union elections ought to take place, and that we should go to the unions. We should form mass organizations and work in the existing ones also. So why we did not want to join the Coordination Committee and why we felt that forming the CPI (ML) so hurriedly was not correct – this is a crucial thing to understand.

The ‘popular phase’ of Naxalbari, which is what you want to hint at – if you call that the real phase, then it’s a very short period, from 1967 to 1970. After that came the repression. And that was the end. Then began the attempt at guerilla warfare and the effort to build the party on that basis; politics moved to a different direction. But the attraction that people – cutting across many divisions – have towards Naxalbari even today; the fact that they are drawn so much by that, so much so that anyone who protests is labelled as a Naxalite; all the literary narratives and theatre and films – the overwhelming social nature that the movement had – that was the mark of those three, or four or five years. We thought that forming a party all of a sudden without adequately understanding this social and political popularity was incorrect. And the party was being established from the top, that is to say, those who were top-level leaders were becoming leaders, exactly like it was in the old parties. Those who were grassroots-level leaders were nowhere. As a result the party would soon become controlled by a coterie. There was a hiatus between them and the masses, and secret organization became the be-all and end-all for them. These strains were visible in the new party, which also acquired some undesirable features of the old party.

CRG: Tell us a bit about going to the village.

RS: I do not like these kinds of personal questions. Personal information is of little importance in this discussion, which must focus on the time and the broad trends. However since you ask – we had to go in groups to villages for about a week or for daily visits to villages near the city... which used to be called “Red Guard” action. My first introduction to Bengal’s villages was in this way – in Kalikapur, in 1967-68. The place was not like it is now. One only saw dim lights beyond Jadavpur – in

Santoshpur and other areas. The gleaming Bypass beyond that was not there. Later, I also went in a small group, together with some other colleagues, to Debra as part of the “Red Guard” campaign. Then, of course, about a year later, I went to Debra, but this time not for just a week. I was placed there as part of organizational work. If I’m not wrong, I went away to the village towards the beginning of 1968, not to Debra at first, but to Behraghora, on the Bengal–Bihar–Orissa border, where we had decided to work. I think it was in the first quarter of 1968. After perhaps five or six months, some of us were asked to return to Calcutta, as the organization told us that we had to assist in the work in the city, and as part of that, to help the student movement in the university. The famous anti-McNamara agitation and turbulent protests of 1968 and the solidarity with various workers’ movements, was the outcome of our – I mean the students’ and youth movements’ – combined efforts. By then some of us had given up formal education. Later, in the beginning of 1969, I returned to the village – to Debra.

CRG: *But it was in Calcutta University that you finally completed your studies, isn’t it?*

RS: As a private candidate.

CRG: *Why was that?*

RS: I had given up studies. I had been thrown out of college. I completed my M.A. eight years later as a private examinee. So the less you hear about my academic record the better!

CRG: *So you were completely immersed in the village. But were you getting reports?*

RS: We used to get the CPI (ML)’s paper, *Deshabrati*...

CRG: *Another question. You referred to the popular phase, but are you not forgetting something about that period, that when the second United Front government came in, in March 1969, there was massive public participation and tremendous public enthusiasm? If everyone had gone the Naxalite way, all their support would have remained with the Naxalites alone, and such exuberance, such excitement about the election result, would not have been witnessed.*

RS: You haven’t understood what I was saying. I’m talking about the popularity of the Naxalites, and the idea that if you are idealistic you must be a Naxalite ... that’s the issue. There was support for Naxalbari. But that doesn’t mean that they wouldn’t vote for the CPI (M). The latter was an organized party. But CPI (ML) was from the very beginning a banned party, it did not contest the election either. I reiterate, that 1967, 1968 and 1969 – was a very grey time. Grey in what sense? Yes, there was great radicalization of people, but this radicalism was not exactly anti-CPI (M), within the CPI(M) too groups were radicalized ... and so, there’s the CPI (M), there was the

United Front government, and if this United Front was not in government, I doubt if Naxalbari would have taken place. Maybe it wouldn't have happened, though there is no point in us asking a counter-factual question. But it's true that with the coming of the United Front, there was a great enthusiasm among the people, they felt that it was their government that had come in, and then they began making more and more demands, and those who were sitting in leadership positions began to block those, because their will, the power they had, their programme – were not oriented towards the aspirations of the common people. They thought they had to strengthen the administration and make it stable. Naxalbari happened in this milieu. I have heard that Harekrishna Konar⁶ had gone to talk to Charu babu and Kanu Sanyal, and there was an attempt to resolve the matter, but it could not be resolved.

Kanu babu's position was: how can the peasants of Naxalbari stop the armed movement if they had to give up the land they had taken possession of? Harekrishna Konar had reportedly almost accepted this, that they could hold on to the land for the time being. But this arrangement could not materialize due to bureaucratic, police and right wing pressure from within CPI (M). I have heard that Debabrata Bandopadhyay had accompanied Harekrishna Konar as the land reforms secretary. If a midway settlement had taken place, I don't think there would have been any great loss. Maybe it would have been better. This was the first such remarkable movement, it had gone quite far and achieved a lot, and whatever had been gained by the movement could have been retained. Besides, sharecroppers or bargadars would have gained also some rights. Politics too would have remained intact.

After all, the gains have to be protected. It can't be that you will go on making gains without interruption. Anyway, when the impact of the movement had to be brought to the city, when the movement had to spread across rural areas, then, merely saying "carry on armed struggle" is not enough. All this business of beheading, which we were strongly opposed to ... we didn't say all this outside, none of us dissented publicly at that time – beheading, breaking statues ... these things did not happen in the student movement we led. Our organization was then called Presidency Consolidation, and we had huge support.

CRG: *What had huge support?*

RS: Support for how we wanted to work, for our "mass line", the way we built up organizations and wanted their coordination.

CRG: *Did you people oppose all that beheading, statue-breaking etc?*

RS: Yes. We have never spoken about that outside, but we declined initially to join the CPI (ML). Meanwhile, the All Indian Coordination Committee of Communist Revolutionaries had been formed, and it moved rapidly towards party formation. In a sense what we wanted or did not want is not important. We have to see how the major

trend developed. That was the reality. At that time, the way things were shaping, Naxalbari meant Kanu Sanyal, it meant Charu Majumdar. Srikakulam meant Vempatapu Satyanarayana, the movement in Andhra Pradesh meant Nagi Reddy and Pola Reddy (who were still with the CPI (M) then, they left CPI (M) after the Burdwan Plenum of April 1968). So, there was this kind of thinking on one side, and on the other side common people thought that their government had come to power, with Jyoti Basu, their long-standing leader, at the helm. The choice for the common people was between Congress and CPI (M). And the CPI (M) did finally come to power too, in 1977. But that CPI (M) was not today's CPI (M), though one cannot deny the logical connection between different phases of the evolution of CPI (M). In any case, they were labelling the path of Naxalbari as "extremist". So, both tendencies co-existed. In a family you would have a father with the CPI (M) and his son with the CPI (ML) or Naxalites; that happened frequently. If you think about the freedom movement you will understand this. During the freedom movement, did anyone distinguish between Anushilan⁷ and Congress? When Anushilan was at a low ebb, the people there used to join the Satyagraha movement, they joined Gandhi-ji, they had not decried Gandhi-ji; for that matter, even Bhagat Singh did not. On the contrary, Gandhi-ji vilified them, saying "You are philosophers of the bomb". Nehru decried Mahendra Pratap.⁸ And you would typically find that throughout the freedom movement, as soon as the momentum of the armed struggle increased, people went in that direction in large numbers; and then when it was at low ebb, people went and joined Gandhi's movement. That's what I mean by saying it was a grey time.

The period from 1967 to 1970 was a very interesting time, and I don't say this because I am infatuated with the Naxalite path or because I think it is correct. That a political movement could become so popular, so left-wing, so militant; that so many completely new demands could be raised and so many new kinds of organizations be built – all this was witnessed during that time. And there were ethics. Discrimination in regard to participation of women in the Naxalbari movement, unnecessary violence towards fellow-activists accused of signing confessions to police (under severe torture) – all these things happened. I cannot say these things did not happen. But that was later. That happened when the movement broke down and hopelessness spread. But remember, large numbers of inspired boys and girls went to the villages. If a hundred boys and girls gave up everything and went to the villages, then at least in one hundred thousand or ten thousand people that inner longing had to arise, and that's how a hundred persons would say, give up your studies and go to the village. Once again, I am saying, why don't you think about the old days, the era of the freedom struggle? When young men and women would say we don't need school, we don't need college, burn everything down, we will work for the cause of the nation, there's no point studying all this ... My doing so means that a hundred persons think that way. It's not that I'm a bit precocious, or I am brave, and so I am doing that. So, we can think of the immense possibilities of the development of a kind of radical politics if the Naxalbari movement had not taken a sudden turn towards anarchy. But, although this is counter-factual, it is necessary to say: if the CPI (ML) was formed

later; if they could have remained on the path of people's movement; if in the rural areas too they could have stuck to the policy of abjuring the line of needless killing and annihilation without building the popular foundations of the movement – then it's very difficult to say what would have happened. Probably revolutionary politics would have developed further and taken an unforeseen turn not seen in India.

But then there was the ruthless repression of the movement by the government, with the military brought in, and after 1970, one massacre happened after another – what we call “white terror”. Revolutionary politics could not develop any more as organizational tasks had been neglected. Red terror entered the picture in an unprepared state. I don't think the time was right when the red terror started. More importantly, what's the meaning of deploying red terror? You have so many people with you ... Take for instance in Krishnanagar, throughout the area doctors were told the maximum fee they could charge their patients, private tutors were told that they could not charge more than a specified amount for their tuition. These are not bad or wrongful activities; behind the application of force therefore there was something ethical. This ethical undertone or overtone, whatever you may call it, which lay behind such actions, this tone or stance of morality, this was there from 1967 to 1970 in a huge way. After 1970, this came down sharply.

This was for two reasons – First was Bangladesh, 1971. In the whole Bangladesh affair, just as there were matters internal to Bangladesh or East Pakistan, one should also ask why, when major upsurges had also taken place in East Pakistan in 1966 or in 1969, there was hardly any reflection of that in West Bengal? But after 1970, the direction to which Indira Gandhi took the people of India on the grounds of support to Bangladesh – standing on that ground, it was not difficult to carry out mass murders of Naxalites. Second, by then people had become fatigued and afraid, they were gasping, and no society can carry on this kind of intense and dense political activity for very long, least of all Bengalis. Everyone knows what the Bengalis' way of working is ..., and especially for middle-class Bengalis it was difficult to keep alive the density and intensity of the movement. Can you take out a procession everyday without thinking about what the next step would be? Can you form a squad everyday? Can you say everyday that there's no need to read anything other than Mao Tse Tung? Can you say everyday that we don't need to have the imagination of an alternative society, but it will come into being as we act? Can such things happen every day?

Yet the point is why do I call the society or the time during the period from 1966 to 1970 a grey time? Let me make a comparison on a larger scale, or perhaps it's not so large: during the French Revolution, when it reached the stage where the revolutionaries killed each other, take for instance Robespierre, Danton ... it can always be said later, that unless that happened at the end of the Revolution, unless that ended the Revolution, dictatorship would not have come, that there wouldn't have been a Napoleon; that after all, the whole society did not move in that direction. Perhaps we can say that now, perhaps some of us said it then. Many say it now, and

perhaps we should have said it even more then. Actually, because we were very young, our political maturity was also limited, we instinctively understood lot of things, or maybe we had read a lot; but we did not have the courage of truth, we did not have the ideological or political courage to go against the stream. Consequently, we raised questions and then surrendered to the forces of anarchy.

CRG: *Tell us something about the movement in Debra?*

RS: You can get an idea about the popular foundations of the movement in Debra just from the fact that there were at least two hundred to two hundred and fifty peasants of Debra in Mednipur jail for at least four or five years. The classes that we took in jail, I mean literacy classes and reading classes, were all with peasant comrades. But you will get an account of the Debra peasant movement through contemporary reports in *Deshabrati*. The movement deserves serious study.

CRG: *Which jail were you in?*

RS: Again a personal question... I was in the Mednipur Central Jail. In each of the study classes in the jail, there were, say, thirty to forty persons. These were literacy as well as political classes, mainly around reading the Red Book. The situation in Jhargram jail was very bad because it was not a central jail and all those who went to Jhargram jail were invariably afflicted with skin ailments, because there was no water, as many as forty persons had to huddle together and stay and sleep in a small room. There were as many as five persons in cells where one or two persons were meant to stay. At night, after lock-up, where would they go to relieve themselves? The situation in Mednipur Central Jail was also similar. Some people were subsequently transferred for lack of space. There were almost three or four hundred people from Gopiballavpur, Nayagram, Keshiari. Also from Binpur, from nearby Salboni, and from Pingla, Sabong, Panskura.

You can see, a huge number of peasants joined the movement. It was also true that just like a lot of people came out of the CPI and CPI (M), there was also another side. I mean, let me speak once again about the freedom movement. Do you know, during the era of the freedom struggle, you could perhaps be a member of the Communist Party, and also a member of the Congress? There was nothing surprising about that. Like Somnath Lahiri who was a leader of the old Communist Party, but was also in the AICC – I think in 1936. Bankim Mukherjee, a significant communist leader, was a member of the AICC for perhaps nearly two decades, and in the pre-independence era a member of the Bengal Legislative Assembly. So, although one can make clear political choices today, it may not be like that at all times and in all places. I say again and again that a major characteristic of a popular movement is that boundaries become very unclear.

On the other hand the person who came to identify us in jail was a communist party (CPI) member. Communists became jail visitors. Once there was a serious discussion

about a big communist jail visitor, who was always seen in the company of the police. The idea was to take action against him. Think of the Satyen-Kanai incident.⁹ Inevitably, six or seven persons would have been charged with serious offence. Luckily that leader did not come again.

Why were people joining our movement? The first reason was because they felt we were saying something new, we were militant. I've seen again and again that though the agrarian labour may not say much – they have great anger inside them. There was something else that created a great attraction, and that was looting the houses of the landlords or jotedars. See, we did not have any experience, but I could understand a little, there was massive mobilization, a massive peasants gathering, you go in a procession and surround the house of the jotedar and burn the documents of land mortgage ... Mao Tse Tung had written about all this regarding the Hunan peasants movement. These things are real... Think of these things as the form of the movement and as symbols of actions. Now definitely many, many things have changed, but this was something to see. Annihilation was not the main aim. The contribution of the Naxalites was – there had to be a beheading too. And everyone knows what the outcome of that was. But it was also true that the burning of old land mortgage documents was symbolic in a major way. Because there was money-lending in the villages, it was from the jotedar that people also took loans, the jotedars and money-lenders or mahajans were all together, and people had to mortgage their possessions. So burning the documents, including the land deeds, was very significant – as was the loot of gold and jewellery. After all bank nationalization had not taken place then.

Thus you could be a part of CPI or CPI(M) in your neighbourhood, and at the same time you could join the peasants' procession of the Naxalites. In the Gopiballavpur peasants movement, on two occasions there was the opportunity of killing the jotedar. The one who was supposed to carry it out worked as an agricultural labourer in the jotedar's house and perhaps he got scared, or he was unable to use the spear out of regard for him ... he let him off even after finding him. The peasants only looted the grain and went away. After that we were criticized, we were called reformists, moderates, etc. Why had we not finished off the jotedar? And what about cutting the grain? Forcible cutting of paddy from the jotedar's land was an extremely traditional action in peasant movement, so what was new about that? We were supposedly making the peasants reformists, by saying, "come along you'll get some grain". But the fact is that the peasants were entitled to the grain, there was nothing reformist about this. Surrounding the jotedar, looting the grain-store, burning all the loan documents or debt papers, looting the gold and jewellery, looting the money, and driving him away, away from home and village, all these were significant. That's why in Naxalbari during the movement triggered by the eviction of the sharecropper, Bigul Kishan, by his jotedar employer, all the jotedars of Naxalbari and Kharibari had to flee and escape to Siliguri. Why were they driven away? Because, the physical presence of the jotedar in the village would be a problem for peasant power. Look at the power dynamics. When the jotedar is in the village, it means his clientele are also

ensconced there. When the jotedar flees the village it means his sycophants too would have to leave the village. And once they are gone, how long does it take to loot the jotedar's house and the grain-store! After all the jotedar who is driven away from the village cannot inform the police station any more. The people from the police station always went to the jotedar's house first whenever they had to visit a village... which was a very accepted way of suppressing the peasant movement in the villages in olden times. When the police or the BDO who arrived stayed in the village, stayed in the jotedar's house, with arrangements made for feeding them, possibly arrangements were also made for one or two women to be provided – he would then do whatever he wanted to, he would have peasants dragged there, scold someone, slap someone, take someone away, and so on. But if that jotedar himself was not there, it would be the first decisive step whereby the role of the peasants in the rural areas would be transformed. But this in no time turned to slitting the throat. As a result, irrespective of whether or not the jotedar's house was looted, let's slit his throat at the very outset. This took the movement towards destruction.

There was a difference between all those areas where the Naxalbari movement had a popular base or a mass base, and those places where the peasants' movement had to be built anew. The difference was regarding building the popular base. The CPI (M) was reformist ... how were they reformist? That was because the CPI (M) line was: benami land would be recovered, vested land would be distributed, and the government would try to raise the wages of agricultural workers, and the share of sharecroppers would be increased ... That is to say, other than seizing ownership of land and establishing peasant authority in the village, whatever else needed to be done for you would be done. On the contrary, what was the meaning of the path of Naxalbari? Peasants must get land title, and in rural areas, land must belong to the tiller. Thus, which was the path of Naxalbari and which one was reformist – that was clear even in that era. The main thing was, the peasant will get land, will get the harvest, and will demand power in the rural area. The peasants association (krishak sabha) will want to rule. If you don't join the movement to bring about your rule, you cannot get ownership of land – this slogan of Naxalbari... there was huge popular support for that. But when popular support had to be built afresh, the question was: which direction should the movement take? Eliminating the class enemy became the line. The movement was finished by adopting that path.

Peasant movements took place in rural areas mostly where a popular base existed. After all, in Naxalbari, the party itself took up the Naxalite line... the movement did not start suddenly in Naxalbari. A major part of the party went that way in Birbhum. In Mednipur, or in the railway workshop in Kharagpur, or in Debra, a major part of the party went in the direction of Naxalbari. For instance, in Mednipur, Bhabadeb Mondal had been in the CPI and was then in the CPI(M) ... similarly, Gunadhar Murmu, a very militant CPI(M) leader ... After all the whole tribal peasantry in Medinipur went the Naxalbari way. The whole of Mednipur went that way, the entire district... not today's Mednipur, but the erstwhile Mednipur. Naxalite boys and girls

went there and were inspired. But later, as I said, their joining the CPI (ML) and then moving towards the line of annihilation finished everything. It became easy for state terror to come down heavily.

CRG: *In a recent article¹⁰, you had written that a radical subjectivity was being formed at this time, and after that, you said that although the movement could not achieve its desired end, streams of influence and memory remained in society though in subterranean way. You have traced the influence of the Naxalite movement on the railway strike of 1974 too, or in those who still continue to put hope on the Naxalite party or a group... this lingering impact, or legacy, could you say a bit more about that?*

RS: That is a good question. If you ask about the legacy of Naxalbari – on the one hand you can say that the path of Naxalbari that had been spoken about or undertaken failed and whether the failure was on account of disorder or anarchy or frustration, or state terror, as a result of all that, it was finished. And the way in which CPI (ML) is now trying to proceed, it is unable to succeed, at least in West Bengal, though it has achieved a measure of success in Bihar. It has now joined the politics of the Left Front in West Bengal, even after the struggle of Singur–Nandigram – which, again, is very difficult to fit into any previous template. It won't do to say that only the Naxalites fought in Nandigram or in Singur. But that's what I'm trying to tell you... I had tried to write about this in the book *Passive Revolution in West Bengal*¹¹, that a massive radicalization had happened, which the state wanted to put an end to through terror. On the other hand, the revolutionaries including us, owing to our own foolishness had the movement destroyed in the vortex of anarchy. But see, how within society the lingering echo of the past remained. After the railway strike, we had thought that it was over. But after the CPI (M)'s coming to power in 1977, first of all through the CPI (M) itself it found some expression. That, yes, wages need to be increased, sharecroppers' share has to be increased, there will be Operation Barga, the peasants will spontaneously register as bargadars, peasants' dignity had to be ensured... in all these the traces of 1967 remained. But the idea that the CPI (M) broadcasts – that during the period of their rule there was no class struggle in rural Bengal... meaning, class struggle existed only until the CPI(M) came into power... To say that after the coming of the Left Front the villages turned peaceful, that now on the exhortation of the CPI(M), everyone advanced towards Ramrajya – that's impossible, this just cannot be. The struggle came to an end in the villages – many including several radical intellectuals thought and perhaps still think in that way because they do not look properly into the history of this time. Some tried to act holding the hand of the Congress, while the Congress itself said that the CPI (M) had cut off its hand! In the decade of the 1980s, the basti movement began, title to land in the basti was demanded, then the anti-eviction movement, then the workers' autonomous movements in various mills and factories ... in various ways one can see the continuity of class struggle. Recall the agitation in the wake of Bhikari Paswan's forced disappearance.¹²

The question of course is: when do we see the result of all these? Nandigram happened – once again, in a combustible situation. An enormous amount of land was grabbed in Rajarhat. Apparently there was not so much protest, but we later investigated the Rajarhat land grab and found that at least a hundred people were murdered in the course of land acquisition and land grab.

CRG: *There was protest, but it was not accorded any significance.*

RS: Yes, it takes time. After all Naxalbari did not happen suddenly. I say again and again, it was a political process in operation over a long period; people were thinking; various things kept happening. But it is just like when people fought in Singur. Did they fight so that they could join Trinamool! That's not true. Those who went to Nandigram, did they go there on behalf of Trinamool? No they didn't. So, in popular movements these boundaries of parties, which we usually think about, these boundary lines, get wiped out to a large extent while the movement is going on. The boundaries of parties, a party-led movement with proper boundaries, etc., – things which we later say, are to a large extent *post facto*. In short, I am trying to say that during the CPI (M) and Left Front era, there was struggle; it took time; it took time for the people to become aware. After all, a new government had come to power; it had done a few good things, so people also took time to judge. If you look at the field of education: during the Congress era, the schoolmaster had to be subservient to the village jotedar, he would be paid his salary once in six months, he used to get some fruits and vegetables, perhaps it would be deducted from the salary! Now in all these areas and places, a huge governmental expansion took place, the government took responsibility of schools and colleges; bank nationalization also took place, banks were not failing any more, you bought even a rickshaw with a bank loan, you put buses on the road with bank loans... I have heard Jangal Santhal got a bus permit and a bank loan. I don't know, certainly some poor people got bank assistance. The Left Front government facilitated that.

CRG: *You and your comrades had organized a meeting after Jangal Santhal passed away.*

RS: Yes, we did that, Jangal Santhal was our leader, one of the main leaders of Naxalbari peasant movement. He was the leader of our group when he died...

But to go back to the theme we were discussing: The impact of such a major movement as the Naxalbari, remains in society. A struggle creates impact, but those who continue the movement later on in difficult times think it has been fruitless. However, only a fortune-teller can tell when the impact will materialize in form of a new event or movement! We used to memorize Mao's words. He said, 'a single spark can spread a prairie fire'. But all sparks do not spread a prairie fire, isn't it? When we come to the time of Bhikari Paswan, we know how many closed factories were there

and so many movements were conducted on the issue of closed factories. We also tried. Mobilizing support for jute mill strikes, movements in support of tea-garden workers, support for workers in the tanneries – through the entire decade of the eighties, we did all that. Nagarik Mancha led movements. Various kinds of workers' associations, organizations, and platforms were created. There was a significant movement in support of the victims of the Bhopal gas disaster. There were anti-eviction mobilizations and gatherings. A National Relief Committee was formed in protest against man-made floods. However the feeling was natural, that nothing was being achieved, who paid any attention to these long, fruitless efforts? But we finally saw the impact of these movements and struggles at the time of Singur-Nandigram.

So class struggle does not end. The Naxalbari era took that very struggle to another level. Popular foundation, ethics, thinking about alternative means of power, and attempting to act upon that – everything taken together, that era has a unique character, and if you allow me, an everlasting impact.

Notes

1. All the left parties called for a 48-hour strike on 22-23 September 1966 in protest against the West Bengal govt.'s food policy.
2. The hunger strike was started because of various demands pertaining to the hostel.
3. Edited by Anil Acharya, *Shottor Doshok* ("The Seventies"), Calcutta, 1998 (in 3 volumes). The theme of the third volume is 'Students Movement in the Sixties-Seventies'. Ashim Chatterjee ("The Students' and Youth Movement in the Sixties", pp. 13-31) and Dipanjan Rouchoudhury ("Students' Movement and Presidency College, pp. 131-158) have written in this volume. Other writing too (for instance, by Saibal Mitra, Ranabir Samaddar, Subhash Gangopadhyay, etc) are significant in this regard.
4. Following the Chinese line, Charu Majumdar and Saroj Dutta, the top-most leaders of the CPI(ML), had criticized the 'adventurist' politics of Che Guevara.
5. This was formed in 1969. Among the notable members were Charu Majumdar, the CPI(M)'s state leader of the United Provinces, Shivkumar Mishra, S Tiwari, Satyanarayan Singh, from Bihar, etc.
6. Harekrishna Konar was a firebrand leader of the CPI(M) and the Minister for Land & Land Revenue in the United Front governments of 1967 and 1969.
7. Anushilan Samiti was an organization that arose from the conglomeration of local youth clubs and gymnasiums in 1902. It propounded revolutionary violence as the means for ending British rule in India.
8. Mahendra Pratap was a revolutionary who tried to organize Indian students in Europe for the cause of the country's freedom.
9. Satyen Bose and Kanailal Dutt killed Narendra Goswami for having turned state witness during the Alipore Bomb Case (1908). They were hanged.
10. Ranabir Samaddar, "Fifty Years after Naxalbari, Popular Movements Still Have Lessons to Learn", *The Wire*, 6 March 2017, <https://thewire.in/111691/naxalbari-communism-maoism/>
11. Ranabir Samaddar, *Passive Revolution in West Bengal: 1977–2011*, Delhi, 2013.

12. Bhikari Paswan was a worker in Victoria Jute Mill, in the municipal town of Bhadreswar, near Calcutta, who disappeared in October 1993 following a clash between the management and workers, in which a policeman was killed. It was alleged that he had been abducted, tortured and murdered by the police.