

Remembering Revolution: Gender, Violence and Subjectivity in India's Naxalbari Movement

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The book, as the title suggests, is about 'remembering,' about 'memory' of middle-class women (and men) who participated in the Naxalite movement in the wake of Naxalbari uprising in 1967 in West Bengal. The objective of the author is to present a feminist reading of the experiences of women revolutionaries, who participated in the radical left movement in Bengal, which was characterized above all by violence. The book deals with 'memory' i.e., memory as a culturally and politically mediated concept; and thereby depends heavily on oral narrative methods to bring the readers 'her story' of the Naxalite movement. The author employs multiple methods and uses a broad array of materials from cinema, literature, and memories to personal interviews (of 26 Women and 16 men on which the book is mainly based) to bring fore the subtle and intricate manner in which the questions of gender and violence were embedded in the early days of Naxalite movement. Remembering Revolution, as the author claims, is an attempt to fill the gap in *gendered politics of left-wing cultures and practices of violence*, a topic that has remained at the margins in the study of the radical left movement in India.

Why did a lot of youngsters-both male and female from the Bengali *bhadralok* joined the Naxalite uprising? What were their motivations? Was it a concern for economic and social justice or was it the 'counter-culture' aspect of the *Spring Thunder* or was its mix of both which attracted a significant section of the young Bengali population towards the Naxalite movement? The Naxalbari movement- like the post-partition Left Movement in India- found its appeal among the children of the 'refuge' population-who longed for their 'lost home'- and superimposition of failure of the Nehuravian state to deliver its promise of development pushed towards an idea of refashioning a utopian new world. For the middle-class young women, the Naxalite movement provided an avenue to break free from the cultural-moral norms of the *bhadralok* society; but the utopian project which they joined, proved to be influenced by the everyday life of every *bhadralok* society which they wanted to overcome. The book is largely a story of this latter aspect.

The author's objective in the first chapter is to "theorize the Naxalite version of revolution as a thoroughly gendered construct that made particular demands on men and women;"¹ this objective is the thread that runs throughout her research. The author begins by problematizing the concept of the universal political subject which is understood as a 'disembodied agent' and based on Feminist theory, argues that this disembodied subject is effectively male which appears in gender-free disguise. This erasure or blindness of 'female' body or by large, also of

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caste and race, usually works to reproduce the normative social order within revolutionary movements (in a rather different way).

The author has brilliantly brought out several continuities (as well as differences) between the anti-colonial movement and the Naxalite movement as far as gender is concerned. For e.g. a) between the militant manliness and spiritual renouncer ideal type of revolutionary, from anti-colonial struggle to the Naxalite stereotypical ideal type of ‘a masculine hero who is ostensibly free from all familial and worldly ties;’² b) Like the anti-colonial movement, the even in the Naxalite movement, “the burden of awakening and inspiring their sons to battle and even death falls on the collective of Bengali mothers;” c) martyrological consciousness and d) binaries of public-private, politics- home, male-female and masculinity-femininity.

Remembering Revolution tells us that the sexual politics of the movement had to negotiate historically and culturally prescriptive *bhadralok* norms pertaining to marriage and heterosexual relations³. Even while the movement tried to break away from the ‘old society’ and marital relations were radicalized to a certain extent, the moors of the old society got refashioned and continued; the new relations were ‘deeply reiterative of the hegemonic gender norms and sexual moralities’ of the *bhadralok* society. Though there were some efforts to refashion normative understandings of romance, sexuality, and gender, the possibilities were thwarted due to the structural conditions imposed by being in a state of war and because the movement was not able to do away with the ‘sacrosanct marker of respectability for the Bengali Middle class.’⁴ Apart from noting these subtleties, the author has also been able to point out another continuity between anti-colonial Nationalism and the Naxalite movement; the author says, “the radicalism of the Naxalites with respect to marriage and conjugal relations reflects these various historical trajectories of Indian nationalism and social reforms.”⁵

Even though the movement and its professed archenemy i.e., the state emphasised discontinuities with the old society, and for their own reasons, the continuities existed at multiple levels.

The author also delves into how sexual violence was understood within the party i.e., by the victim (women) and the party leadership. The expositing of ‘naming sexual violence’ is based on interviews of the women (and men) cadres and the author pays close attention to the ‘silences,’ ‘omissions’ and ‘secrecy,’ over incidents of sexual violence, to bring out the intricacies surrounding this question. *Remembering Revolution* shows that the traditional *bhadralok* moralities regarding the female body, and its sacrosanct nature, formed the very basis of understanding of sexual violence within the revolutionary community.

One of the most critical ethically loaded questions that *Remembering Revolution* discusses is that of violence. The author, through analysing the everyday life of revolutionaries, especially the middle-class women revolutionaries, has brought to the fore how “violence of the revolutionary was continuous with forms of everyday, especially gender-based and sexual violence against women.”⁶ The extraordinariness of revolutionary life rendered the above-mentioned normative violence to the background. The good violence i.e., the emancipatory violence of the movement vs. the bad violence i.e., the violence of the state and oppressive structure has a continuum that had detrimental consequences for *bhadralok* women cadres of the Naxalite movement.

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Women activists had not only to deal with the outsider masculine ‘rapist’ state but also against the insider violence emanating from the ‘revolutionary community.’ The latter had multiple layers to it i.e. from the outright rape to “less clearly definable forms of male intrusion that could only be resisted through silences and withdrawal.”⁷ The ‘spaces of safety’ where Naxalite cadres took refuge, were often part of routinization of violence, for the women cadres. Moreover, within the party, the discourse over sexual violence was filtered through the concept of class and class-struggle, which only led to the reproduction of patriarchal gender relations in the ‘outside’ society. In the party discourses, sexual violence was understood as an outcome of individual weakness instead of locating it in the structural conditions which have to do with gendered power relations. This approach according to the author filtered through the ‘official discourse’⁸ of the party which privileged economic questions above others.

There are some very brilliant insights that can be subjected to further research. Roy has shown how “the cultural imaginary of the movement employs tropes of religious renunciation for complete devotion to political purpose.”⁹ The process of “becoming a Naxalite” for the *bhadralok* male was tied to strict sexual self-discipline. The impact of the religious teachings of Ramakrishna Paramahansa, the 19th-century mystic that pervaded the everyday Bengali society, also found its entry into the ‘atheist’ Naxalite movement through the *bhadralok* men activists and leaders. The book also opens up possibilities of research on the notion of ‘sacrifice’ which found its profound expression in the anti-colonial revolutionary movement in Bengal and the Naxalite movement.

Overall, the book does a brilliant job of bringing out the sexual politics of the Naxalite movement and what it meant for urban middle class women. However, in doing so, the author has freely juxtaposed ‘party and movement’ to broader ‘society,’ and has freely superimposed a political movement with social reform.

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