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MONOGRAFICO

Istituzioni e conflittualità: una prospettiva interdisciplinare
a cura di Marco Antonelli e Jonathan Pieri (Università di Pisa)

LIBRI IN DISCUSSIONE

HOW CAN A SOCIO-POLITICAL CONFLICT SPEAK?
Some Trends in the Study of West Bengal's Naxalbari Movement, 1967-1972

by *Vanessa Corrado*[*]

Abstract

The article engages with the historiography of the Naxalbari movement in West Bengal in order to underline some epistemological problems in the study of recent history and revolutionary movements. The essay begins with the circumstances that gave rise to the movement, trying to underline its complexity and multifaceted character. It then presents the major literary and research-based publications in English to show some bias in producing knowledge about the movement. Thereafter, the article questions the bias or lack of interest on the historicization of the movement pointing at the problem of bipolarization of ideas by the authors, and at the absence of empirical researches for a considerable time. Finally, the author suggests that tropes, opposite narratives, and romanticization on socio-political movements may be overcome through questioning participation, and admitting the nuanced character of the personal and the political in history.

Keywords

Naxalbari; Naxalite; Revolution; History

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Naxalbari movement takes its name from Naxalbari (also spelled as Naksalbari) community development block[1], a rural area in the Siliguri subdivision of the Darjeeling district. There, mass-based actions and protests by sharecroppers and poor peasants against big landowners, supported by the Darjeeling District Committee of the Communist Party of India (Marxist)[2], which was active also through the Siliguri Mahakuma Krishak Samiti (Siliguri Subdivision Peasant Association), proved successful, especially between February and May 1967. Protests and unrest were the result of a persisting land question[3] that entangled in economic and social abuses by landowners towards their sharecroppers and agricultural labourers. Peasant protests had already happened in Bengal rural areas, the most famous of which is known as Tebhaga movement (1946-1947)[4]. The opening event of the Naxalbari movement happened on 25 May 1967 in a village called Bengai Jote. There, nine women and two children died under the firing of the local police as retaliation for the killing of a police officer, Sonam Wangdi, which took place few days before when he and some colleagues clashed with local peasants. The whole sequence of events that preceded the killing is less known. In Sanjay Mitra's (2019) oral narration[5]:

[1] CD block is part of the administrative structure of India and refers to rural areas whose planning and development is led by some specialists and various gram panchayats (village councils).

[2] Hereafter, CPI (M).

[3] The land question in West Bengal originated from 1793 Permanent Settlement, which was indeed an agreement to fix tax collecting between East India Company and local landowners located in the Bengal Province. However, the new provisions led to changes in socio-economic relations in rural societies affected by the Settlement. New social classes appeared, leading to a more clear and tough separation between those who owned the land and those who cultivated it. Further measures enacted by the British Crown, such as 1885 Bengal Tenancy Act and 1928 Amendment, added to other factors, worsened the situation for sharecroppers and small peasants. For an introduction see Chatterjee (1984) and Rampini, Finucane (1889).

[4] It was led by the Communist Party of India (hereafter, CPI), also thanks to the work done by its activists through the kisan sabhas (peasant associations). The movement's aim was to reverse the share due to the landowner by the sharecropper, so that the latter could keep for himself two thirds – as 'tebhaga' means – and the former could have one third. Along with sharecroppers, agricultural labourers participated. The movement suffered repression from the colonial government, many leaders of the Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha were jailed, and the agitation was called off. For an introduction, see Cooper (1988), Lahiri (2001), and Panjabi (2017).

[5] I collected oral narrations of former Naxalite activists between October and November 2019 while enquiring into popular participation of the urban Naxalbari movement. For further details on Sanjay Mitra and following oral narrators mentioned, see references at the end. The facts narrated by him, which had preceded the already accounted killing of nine

> If you look at the beginning, the initial stage of Naxalbari movement, what happened? Bigul Kisan was a sharecropper and Iswar Tirki was a landlord. Iswar Tirki was with the [Praja] Socialist Party. Bigul Kisan was with the Communist Party [Marxist]. Bigul Kisan got victory in the court. Land Revenue Department said that Bigul Kisan is a sharecropper, so he has a right [to the land he cultivates]. And then Iswar Tirki as an owner, he got so angry he attacked Bigul Kisan['s] house and burned it. Then on retaliation the peasants got organized themselves and they attacked Iswar Tirki's house. And Iswar Tirki fled and they burnt the house. So that was the original Naxalbari incident. By the time United Front government has also come [in power][6]. So they [Bigul Kisan along with CPI (M)'s local leaders] were asked to surrender [by the United Front government] and Hare Krishna Konar[7] said that 'We'll see [how to help you] but you have to stop this [struggle]'. Kanu Sanyal, Jangal Santhal[8], answered in that meeting that 'What we are doing is for the document of Kishan Committee, nothing against the party line. So why should we stop?' Then answer [from minister Konar] was that 'Then we were not in power, now we're in the government so we will make sure that there is no case against you people. We will manage. But you have to stop.' But the meeting failed. They didn't agree. They returned [to Naxalbari] and then the police was sent under the leadership of Sonam Wangdi as an officer. And he was shot by the arrow. And he died. Then there was a large contingent sent and the Kishan Committee decided that 'Let women face it' [thinking that] that would stop police from getting to the armed action violence. But that didn't stop the police so they shoot and eleven [*sic!* nine] women and a child [*sic!* two children] died[9].

women as well as the well-known meetings between Kanu Sanyal and Minister Konar, available in many monographs on the movement listed in the references, relate to Bigul Kishan and Iswar Tirki. The fight among the two is briefly mentioned, as far as I know, in Banerjee (1980: 110) and Das (2015: 50-51).

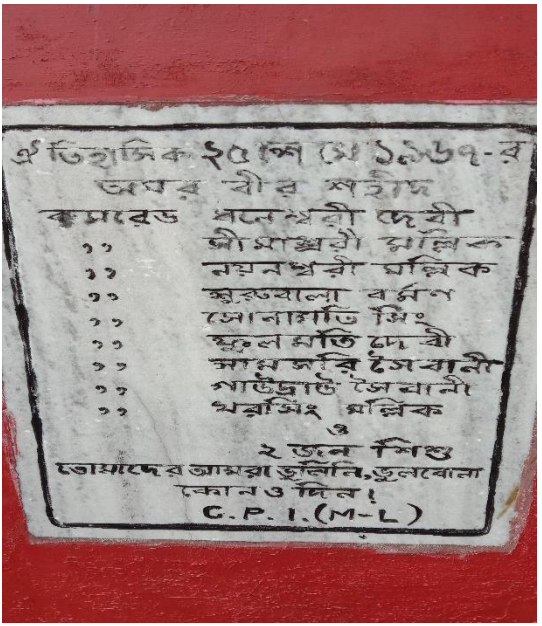
[6] For the first time after Independence, the Indian National Congress was defeated in West Bengal state elections by a coalition of communist and socialist parties. This alliance included the communist party that by then had already split in two factions in 1964: the CPI and the CPI (M).

[7] Minister for Land and Land Revenue in the 1967 United Front government, CPI (M) member.

[8] Kanu Sanyal (1932-2010) was a CPI (M) District Committee member of Darjeeling and later became a very famous leader of the rural Naxalbari movement. He lived among poor peasants and agricultural labourers and remained a peasant-devoted communist worker until his death. Jangal Santhal (1925-1988) too became a famous rural leader. He played a major role in bringing the Santhal Adivasi community, to which he belonged, into the struggle. Basu (1977) took inspiration from his personality to create the main character for one his novels.

[9] See fig. 1 for the list of the women's names who died in the well-known killing that attracted the attention towards Naxalbari.

Fig. 1. The famous pillar in Bengai Jote erected on the ground where the killing happened. It reports the nine women's names



Source: Picture mine, November 2019

The precarious situation that West Bengal had been facing in the aftermath of Independence also in the urban context revealed itself through two food crises respectively in 1959 and 1966 due to inflation and increase of basic commodities' price (Basu, 2018; Das and Bandyopadhyay, 2004); a sharpened land question in the countryside that mixed with the need for land around urban areas for people coming from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) (Banerjee and Sengupta, 2018); government and police abuses against protesters all along the fifties and sixties (Sengupta 2019); and an inner-party ideological debate that had been going on among the communists since 1953 (Basu, 2000). These were the circumstances[10] that brought some communist cadres and some sections of society to hail at Naxalbari as a symbol of struggle against injustice,

[10] For further readings on popular movements and communist mobilization in the fifties and sixties in West Bengal, see also Chakrabarti (1990), Guha Ray (2007), Samaddar (2018b), Satpathi (2013).

becoming a slogan for the Indian revolution[11]. The city of Calcutta[12] became the epicentre of the urban Naxalbari movement of West Bengal. There, many who had been struggling inside the CPI (M) questioning parliamentary democracy, and who had been carrying on the inner-party debate by forming many groups outside the party and publishing their own leaflets, they formed the All-India Coordination Committee of the Revolutionaries of the CPI (M), which created the Naxalbari and Peasant Struggle Solidarity Committee in July-August 1967 (*Deśabratī*, 31 August 1967: 38). It became the All India Coordination Committee of Communist Revolutionaries[13] in November 1967 (*Liberation* 1968 1(7): 17-25, 1(8): 7-10). The urban movement attracted students from all walks of life, especially the middle class, and many individuals from factory trade unionism, as well as informal labourers and petty clerks (*Śahīd* 1996, 1997). It also relied on solidarity networks in Calcutta's paras (neighbourhoods) (Donner, 2011; Samaddar, 2018c), where its galis (lanes, by-lanes) worked as labyrinths for activists while escaping from police raids (Chattopadhyay, 2015; Sengupta, 2019).

In 1969, the circles of Charu Mazumdar, the main ideologue of the movement, approved the formation of the extra-parliamentary Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist)[14], and the majority of the activists and the two above-mentioned revolutionary journals, *Deśabratī* and *Liberation*, came under its influence starting from April 1969 (*Liberation* 1969 2(7): 3-16). Its political aim was to seize power from villages following the Maoist path, and to establish the New People's Democracy. From 1969, it stressed the khatam (annihilation) line and put less emphasis on mass actions. CPI (ML) was the major representative group among other revolutionary trends that radicalized after the Naxalbari incident. Many of the college students – an important section of the society that participated in the movement – became CPI (ML) supporters. However, there were communists who broke away from the initial committee, the AICCCR, and never joined the CPI (ML), or, there were those who were never in the AICCCR, such as the organizations of the Maoist Communist Centre[15] and the Revolutionary Communist Council of India[16].

[11] The most famous was probably Āmār bāṛi, tomār bāṛi, Nakśālbāṛi, Khaṛibāṛi (Bangla, "Your home, my home is Naxalbari and Kharibari"). It plays with the word bāṛi ("home"/ "house") that forms also the second part of the name of the two areas where peasant protests took place in the first part of 1967, Naxalbari and Kharibari.

[12] When referred to pre-2001 period, I use Calcutta. Otherwise, I use Kolkata.

[13] Hereafter, AICCCR.

[14] Hereafter, CPI (ML).

[15] Hereafter, MCC.

[16] Hereafter, RCCI.

Although they all recognized Naxalbari as a turning point for the revolutionary communist discourse, stopped being CPI (M) activists after that incident, and carried on revolutionary activities, they were not all under the influence of the often mentioned CPI (ML)[17].

Highly repressive measures were instated and police atrocities happened frequently, both in streets and while in police custody (Amnesty International 1973: 61; Chaudhuri, 1977; Guha, 1997; Guha, 2001; 2005; Mitra, 1989; Patwardhan, 1978; Tyler, 1977). Charu Mazumdar died in police custody in 1972, and the newly CPI (ML) became fragmented. The movement had lost its strongholds in rural areas and the city of Calcutta was under police control. From 1975 to 1977, a state of emergency was called all over India by Indira Gandhi and by that time the movement was crushed, the majority of Naxalite activists were either dead or jailed.

In the 1980s, guerrilla activities began in new parts of the country, mainly in rural and forest areas of Central India[18]. New groups started calling themselves the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), but with different regulations (Bhattacharyya, 2016): some of them remained inactive while others became parliamentary parties. Others formed guerrilla units and started proper guerrilla warfare. After scattered activities as well as fights among themselves, a new and united Naxalite party was formed out of the merger of different guerrilla groups and the MCC. It was called the Communist Party of India (Maoist)[19], now the main extra-parliamentary Naxalite organization.

In spite of many published works on the Naxalbari movement, and the popularity that the word 'Naxalite' enjoys both inside and outside the West Bengal state, its history and especially its popular features out of a

[17] During my fieldwork in 2019, I had the chance to collect two oral narrations regarding the two revolutionary trends: Sumit Chattopadhyay and Braja Ray respectively. Above-mentioned Sanjay Mitra, on the contrary, was in AICCCR but parted before the CPI (ML) formation and worked with the group called National Liberation and Democratic Front (NLDF). See references on oral narrations.

[18] Andhra Pradesh and Bihar were active already in the late seventies. The Central area of the country has been called 'red corridor' and it identifies places were Naxalite guerrilla warfare has been going on since the 1980s. Nowadays it includes forest and village areas starting from the Northeast at the border between West Bengal, Bihar and Jharkhand, crossing Chhattisgarh, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, with few scattered areas in the states of Maharashtra and Karnataka in the Southwest.

[19] Their activities include both violent actions through guerrilla warfare as well as social work related to health, education, and social and agricultural activities. Contradictions inside the movement, retaliation from police towards supporters of the Maoists, and organized counterinsurgency activities are part of the constant debate in current India's affairs. As Madhu Babu (2010) has analyzed, Maoists are mostly depicted by the media in a negative way only. The ongoing Naxalite/Maoist movement is also a very appealing topic for publications, whether academic-based or journalistic. For a good introduction see Shah (2018), Sundar (2016).

state-centric or political theory discourse is not empirically and extensively analysed within academic publications. In world history or comparative studies, sometimes the movement is mentioned in connection to the 1968 global protests (Fink, Gassert and Junker, 1999; Banerjee, 2018), where the Naxalbari movement is reduced to a student-youth-led protest under the influence of the Cultural Revolution. At least, Indian restless sixties are mentioned, thus contrasting the lingering image of a spiritual India that started to spread extensively after some New Age events of the late sixties, which extended the perception of an exotic and peaceful country from just an elite phenomenon during XIX century orientalism (Halbfass, 1981) to a mass phenomenon during the Western 'hippie' times. The opening of an Hare Krishna ashram in New York in 1966 (Griesser and Gawde, 2017) and the Beatles in Rishikesh looking for meditation and spirituality (Colombo, 1968) definitely stand as turning points for a new stereotype of Indian spirituality (Squarcini, 2007). It was indeed interesting to see how even in 2018, some celebrations of the 1968 global protests did not acknowledge India. For instance, at the History Museum in Marseilles (France), the 2018 temporary exhibition on 1968 had references to global movements in many countries, but India was neglected[20]. This overlooked part of India's contemporary history has been openly denounced only recently in one of the latest publications on the subject:

> […] readers have to remember that even in the propaganda and agitation literature of the Left the unprecedented militancy of the late sixties and early seventies stands ignored. […] the legitimacy of the sixties has been denied. All nations in history own up their past including the past of failed insurgencies and revolts. Only in miserable Bengal that pride is denied, perhaps because the insurgent sixties and seventies are still not history. Perhaps our time is such that these still remain stories of our lives. (Samaddar, 2018a: 3)[21]

In fact, this is especially demonstrated, I argue, by the huge number of publications on the topic that reflect the fact that for a considerable time only those who were there and were linked to those times have been interested in writing on the Naxalbari movement. This is an added consideration to what Samaddar states on the militancy of the sixties and seventies, which remains a notable matter especially for arts circles, and

[20] See the online page of the museum http://musee-histoire-marseille-voie-historique.fr/de/resources/temporary-exhibitions.

[21] The author, an established Marxist historian specialized in migration studies and now director of the Calcutta Research Group (CRG), talks of 'our lives' because he too, as many authors on the movement – as I will show – was a Naxalite activist during his young age.

survives through personal stories told inside Kolkata's families.

The Naxalbari movement of the sixties and seventies is hard to define in a few words. The reasons can be summarized in four points. First, that is due to the varied social composition of the movement's actors who took part (peasants, agricultural and urban labourers, students, artists and intellectuals, workers and employees at large), and to the role that many played as sympathizers or helpers, as Donner (2011) postulates[22]. Second, the complexity of the movement is also due to its double character of being a rural and an urban movement at the same time. A feature that it earned thanks to the involvement of actors in both rural and urban areas, not leaving aside the support it enjoyed in small towns of West Bengal (Sinha Roy, 2011: 73-76). The model was the Chinese path: to declass oneself and to integrate with the village poor. However, many urban Naxalites worked in the metropolitan area of Calcutta and did not go to villages or went there for a short time. Third, the Naxalbari movement had a wide recognition by revolutionaries outside West Bengal. It was born and got its name in West Bengal, but later spread to or influenced communists in other Indian states, especially Bihar and Andhra Pradesh[23]. Fourth, the complexity is also due to the many different communist revolutionary trends it came to be identified with in West Bengal. The term 'Naxalite', initially used by both press and police (Mukherjee, 1999; Sen Gupta, 2011) while referring to protest activities by urban communists who were supporting peasant protests of the Naxalbari area, later turned to be a common way to brand all Left extremists. Even though communist revolutionaries all hailed at Naxalbari and aligned themselves along the path of revolution and extra-parliamentary activities, they had differences among one another and since the beginning they were already fragmented in many groups, each one publishing its own leaflet or journal.

Therefore, to begin with, it must be clear that all authors of the Naxalbari movement or revolutionary conflicts at large should confront themselves with an epistemic question first, bearing in mind that their view could render a monolithic and consequently incoherent image of the questioned movement. But let us proceed to see how the Naxalbari movement has been narrated so far, a narration in which empirical-based researches have appeared only recently, despite the high number of publications. I indeed

[22] My current PhD research project engages also with this hypothesis and highlights the relevance of family members' and neighbors' support for Naxalite activists in Calcutta (*Workers, Laborers, and Employees of Calcutta: Dynamics of Popular Participation in the Naxalbari Movement, 1967-1972*).

[23] In this article I focus on the case of West Bengal alone, where the movement originated, because the impact and variations the movement had in states like the above-mentioned requires a proper attention, as Samaddar (2018a: 6-7) states.

suggest that focusing on people's participation instead of discussing theoretical debates inside the movement, or, big leaders' choices and conduct, may help the understanding of this romanticized page of Indian history beyond tropes and opposite narratives.

2. PUBLICATIONS ON THE MOVEMENT

The Naxalbari movement enjoys a considerable amount of written works and as some scholars have pointed out (Basu 2012a, b; Sinha Roy 2011: esp. 36-46), it had a strong impact on the artistic field, especially literature and cinema, where Naxalites are protagonists or the Naxalbari years have been chosen as background. Non-literary production too is quite abundant. However, my attention was drawn by the lack of empirical studies. Therefore, I have tried to identify the numerous publications through three frameworks according to their nature and bias: literary works, memoirs, and research books.

The literary field is the most well-known and broadly accessible to the general public. The imagination and reminiscences of those years are indeed reflected and nurtured in a mutual relationship by the huge body of cultural representations that the Naxalbari movement enjoys in literature (Basu, 2012a; 2012b). Sometimes film adaptation followed literary creation (Ghosh G., 2009; Mukhopadhyay, 2005; Nihalani, 1998; Ray, 1970). Basu (2012c) indeed provides an essay collection on cinema productions related to the whole Naxalite movement. Literature and cinema are always successful in spreading knowledge on a vast scale, being more accessible than academic books or essays. This is further proved by the amount of fictional or semi-fictional works on the topic[24]. Problems appear when, as has happened in the last two years of my dealing with this topic, many people I met inside and outside the academic milieu, quoted fictional works set in Naxalbari years as the only source of their knowledge about it. This naturally tends to both awake interest in the subject, as well as create partial truths. For instance, take the graphic novel project (Kumar, 2015) whose title reproduces one of the famous Naxalite slogans quoted at the beginning (see *supra* note 11), *Amar Bari, Tomar Bari Naxalbari*. The work, which freely goes from English to Bengali to Hindi languages, tells the story of the entire Naxalite/Maoist movement from 1967 until today. Even though the purpose was probably to show how many interests have been at play all along this movement, not last the extended corruption in police and state machinery, it is also evident

[24] See references for literary works at the end.

that the work brings all stereotypes out. Peasants swayed by indoctrinated communists; communists greed for revolution; nowadays Adivasi people going in and out of Maoist guerrilla units because of love affairs and family quarrels. Mandal (2015) called this taste for violence and romanticization related to Bengali revolutionary years, which is depicted also by some contemporary international-based award-winning novelists (Lahiri 2013; Mukherjee 2014), as the neo-orientalist agenda. Even if these works are not considered historical archives and represent fictional or semi-fictional narratives, it is incidentally true that they stand as 'imaginary archives' in relation to the Naxalbari movement (Sinha Roy, 2015: 36-46). They contribute to shaping the memories of the movement at the same time as they themselves are shaped by the stories about the movement. Although artistic field produces interesting reflections, the representation of the movement has proceeded from an epistemic appropriation that has led to a commodity production, which naturally bears an ideological bias (Basu 2012b).

The second framework through which I read the publications on the movement includes memoirs or collections of short biographies. This is a production that seemed to increase as time went by, especially in Bangla. Memoirs of political activism and ideological debates abound among those who were the rank and file, known leaders or students (Bandyopadhyay, 2008; Bhattacharyya, 2018; Ghosh S. K., 2009; Samaddar, 2018d; Sen, 1980; Sengupta, 1983), and middle-class participants (Ācārya, 1998; Banerjee, 2009; Das, 2015). Significant memoirs belong to lesser 'mainstream' protagonists, whose voices are sometimes collected by researchers (Byapari, 2018: 104-214; Dāśgupta, 2017; Datta, 2018; Kallol, 2012; Hom, 2017; *Śahid*,1996; 1997). In this respect, *Ebaṃ Jalārka* nineteen volumes, an ongoing project since the late nineties, represent an additional source for collecting accounts of unknown protagonists[25]. Moreover, there are memoirs-historical accounts authored by police officers, who were in charge of counterinsurgency activities and later were the ones who, in some cases, accessed police archives to make their memoirs-history books as research-based (Chakraborty, 2010; Gupta, 2004; Majumder, 2010; Mukherjee, 2007; Samanta, 1984, 2010; Singh, 2006).

In fact, the third framework I identify relates to research-based books.

[25] The first volumes focuse on Naxalite theoretical debates and big leaders' writings, but later the perspective changed and its authors have recently started a search for collecting memoirs of ordinary and unknown participants, especially small town and rural-based individuals, or coming from marginal sections of the society (informal meeting with Swapan Dasadhikari, *Ebaṃ Jalārka*'s project editor, in August 2019 at the editor's place in College Street).

This is a more nuanced grouping, since it has three features. Firstly, some of them are memoirs at the same time, as explained above. Secondly, even though the research-based book purpose does not include the author's personal comments and interferences, he still is someone who had been a Naxalite activist or a witness to those restless times. These authors have produced landmark monographs and essay collections (Banerjee, 1980; 1984; 2008; Basu, 2000; 2012a; 2012c; 2017; Ray, 2011; Samaddar, 2018b). Thirdly, a younger generation of scholars appeared, who have produced significant empirical research (Donner, 2004; 2009; 2011; Roy, 2012; Sinha Roy, 2011) in an extended period of time and out of direct involvement. Though the works are still few in number, they deal with the question of participation. I consider them very much needed in order to go beyond 'official histories', and to question structures and relations of this socio-political movement. Since the movement left an unforgettable sign on West Bengal and Kolkata, during my research I have been asking myself the question of how to contribute in trying to fill a lacuna in the perspective towards the study of this movement, and to avoid both redundant tropes and sterile narratives.

3. IN SEARCH OF AN ALTERNATIVE FRAMEWORK

Shah (2018: 270-295; Shah and Jain, 2017) similarly observe biased narrative patterns and redundant tropes with regard to the current Naxalite movement, where political and social scientists' armchair opinion prevails over extended field-based researches, which are few and by no means easy to conduct in those guerrilla areas. Between the two kinds of narrative other books stand, namely reports that are written by journalists who, through contacts with Maoist cadres, had the opportunity to spend some weeks among guerrilla units. Shah affirms that giving the prevailing voices of political and social scientists who eventually sustain the 'sandwich' theory, also referred to as the 'neglected development' theory[26],

[26] The two theories basically affirm that the reason why rural and forest people join, support or cover up the Maoists is because they provide them with agricultural, educational, and health facilities and defend them from the corrupted state machinery (neglected development). In fact, even though the Indian Constitution protects Adivasi, scheduled castes and their land, practically these communities are fooled by multinational companies and factories who appropriate their land, and are abused by the police. Consequently, authors say, these people are sandwiched between guerrillas who convince them by the use of force, threats, and the promise of facilities, and the state machinery, which considers them as terrorist-supporters, retaliates and does not defend them from abuses. Shah (2018: 141-142) explains how this 'sandwich' theory is typical of many security and conflict experts kind of authors who write on guerrilla situations in Africa and South-East Asia as well. In fact, Shah (2017, 2018) interpret current Naxalite politics among Adivasi and low caste people beyond

and of journalists who access the field via the cadres and interview the leaders, the perspective of Adivasi and low caste people who are the ones for whom the movement exists and that the state neglects, stands ignored once again. Their agency is either covered by the idea that Maoists indoctrinate or force them by violence or by promising utilitarian benefits they never received from the government (schools, doctors, support in countering corruption, in agricultural work, etc.), or they are recognized as revolutionary in nature because of countless years of marginalization. Thus, the Maoist movement ends up being an Adivasi movement (Shah, 2017: 53). Even though Shah (2018: 295) recognizes the power that all these narratives and books have in keeping the debate on parliamentary politics and the necessity of revolutionary violence open as it does not happen in other countries of the world, the debate cannot get stuck on a state-centric view[27], nor it can consider people who are part of the movement outside its guerrilla units as with no other motivation to join or support the Maoists than the material benefits, denying them a deepest agency.

Chakravorty Spivak (1988) indeed realizes the impossibility of the subaltern to speak by her own, her voice continuously mediated by ideology as soon as it steps out of her mind. Through the image of the third woman whose words, whatever she says, are narrowed to patriarchal or imperialistic frameworks, her ideas being thus marked as traditional/backward or modern/Western-centric[28], Chakravorty Spivak affirms the impossibility to avoid categorization when the subject's voice appears on the stage.

A possible way out to this bipolarization[29], which I consider typical

the traditional understanding of politics and explain people's support and participation by realizing the "humaneness" character of Maoist politics towards them. As she has demonstrated through her long term-based fieldwork living with Adivasi people in Maoist-controlled areas, the dignity and respect, and acquired kinship and friendship developed time by time are essential relations involved in Maoist politics, which brought marginal communities to offer the guerrillas food, shelter, protection and to make some of their youths join guerrilla units.

[27] On the state-centric bias, typical of security policy and current conflict studies, see also the historical arguments of Benigno (2018: vii-xix) in relation to the understanding of terrorism and its interpretation.

[28] A bipolarization already understood by Halbfass (1981) while detecting Indian orientalism.

[29] Even the debate that Guha (1983) opened up on the interpretation of India's insurgencies during colonial times, which he understands as the product of the subalterns' political consciousness and thus criticizes Hobsbawm (1959)'s reading of marginal subjects' revolts as pre-political and not yet politically mature, still misses the intricacies of the personal with the political. For a counter-analysis see Shah (2014). Also, Amin (1995), Batsha (2009), and Mitchell (2009) present two cases of colonial and post-1947 history of India, where matters of emotions, representations and meaning of political events intersect and make the framework complex. Amin and Mitchell not coincidentally made empirical investigation into

of conflict-related analysis, is to research empirically on participation. It is not by chance that in other cases where authors made the point on research status on socio-political movements, the need for more enquiries into participation was acknowledged. That happened respectively on world protests of 1968 and again on Maoist movement (Bernhard and Rohstock, 2008; Harriss, 2010). It seems that the difficulty to find sources and unravel the complexity of ordinary subjects who, to a lesser or greater extent, come in touch with a socio-political movement and thus to investigate participation, works as deterrent effect. In fact, while Banerjee asks «whether anything worthwhile about the movement remains to be said» (2018: 52-53), few scholars have already paved the way for a change of understanding while researching empirically on the movement (Donner, 2011; Roy, 2012; Samaddar, 2018b; Sinha Roy, 2011). They have indeed focused on the aspect of participation, as well as on the popular character of this revolutionary movement by focusing on ordinary activists. Redundant tropes, such as the strategy and tactics of big leaders, the influence of the Maoist ideology, the romanticization of the role of students, the violence that made the revolution fail (Mohanty, 1977; 2015; Ray, 2011), these all have been recurring themes that have not broaden the study on this subject, neither have questioned structures and relations, which play an important role in socio-political movements. For instance, the descriptions of the inner fights in the rank and the file of the CPI (ML) ignore how varied the movement was already before the formation of that party (1967-1969), and do not highlight the role of other groups that were branded as Naxalites, such as the MCC[30] and the particular case of the RCCI[31] (Chakraborty, 2021; Gupta, 2015a; 2015b; Hom, 2017). Or, in the case of student participation, no enquiry or reconstruction of the student movement itself exists, which can clear the mutual relation among students' associations, political parties and popular protests, a connection that was probably present much before the Naxalbari movement appeared, especially in the anti-tram fare rise movement in 1953 and 1965 (Sengupta, 2018), and in the 1966 food movement (Basu, 2018). There is still an over-quotation of the role of students in socio-political movements in India, but strangely enough, it is an empirically under-published topic. Only the few above-mentioned recent academic publications on participation issues and a certain number of memoirs listed in references compensate the scarcity of interesting empirical works on the participation in the Naxalbari movement.

popular participation.

[30] See reference for oral narrations.

[31] *Ibidem.*

A methodology I suggest in order to explore the under-researched and pivotal aspect of participation requires an anthropological perspective and the use of oral history methods, as it can be concluded especially by Donner (2004; 2009; 2011)'s research articles on male student and teacher Naxalite activists of Calcutta, and Sinha Roy (2011)'s work on female ordinary activists of small towns. The methods indeed include both textual analysis of memoirs and biographies combined with revolutionary publications, if any, and conversational interviewing. In fact, published memoirs do not always include all those who had the chance to publish, as I have found out during my fieldwork in Kolkata. Protagonists' voice that prevails is not in all cases the result of who had the opportunity to tell his or her account, or someone who had the power to publish or not. I indeed came across ordinary Naxalite activists or local leaders who never wrote memoirs nor accepted to render their own oral narrative to anyone for different reasons. In the case of one oral narrator I met, Saumen Guha, it happened that although he had published a book on the court case he won for his sister's tortures inflicted by the police (Guha, 1997) and a booklet on human rights in India (Guha, 2004), he had always refused to either write a memoir or give his oral account on his role as Naxalite to anyone before for the following motivation:

> […] unfortunately the term Naxalite or Naxalbari, the incident of Naxalbari is a very much commodity. Commodity in the commodity market. Everyone is marketing. Everyone is making some capital. Everyone is making money or fame out of that. It is a commodity simply. And I had to resist that sense of commodity from the Naxalite movement or Naxalbari, that's the thing. That's the struggle I was fighting for. For more than four decades. […] And I am very much vocal about the Naxalite movement and other things, but I always resist myself from the commodity sense of Naxalbari, Naxalite movement[32].

His statement is significant because it highlights the double character that some memoirs have. In fact, in some cases authors have presented their work as a historical reconstruction of the movement that followed research, and to deal with those writings always means to be aware of their position in the Indian ideological revolutionary debate and to consider them both as researchers as well as protagonists who were involved firsthand, as witnesses, or as politically opposed to the movement (Banerjee, 1980; 1984; 2008; Bhattacharyya, 2016; 2018; Dasgupta, 1974; Ghosh S. K., 2009; Johari, 1972; Sen, 1980; Sengupta, 1983).

[32] Saumen Guha exceptionally accepted my request to meet him because, as he told me directly over the phone the first time, he was interested in my research focus, namely ordinary activists' participation, non-student participants and the role of sympathizers.

The anthropological perspective is crucial while investigating participation because it centres upon structures as well as relationships. For instance, there are points that need investigation and further clarification when discussing socio-political movements, such as the urban and rural location or segregation, the way ordinary people access politics and the meaning it acquires to them, the relations involved with it, especially the patron-client relationship that marks activism as act of agency and victimhood at the same time. In the Naxalbari movement, where differences between the haves and the haves not, the rural and the urban, the educated and the illiterate, the rigid party structure and popular ferment, all these dichotomies were meant to be overcome as preached in theory, the broad social categories of gender, caste and class were at play, but more than that, they were constantly in a making process. The above-mentioned dichotomies intersected with the three broader categories of gender, caste and class, and made them fluid[33]. For instance, the role of the urban poor, basically absent in the works about the movement, whether as a tough, a minor helper, or as a 'proper' activist questioned whether the dichotomy between the haves and the haves not, the educated and the illiterate was going through a process of struggling or was standing in a state of unresolved tension. The role of the organized workers, usually minimized when compared to students' involvement, interrogated once again the party structure and workers' perspectives and protest performances. The presence of many radical groups in the revolutionary set, mainly neglected, challenged once again the notion of a monolithic party structure from above imposing directions to its base. All these points also open up the investigation into local networks of activism and the solidarity or rivalry chains among people living in the same para (neighbourhood), as Donner's article (2011) postulates indeed. More than recurring over and over again on the strategies and tactics of revolutionary communist politics, on the influence of the Maoist ideology over India, on the romanticization of the role of students who were nihilists, as well as the violence that made the revolution fail (Mohanty, 1977; 2015; Ray, 2011; etc.), this approach may be able to explore how and where the movement was lived and practiced among ordinary activists.

[33] I borrow this understanding from Sinha Roy (2011: 53). While explaining the contradictions in relation to women's participation in the movement, she talked of 'a state of flux' in which gender, caste and class categories were continuously negotiated and not simply denied nor accepted.

4. WHO SPEAKS FOR WHOM?

The Naxalbari movement has long suffered from a neglected historicization for the reasons seen above. The topic remained relevant in the artistic field, as well as in Left circles or for current established scholars 'who were there'. Knowledge production continued thanks to a limited range of authors, and this point brings into question what is not being or has not yet been said about those years. History indeed keeps the historian's work a challenging one because of the necessity of dealing with different issues. Firstly, the silence imposed by state archives – because the past is not far enough – and by lost documents, memories and persons. In fact, the sense of loss, which Anil Acharya[34] feels whenever he remembers his youth as a Naxalite activist along with his friends who died in those years, is what dominates. Secondly, the question of facing people 'who were living' those moments, whose voice and opinion cannot stand ignored, but certainly challenge the historian's interpretation. Finally, the transformation of the protagonists of history from subject with agency into object of research, whose analysis must produce a defined empirical work. The challenge of the historian always being at risk of ending up in a conflictual situation is perceptively represented in Pirandello's famous play *Six Characters in Search of an Author*[35]. Six characters abruptly appear on the stage while a theatre company is preparing for a Pirandello play. They insistently ask the company's director to let them play their own story. They have a terrible drama that needs to be told, but no script of it still exists. As soon as the director listens to some dialogue, he understands how interesting their story is and how successful a play on that subject would be. Here the problem comes: who should narrate the story? Theatre professionals and actors or the original protagonists, who went through the events firsthand? It is indeed that tension that lies in historical narration as well, as Chakravorty Spivak (1988) reminds us. The politics of representation tells us of the necessity of reconstructing the different, heterogeneous sensibilities that lie in human history and in its socio-political movements. It compels us to continuously engage in making the event and its protagonists speak, trying to avoid easily attracting features ending up in redundant tropes and sterile narratives that forget to recount structures of power and relationships among the participants who make socio-political movements.

[34] Ācārya (1998) was a Naxalite student and later founded a publishing house called Anustup along with others (informal meeting at the publishing house in College Street, Kolkata, in August 2019).

[35] First performed in Rome in 1921. See Pirandello (1990).

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