

III. NAXALISM AT A DEAD END

Two hard facts emerge from even a cursory study of the ideas and activities of the CPI (ML) in West Bengal. First, the failure at each successive stage to achieve the ends of the movement with the means to which it was committed. From Naxalbari to Calcutta through the Midnapur villages was a journey on which the mileposts marked retreat and the focus of action steadily shifted from the more meaningful forms and targets to the less. Second, the extreme ideological poverty of a leadership which mouths Mao and sometimes even Marx and Lenin has already reached the point where theory is replaced almost entirely by brainwaves. Rarely before in the history of militant movements has so much mindlessness produced so little in the way of genuine achievement.

On the plane of thought, as of action, a distinct if slow process of atrophy seems to be at work. Still, one knows as one

writes that this is not the last word to be said about the Naxalite movement: there would be no need to say it in that case. Not even the CPI (M) can dispose of the Naxalites in the way it would like, though it tries, with an inventiveness that rivals Charu Majumdar's, to depict the whole movement as a brain-child of the CIA, the CBI, the centre, anti-social gangsters and likeminded elements.

What explains the vitality and attraction of Naxalism, and its powerful, though not pleasant impact? To begin with, the CPI (ML) in its earlier phase presented an image of revolutionary romanticism that may be sustained for some time to come in other parts of India, while the romance wears thin in the darker bylanes of Calcutta. When a band of young students, many from affluent families, some academically brilliant (as even outsiders pointed out with a touch of vicarious pride), left their home comforts and prospects of a stable future to live among the peasants, they commanded respect and admiration even from political opponents. The exact number of those who went to the villages is difficult to establish, probably not very large, and with a fairly rapid turnover, as some dropped out and others joined the movement.

This was all the more so because the extremists appeared to be taking up the reins of armed struggle where they had been dropped nearly twenty years ago by the communists. Their call to arms came precisely when social and political tensions had induced a new mood of militancy, not least among those whose own lives are free of any violent, or even non-violent, political involvement. This fact alone explains the electrifying effect of Naxalbari—a pin-point on a map where a minor uprising occurred in 1967, subjected ever since to much uninformed enthusiasm at home and abroad. The timing of the movement, being a serious embarrassment for the united front in office was fully exploited by the rightwing propaganda machinery as well. This led to extensive press coverage of a series of agrarian clashes of far less intrinsic importance than the earlier communist-led peasant and tribal risings, before and after independence, of which no connected account exists.

Naxalbari undoubtedly created a climate of expectancy and

enthusiasm. It attracted a new political generation, less because of anything that happened at Naxalbari, which soon passed into a twilight, than as a promise of social and political justice. The movement thus came to have a distinct look of the "new left" about it. It seemed to be part of the revolutionary tide sweeping the world, trying to break the stalemate of the revolution and swing it to a new uncharted course.

In our own social context the CPI (ML) does represent to a large extent the revolt of the youth against established values and norms. The promise of Naxalism, however, is not likely to be fulfilled by a movement which has no new set of values to offer, and no political methods beyond sheer self-destructive nihilism. Naxalism as an idea, even a species of wish-fulfilment, may have its uses; as an actual movement, it has ceased to believe in reform and is incapable of revolution.

This does not make it easier to establish any real parallel between other major world currents and Naxalism. Guevara beards, the *Red Book*, the thrill of May 1968 felt vicariously in Calcutta teashops, or Black Power literature may bring a dash of the exotic into otherwise drab lives, but no real rapport between the student movement here and in the affluent countries of the west. The CPI(ML) despises student "economism", the obsession over cheap canteens and the like, but it has not tried very hard, much less succeeded, in building up a political movement on Vietnam or any other anti-imperialist issue. Any idea of university reform it rejects utterly as a baited trap for revisionists, and one can hardly visualise it (except perhaps the cream of the "brilliant" ones) running teach-ins or "free" universities. Nor does the CPI(ML) share the liberation ideas or anti-bureaucratic stance of the groups abroad, and certainly would not dream of invoking Rosa Luxemburg or Trotsky or the "young" Marx in defence of its voluntarism. Subjectively, the CPI(ML) and other extremist leaders in India are fully conscious of their communist past, and deeply suspicious of any ideas (including those of Marx, Engels or Lenin) which might be used to controvert either Stalin or Mao on any point.

This is presumably the reason why the revolutionaries of Latin America find no favour with the Naxalites. While the

CPI(ML) organ derides "Castro Maharaj" for sailing in the boat of revisionism, and emphatically attributes "Che-ism" to others, the Asit Sen group looks on the CPI (ML) as neo-anarchist followers of Guevara. Both are wrong. Possibly they judge Guevara by his tragic miscalculation in Bolivia alone; but it is more than a little unfair to place him in the same class as Charu Majumdar, or any other Naxalite leader.

Che Guevara's handbook on guerilla warfare, more significant (minus the emotional associations) than his Bolivian diary, is not in the least like Charu Majumdar's instructions, dealing as it does with actual political and military experiences, not make-believe ones. He recognised that guerilla warfare can be taken up only when the possibilities of peaceful struggle have been exhausted, as they cannot be "where a government has come into power through some form of popular vote, fraudulent or not, and maintains at least an appearance of constitutional legality..." (*Guerilla Warfare*, p. 14). Unlike the CPI(ML), Guevara believed in the guerilla as a social revolutionary fighting in "a war of the masses, a war of the people" (p. 15). Bandit gangs may have many guerilla characteristics: "the only thing missing is support of the people, and inevitably these gangs are captured and exterminated by the public force", says Guevara unemotionally (p. 16). Above all, guerilla warfare is bound up with the agrarian revolution—a clear repudiation of the thesis that the agrarian revolution must wait until the "guerillas", with or without mass support or a programme of immediate demands, have succeeded in capturing state power through the tactics of *khatam*.

It is because of this emphasis on the popular character of the guerilla war that Guevara can make a sharp distinction between sabotage as a revolutionary weapon and mere terrorism:

"We sincerely believe that terrorism is of negative value, that it by no means produces the desired effects, that it can turn a people against a revolutionary movement, and that it can bring a loss of lives to its agents out of proportion to what it produces" (p. 195).

The murder of "the little assassin" as opposed to selective political assassination is a serious political mistake: "the killing of persons of small importance is never advisable, since it brings on an increase of reprisals, including deaths" (p. 26).

Thus there is no need to confuse "Che-ism" with the CPI (ML) thesis which resembles, if anything at all, the terroristic interpretation of Guevara's ideas by Regis Debray. The latter's theory of guerilla action as a small motor to start up the big motor of the popular revolution does repeat a familiar anarchist position. Debray throws overboard the whole theory of political work among the masses—Guevara's "intensive popular work"—in favour of the "propaganda of the deeds". Action is to begin from the scattered guerilla *focos*, the nuclei which will eventually develop and combine into a national revolutionary front. There is no need for "armed propaganda": the liberation army will be built not on a popular basis but "from the apex downward". Arms and terrain ("the mountain" as opposed to "the city") are everything; any distinction between military and political activity unreal. In Mao's famous passage the gun creates political power, and nearly everything else except the party which must always control the gun. In Debray's theory the party itself appears to grow out of the barrel of the gun.

The romantic vision of the isolated "little group" destined to "either die—physically—or conquer"; the extreme mobility (no fixed bases of support); and the moral value of physical hardship (symbolised by life on the mountain)—all this helps to establish a certain kinship between Debray and the CPI (ML) in its best phase. There is also a touch of Franz Fanon (who harks back to Bakunin in this respect) in the CPI (ML) cult of violence as a cleansing and liberating force, though the sadistic descriptions in *Desabrati* may be put down to the Majumdar effect.

It must also be said that Fanon and even Debray, both idealistic intellectuals rather than politically experienced and mature revolutionaries, were caught up and played their part in a real political storm which did not allow them to stagnate

in the company of "pseudo-political criminals" and artists in gang warfare. In fact, there is hardly any type of armed movement which affords examples of such meaningless violence, except perhaps where rioting is noticeably a part of it. In such cases sheer banditry may take over or merge inseparably into the movement.

With the CPI (ML) in its present urban phase, the reactionary social, or, more correctly, anti-social links are painfully clear. There is little reason to doubt the large-scale infiltration of professional criminals and gang leaders, as well as informers and spies, into a movement which started as a misguided but sincere revolutionary effort. More and more this movement applies the techniques and reflects the outlook of communal, chauvinist and generally rightwing movements—like the RSS or Shiva Sena—which also have their roots in the same kind of social discontent and attract middle class youth in other parts of India. The distinction between the radical left and radical right is finer than one imagines as a rule.

Even admirers of the CPI (ML) are being forced to see that the party not only takes revenge on "the little assassin" but shares his mentality as well. It is becoming difficult to trace in its acts of petty destruction and personal violence even the classic features of a terrorist movement. Neither in Russia nor in our own country did the terrorist revolutionaries indulge in such orgies of violence, or choose as their victims ordinary men and women, small traders and clerks, teachers, political workers or under-privileged police constables. Even the Ranadive thesis of 1948, leading logically from left-adventurism into terror tactics, never dissolved into such political impurity, possibly because conditions of life in Calcutta were different twenty years ago.

The Narodnik movement was a product of Russia's age of reason, with an interesting if futile socio-economic programme for the peasantry, and its resemblance with Naxalism is not deep enough to give the latter the dignity of that heroic migration to the heart of rural Russia. A parallel may exist, however, with the Nechayev brand of pure nihilism and its worked-out murder plans. The petty-bourgeois revolutionaries who

added an armed wing to the anti-imperialist freedom movement in India passed through different stages, and acquired a developed social outlook towards the end, but at no stage used their romantic ideal of martyrdom to gloss over the indiscriminate killing of innocent persons.

Individual terrorism may play a positive role—though never, as Lenin said, the major role—as part of a mass revolutionary struggle. When the forms of mass action and organisation are yet undeveloped terrorism amounts to a futile political misadventure, but not a serious or costly diversion of any genuine revolutionary movement. It may, to that extent, earn some sympathy and respect as was the case in India and other countries where a similar pattern of action developed. It is when a powerful organised movement of the revolutionary toiling masses already exists, and has mastered a variety of forms of effective mobilisation, without having come to the point of revolutionary transition, that individual terrorism really plays a historically reactionary role.

This is the position in which, regrettably, the CPI (ML) finds itself today. Marxism should not be reduced to the kind of crude determinism which holds revolutionary enthusiasm in leash while everlastingly waiting for the proper conditions to mature. But what the CPI (ML) is doing when it taunts others with having waited a lifetime in “preparing” conditions without taking the plunge, is trying to cut through political complexities and transform a non-revolutionary situation into one of immediate insurrection through crude anarchist action. In so doing it has only brought about a reign of terror *for* the masses instead of *with* them.

Such a situation is not really unnatural, because the CPI (ML) is fundamentally elitist, without a mass democratic character, and a movement of this kind may develop fascist characteristics under certain conditions. There is certainly no watertight division as both types of movement rest ideologically on a theory of heroic action by individuals as the prime mover of history—the point at which Marxism diverges sharply from anarchism of all shades. The rudiments of a form of fascism may already be seen in the arrogance and ignorance of some

of the CPI (ML) cadre, their cult of the super-leader, the discouragement of political studies, and then the ultimate in political persuasion, the use of the knife and the hatchet in neurotic, cowardly assault.

Of course the studied arrogance and what might be called the lack of revolutionary sanity is also a part of the “generation gap” which leads to curious and unusual tension in the conditions of Indian family life. Only a sociologist could do justice to the problem of the adolescent revolt in Indian middle class homes, whether affluent or not, in the given social context; just as the study of conditions in a city like Calcutta on a professional basis alone could lay bare the real roots of Naxalism as a social phenomenon. What is quite clear to any political observer is the tremendous fact of economic, social and psychological pressures building up the Naxalite explosion.

Much is being said now at the popular magazine level about the frustration and anger growing out of the employment situation, cost of living, overcrowded and insanitary homes and the crisis of an academic system which commands no respect from anyone. It is important to realise that all these and other problems provide a breeding ground where Naxalism in the broad and loose sense of the term can flourish often without any central direction. Several of its forms of action, like the disruption of examinations, attacks on laboratories, and “crimes against property” in general, are not new but a hangover from the recent past before Naxalbari was even heard of; only the ideological varnish is new. Some of the markedly eccentric and unpleasant forms—threatening families with more than one earning member, sending widows’ weeds to women teachers—may not be the work of authentic Naxalites. That of course is immaterial as long as the leadership fails to disown such acts. The point is that social causes are sending new recruits, and now a younger age group, into the CPI (ML) ranks even as many others drop out, or are picked up by the police.

Internal weaknesses and police action together are probably hastening a time when the CPI (ML) organisation will collapse in this state while its ideas smoulder in minds that know nothing of the political compulsions from which it sprang

Naxalism may in that case live on as a self-generating force for some time to come. The general effect can only be to strengthen the hands of reaction, shatter the people's faith in a democratic way of life and make them yearn for peace, even of the political graveyard.

It is because of this that the political background of the Naxalite movement becomes important for all those who want to give a new direction to the leftist and democratic forces in West Bengal. There is a general idea, and it is true, as far as it goes, that the extreme leftwing of the CPI (M) was gifted with a logical consistency, or perhaps simply greater honesty, which enabled it to call the bluff of the CPI (M) leadership after the 1967 election. The would-be Naxalites realised at that point these leaders had no intention of refusing office once it came their way. The overnight reversal of policy, switching over to united front politics shocked the extremists who had taken the election campaign as an exercise to preach the message of revolution and expose the "revisionists". Differences in the CPI (M), not new in themselves, boiled over after this supposed betrayal by a leadership which had experienced no difficulty at all in using the extremists as their storm troopers against the CPI and others. Naxalbari was made to happen; the breach widened; and on 28 June 1967 the leadership organised its celebrated coup in the office of the party weekly, partly to forestall the Naxalites and eject them by physical force before they took over the editorial board.

In this way the Naxalites were launched on their new political career. The hard way, partly thrust on them but largely chosen, gave them the image of revolutionaries who did not shrink from the consequences of their political convictions. Their anger against the party bosses, with a touch of hysteria in it, brought into relief the violent sense of betrayal which is setting a new generation against its elders in political, academic and family life.

The Naxalites reacted sharply to the very real dilemma which causes the CPI (M) to oscillate uneasily between aggressive sectarianism and a comparatively sane united front policy at the base of action; and between a democratic national outlook

and pseudo-left demagoguery in high politics. The same dilemma makes it long for power when it is in the opposition, and behave like an irresponsible opposition when in office. Experience of the CPI (M)-led ministries in Kerala and West Bengal showed that this party has no plan for the people when in office and no idea of using its constitutional powers to introduce concrete changes for the better. Its tenure in office is thus reduced to shadow-boxing with the central government on the one hand, and, paradoxically, making the most of its position to ensure immediate gains on the other.

The Naxalites have built up, in their usual lurid style, a fairly convincing exposure of the rampant economism, corruption and opportunist power politics, reminiscent of the worst aspects of social democracy, that characterised the behaviour of the CPI (M) in the state governments.

The Naxalites' own tragedy lies in the fact that they represent not simply a hostile reaction, but also the logical extension of one end of the ideological scissors which holds the CPI (M) in its grip. They are the ones who took all this irresponsible leftism seriously and carried it to the utmost limit of adventurist action, where all democratic forms and anything resembling a mass political line had to be thrown overboard in the name of the people's revolution.

For the CPI (M) to face the truth about the CPI (ML) would be like facing a mirror. It is compelled to deny the social and political basis of the extremist movement, and to slander it as a tool of the police and bureaucracy. The CPI (ML), under Charu Majumdar's guidance, has turned into a monstrous parody of the parent body, with its sectarian and bureaucratic temper. The CPI (M), governed by a kind of lumpen proletariat of the intellect, passes easily from mass action to the methods of political and even physical terror whenever this is needed to ensure its dominance. No wonder the two now find it necessary to fight it out, with knives and bullets, literally to the death. It is a war between the two halves of a split political personality; a real looking glass war in which each borrows the other's techniques.

This again implies the final defeat of the Naxalite revolt, in its reabsorption into the system it hates. The system cannot be destroyed, only strengthened, with its own weapons. Academic corruption, or what the CPI (ML) calls the filth of bourgeois education cannot be removed by a cynical flouting of all academic norms and decorum, or cheating in examinations. Economism may be the curse of the mass movement, but the best way to fight it is not necessarily to encourage that wanton destruction of property in which the have-not mentality finds such acute relief. And certainly bourgeois society is not to be overturned by terrorist methods in the hands of the criminal gangs created by this society.

It is easy to show that Naxalism provides no sort of alternative to the established communist movement. The terrorism of the CPI (ML) can only pave the way for a reactionary takeover. Still, the challenge of Naxalism is real enough, and that too in a state where the forces of the left have been traditionally strong. The time has come for these forces to take a look at themselves in the cold light of Naxalite criticism. Much of this is wrong and purely negative. It denies the striking achievements of the older movement which is not only rooted much more deeply among the masses but holds a much finer record of armed struggle than the Naxalites with their aristocratic temper typical of anarchist movements. Yet the germs of Naxalism may be found in the major weaknesses of the traditional left-wing and communist movement which has reached its culmination in the CPI (M). Its failure to bring the broadest masses into action for any positive change in the system was always accompanied by a reliance on discontent and occasional violence; an attitude of discouraging any improvement in the people's lot without in the least preparing their minds for a real revolution. Naxalism has merely exposed the limited aims of the movement—the neglect of the struggle for structural change while dreaming of a revolution round the corner—and reduced its negative leftism to a terrible absurdity.

Now that events are moving faster on the national political plane, and the forces of reaction gathering strength, the need is felt to move forward rapidly to left and democratic unity for

which now patterns of mass mobilisation and action have to be worked out. Provided such a pattern is found, the best of the extremists, with their revolutionary idealism, may yet come forward to help remove the mountain in the path of revolution, finding, as in Mao's legend retold, the ultimate source of power in the will and consciousness of the people of India.

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LATER DEVELOPMENTS

Much has happened in West Bengal in the last few months, but nothing that really contradicts what has been said above.

Too much was made by certain political observers and newsmen of the supposed deflection of Naxalite policy in some respects. For instance the CPI (ML) did not try seriously to disrupt the mid-term election, though few would doubt their capacity to do so in a small number of centres at least. This was because the majority of the CPI (ML) cadres were worried about the prospect of the CPI (M) coming back to office through elections which they could not hope to disrupt everywhere or for all time. It was in the pre-election period, as the battle over areas of influence got seriously under way, that the CPI (M) unleashed its violent offensive against Naxalites and all other political rivals. As its methods became more pronouncedly terroristic, sheer force of circumstances made the CPI (ML), if not exactly constitutionalists, at least more benign towards those who were trying to use the ballot-box to defeat the CPI (M). This did not make them firm allies of any other party; understandably cynical in their approach to all who participate in elections, they probably felt justified in the manoeuvres and balancing tricks seen in some constituencies. Since the election, both government and opposition have been under fire from the Naxalites.

A brief sensation was caused by the report that Charu Majumdar had repudiated the tactics of assassination. Actually he said, in a signed article in *Desabrat* (10 February 1971), that