

## **Looking back at Naxalbari**

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Grassroots movements for land and tenancy rights form an important part of the narrative of progressive struggles in India. Even though defeated, an important consequence of these grassroots peasant movements of the 1940s for land rights<sup>1</sup> was that land-reforms were constitutionally mandated when India became a republic in 1950.

Despite this, a coalition of the urban bourgeoisie and landed interests were successfully able to resist land reform. As a result outside the abolition of landlordism, very little land was redistributed except in Kerala. However the abolition of landlordism did open the door for the gradual capitalist transformation of Indian agriculture.

But in the early 1960s, India was in the midst of an agrarian crisis. It is in this backdrop, that in May 1967 in a remote village of Naxalbari in north Bengal, that Charu Mazumdar and Kanu Sanyal, both CPM (the undivided CPI had split in 1964 leading to the creation of Communist Party of India – Marxist (CPM)) leaders, led one of independent India's most celebrated peasant uprisings, inspired by Mao Zedong and Chinese communist peasant revolution.

The peasant uprising itself was quickly crushed but led to, in May 1968, the formation of a left-wing armed guerilla movement, called the Naxalite movement that chose to eschew parliamentary politics and explicitly espoused armed struggle aimed at fomenting a peasant revolution. In May 1969 Mazumdar, Sanyal and their supporters split from the CPM to form the Communist Party of India – Marxist Leninist (CPI-ML). By October however another faction formed a separate group. This dynamic that marked its birth continues to bedevil the Naxalite (or Maoist) movement to this day, with splits and counter-splits due to differences over ideology and strategy.

In May 1969 CPI-ML drew within its ambit not only the peasantry but also left-wing progressive urban youth, a lot of whom, alienated with India's insubstantial political and economic gains since freedom, dropped out of school and college to join the movement. The Indian state responded with the full might of its repressive arms, which the movement was unable to withstand because of insufficient popular mobilization, internal feuds and popular distrust of the excessive use of violence. Charu Mazumdar was arrested in July 1972 and died a couple of weeks later in prison. By the mid-1970s, in the face of unrelenting state repression and thousands of deaths in police 'encounters' and arbitrary killings and tens of thousands of jailed political prisoners, the first phase of the Naxalite movement was effectively over.

What of the legacies of Naxalbari? One of the most enduring legacies has been in the field of literature and theatre, particularly in West Bengal, with some very powerful meditations on the impact of state violence on individuals and on a society that gets

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<sup>1</sup> Such as Tebhaga (in 1946 in what is now Bangladesh) and Telengana (from 1944-1951 in Andhra Pradesh state), both of which were finally led by the undivided Communist Party of India (CPI).

caught in an ideological maelstrom. Naxalbari led to the emergence of the Subaltern School of Indian historiography that restored popular agency to the narrative discourse of Indian history<sup>2</sup>. It strengthened the civil-rights movement in India, as progressive groups sought to use constitutional and legal remedies to fight for justice not only for the tens of thousands of naxalites who languished in Indian jails but also others who were victims of state repression.

The Indian state's response to the agrarian crisis of the mid-1960s was the introduction of the subsidised 'green revolution' package of agricultural technology. The Naxalbari movement certainly gave an impetus to its widespread implementation across India, leading eventually to the emergence of a rural bourgeoisie and capitalist agriculture.

The Naxalite movement has seen a recent resurgence, driven by the reappearance of the land question which India's bourgeoisie thought it had solved with the green revolution and capitalist agriculture. But the movement forgets that this is not 1968, Indian agriculture today is largely capitalist with a differentiated peasantry, India's tribes do not necessarily want to overthrow the state, and there is still popular abhorrence of excessive and arbitrary use of force, be it by the state or armed revolutionaries.

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