

From Outspoken Admiration to Incisive Critique

“The Naxalbari Uprising was by far the most far-reaching and meaningful event in the post-1947 period of Indian history”.

Mahasweta Debi

“ The aesthetic moment emerges when the flow of history with all its ramifications is broken decisively by the Jetztzeit, that is, by the immediate moment of rebellion.

Walter Benjamin

The more I am delving deep into the multifaceted creativity inspired and incited by the Naxalite uprising, the more I am struck, nay, baffled at times, by the sheer quantum and quality of this outpouring. From propagandist poetry to reflective verse; from novels or prose narratives hailing the movement to stories and novels severely criticizing the theoretical ballast and its related activism; from revelatory plays transcribing the most decisive moments of the movement on the stage to cut and dried one act plays serving as slices of the experiential truth; from gripping films like *Hajar Churasir Ma* and *Herbert* to full-throated songs which exhilarated hundreds, the surfeit of this many-faceted creativity is - to put in one word - dazzling. Indeed, scholars and critics can churn out several doctoral dissertations from this specific genre. For example, one topic could be the evaluation of mainstream literature engaged with the uprising which would concentrate on the creativity of Samaresh Bose, Sunil Gangopadhyay and Samaresh Majumdar. Yet another could be the examination and estimate of actual activists who also wielded the pen like Swarna Mitra and Dronacharya Ghosh and their ardent supporters like Mahasweta Debi.

Only one aspect of the genre has not received adequate attention so far, and, that is, memoirs or $\text{Öö,Ê} \times \text{Tö}\%ç\tilde{a} _ \text{F}^*$. It is however true that Swarna Mitra's *Grame Chalo* is based on personal experience, but even after this intervention, it remains primarily a novel. This huge gap is only partially filled by Radhanath Chattaraj's " $\%ç \pm \text{ÁÖö,Ê} \times \text{Tö}$ " and Raghav Bandyopadhyay's $\text{LçXĩç} _ \text{70}$. In this context, it needs to be emphatically stated that $\text{LçXĩç} _ \text{70}$ is a masterpiece. Shot through with powerful reminiscences, both inspiring and agonizing, this memoir first published in 'Desh', on the one hand, dissects the entire movement with a hawk's eye, and, on the other, recalls the redemptive moments with clarity and insight. But why does this specific branch of literature, namely $\text{Öö,Ê} \times \text{TöEöX}$ or memoir, suffer from this marked paucity? One reason could be that the activists who operated in Kolkata and also in the villages preferred to remain silent after the collapse of the movement. They did not want to transcribe the defeat and breakdown of the movement in literary-creative terms. They regarded the entire experience as far too palpable, immediate and even, intimate to call for an autobiographical record. One could also apply the brilliant verdict of Thomas Wiesemgrund Adorno who said in a related context that invigorating poetry could not be written after the horror of Auschwitz. That

is, some experiences – be it the Auschwitz or Baranagar mayhem - defy the process of creation and remain searing, raw, wounded and therefore unsung. In my final paper I shall concentrate on Raghav Bandhyopadhyay's brilliant memoir to examine the tormented dialectic between intrinsic silence and irresistible sound.

As I have already said, the 8 to 10 thousand spatial limit of my paper will compel me to be highly choosy and selective. I have just begun my journey, hence I cannot offer a complete and comprehensive list of the texts that will be analysed and deconstructed. But, at this early moment, I can certainly pinpoint the creative constructions that would secure their deserving places in my study. These are :

NOVELS : Mahesweta Debi's *Basai Tudu* and *Hajar Churasir Ma*. In order to substantiate the overarching dialectic between 'outspoken admiration' and mainstream 'Incisive Critique', I shall also dissect Samaresh Bose's *Mahakaler Rather Ghora* and *Manushi Saktir Utso*. To be candid, I have not yet decided on Samaresh Maumder's *Kalbela*, whether to include it or not. This mainstream novel is perhaps the most popular in its genre and has been extensively commented upon. I am not keen to repeat what has been said already.

PLAYS : I shall certainly shed light on Bijan Bhattacharjee's masterpiece *Debigarjan* and Utpal Dutt's *Teer*. If space and time permit, I shall include one or two one act plays; one of them could be *১৯৭০-০৮* by Amal Roy which transcreates the massacre that took place in Barasat on 19th November, 1970.

I have a particular word of praise for *Debigarjan* whose conclusion is much more radical and decisive than *Nabanna's* and is a direct descendent of Dinabandhu Mitra's 'Neel Darpan' and Mir Mosharaf Hossain's 'Jamidar Darpan'. The last elaborate stage direction in Bijan Bhattacharjee's play is a prevision, or if I may use the aporial term 'pre-echo' of what took place three years later. The stage direction, in chiselled and inspired prose, recreates the killing of the tyrant jotedar Pravanjan and is a forerunner to identical reports published in *Deshabarati* sometime later. The first staging of *Debigarjan* was on February 21, 1966 while the jotedar-jamidar 'Khatam' programme was directed in 1969-70. In other words, the aesthetic dimension (Herbet Marcuse's favourite term) was enacted before the actual event. Adorno's celebratory 'Utopian moment' was transmuted before the actual existential intervention. Passages such as these which underline Carlyle's role of the poet or the creative being as 'Vates' (Prophet) and inspire him – to use the Shakespearean phrase in *Macbeth* – to look into the seeds of time bring together the Utopian and actual moments of time in a seamless, unbroken continuum.

POEMS AND SONGS : Young, idealistic Naxalites were not only rebels. Some of them were poets and quite talented ones at that. Rahul Purakayastha is bringing out a comprehensive volume of Naxalite poetry and poetry written during the Emergency. Due to be released on Poila Baishak it should act as an unerring guide to the poetic output of the Naxalites which reverberates with hope, ardour, unflinching commitment and also heartfelt self-interrogation and profound regret. For the present, we have the *Thema Book of Naxalite Poetry* edited by Sumanta Banerjee who was also an activist. Indeed, Sumanta Banerjee's *The Simmering Revolution* is the most objective and authoritative account of the Naxalite revolt. In this selection we read the poems of Bipul Chakravarti, Partha Bandyopadhyay, Saroj Dutta, Murari Mukhopadhyay, Dronacharya Ghosh, Srijan Sen and others. Quite a few poems are abiding examples of literary

excellence where the form and the content converge to give to the rebellious thought, idea or feeling the appropriate aesthetic form or the desired objective correlative. Consider, for example, the following poem written by Bipul Chakravarti, a rebel, who had to suffer inhuman torture inside the prison : “Whip me / So that the scars / Remain embedded / For days together. Whip me again and again, / So that, / When you are finished with your whipping / I rise up / Looking like / A striped tiger”. Even the most diehard disciple of Stefan Mallarme (the most devoted apostle of pure poetry) would have to agree to the claim that this poem has more than adequate literary or poetic value.

Yet, at the same time, one has to admit that many, so-called poems were primarily propagandistic – that is, they do not qualify as poetry proper. In these efforts the sharp content of resistance and revolt attained the foreground and, as a result, the poetic dimension was often ignored and belittled. Even a thoroughly partisan critic like Nirmal Ghosh commented that these efforts do not culminate in genuine poetry. He advocated that the spontaneous union of form and content was the lowest common denominator of poetry and this crucial denominator was missing in many poems.

Along with the activist poets mentioned earlier lyricists and poets who cherished a deep sympathy for and even fellow-feeling with the uprising, penned poems of imperishable worth, though they belonged – to use the common term - to mainstream literature. Foremost among these poets were Birendra Chattopadhyay, Subhas Mukhopadhyay *ঐশ্বর্যে ঐশ্বর্যে* *জগৎ* Sankha Ghosh (elegy for Timir), Alokaranjan Dsagupta. They saluted the bravery and sacrifice of the young Naxalites, condemned the torture and killings and dreamt of the day when they would be victorious. A cross section of these poems declaring a communion will also be deconstructed and analysed.

In an animated conversation, my friend Ranabir Samaddar, drew my attention to the songs and dirges that accompanied the uprising. His logic was quite simple. He said, “While prose and drama were meant for the consumption of the literate and educated middle class, songs sung from the rostrum or during the action reached the ears of hundreds”. Detailing the tradition of these rousing songs, which reached the apex during the IPTA days and nights and recalling the contribution of the unforgettable like Salil Choudhury and Jyotirindra Maitra, he said that the songs sung by the Naxalites also inspired hundreds of rebels and activists .

These songs (i) broke the dramatised narrative, as in the case of *Debigarjan*, (ii) were composed by poets like Srijan Sen, (iii) were adapted from the folksongs presented by village bards to focus on the onrush of the revolt. Incidentally, the most glorious example of songs juxtaposed with the creative narrative is to be read in Akhtaruzzaman Elicis’s *Khowabnama*. An appropriate example of a revolutionary song was written by Bipul Chakravarti :

They are the brothers of Bhagat Singh
They are the brothers of Khudiram
We want the release of all political prisoners

While these songs rouse and inspire, they coexist with the lone, lyrical voice reflecting or ruminating on the existential condition of the rebels. Their doubts, dilemmas, questions and sorrow receive a poignant treatment in these poems. Srijan Sen has written inspirational songs,

on the one hand, and enquiring lyrics, on the other, which detail his personal condition, afflicted and injured. Titled appositely *The Return* one such poem by him reads : “The air became heavy/ Memories suddenly became pedlars of flowers / I found only stairs before me / stairs of the overbridge / Laying themselves bare in the darkness”.

FILMS : Quite a few films have been made where the uprising has been treated with sympathy and concern. At this moment, in the preparatory phase, I am thinking of concentrating on two films – *Duratwa* by Buddhadev Dasgupta and *Herbert* by Sumon Mukhopadhyay. Instead of evaluating these films like a professional film-critic (I am not one), I shall interview these two directors, who are my close friends. The thrust of the interview will be on their attitude towards the uprising, and why they made these two films which obviously do not belong to mainstream cinema. Examples of other films which treat the Naxal uprising diligently and artistically are Mrinal son’s *Padatik* and *Kolkata Ekatoor* Utplendu Chakravarti’s rousing documentary *Mukti Chai* and Gautam Ghosh’s *Kalbela*.

MEMOIRS : As stated earlier, I shall read Raghav Bandyopadhyay’s *Journal Sattar* meticulously and examine the spotlight of memory as it falls on the turbulent 70s

SHORT STORES : This is another fruitful section. Mahasweta Devi herself has written more than a dozen stories. Sunil Gangopadhyay, Nabarun Bhattacharya , Amal Chakravarti, Dutiman Chatterjee, and others have also contributed. These stories constitute - to use Mahasweta Debi’s expression - ‘the documentation of the time’. The final selection of short stores for deconstruction will be done after some time.

Following are the self-imposed guidelines which I would like to follow to the best of my ability when writing the paper on Naxalite creativity :

- (i) To adopt a strictly non-partisan approach while evaluating the creative texts and expressions. In other words, my own political predilection will not cast a shadow on the estimate.
- (ii) To remain always aware of the aesthetic precondition whose fulfilment conveys a timeless dimension to the creative text.
- (iii) To separate the truly creative from the primarily propagandistic. At the same time, take it for granted that the propagandistic has its own role to fulfil in such a political uprising, and hence it cannot be thrown overboard-lock, stock and barrel.
- (iv) To trace the movement from the political voice to the personal voice and viceversa. Both voices have been explored by poet-activists like Srijan Sen and they weave a dialectical relationship between the private and the public.
- (v) To stress the quality of inner doubts, queries, torment of the protagonists, as is evident primarily in the novels. Ratan Khasnobis has drawn my attention to this aspect which has been explored by, say, an author like Samaresh Bose.

- (vi) Finally, to weave a thesis-antithesis relationship between creativity engaged in by Naxalites and by non-Naxalites as well, who also have something to say on the pathbreaking uprising. As I have already said, my paper will be an overall critical review of Naxalite creativity in which the leading theme-patterns will be analysed and the aesthetic dimension examined. It has to be necessarily, selective in nature. But after the completion of this paper, I would seriously consider bringing out a full-fledged monograph on Naxalbari-creativity. This monograph would attempt to do full justice to the quantum and quality of this genre. Till date, not a single non-partisan book has appeared on this important subject. I shall be grateful if RLS extends its helping had to this fruitful, future engagement.