SCIENZA & POLITICA
per una storia delle dottrine

Naxalbari and Popular Movements: A Conversation with Ranabir Samaddar

Naxalbari e i movimenti popolari. Conversazione con Ranabir Samaddar

Ranabir Samaddar

Calcutta Research Group ranabir@mcrg.ac.in

ABSTRACT

The interview to Ranabir Samaddar – translated from the original in Bengali by V. Ramaswamy – deals with the Naxalite decade (1965-1975) in the perspective of the history it grew from, the history it was part of, and the history it created. The underlying question is: has this decade inaugurated a new phase in the Indian history of rebellions? Samata Biswas and Sandip Bandopadhyay, speaking on behalf of the Calcutta Research Group, engage in a deep dialogue on the novelties and the legacy of the "dangerous decade" that the rulers have only wanted to put to death. The interview explores the evolving modes of popular politics of the past as well, shedding light on the unprecedented and stark opposition between activism and pacifism including submission to law and order. The answers are as much historical as political.

KEYWORDS: Naxalites; Communist Party of India; Maoism; Strike; Rebellion.

*****

L'intervista a Ranabir Samaddar – tradotta dal bengali da V. Ramaswamy – verte sul decennio naxalita (1965-1975) letto nella prospettiva della storia da cui si originò, della storia di cui fu parte e della storia che produsse. La domanda di fondo è: questo decennio ha inaugurato una nuova fase della storia indiana delle ribellioni? Samata Biswas e Sandip Bandopadhyay, per conto del Calcutta Research Group, intraprendono un dialogo profondo sulle novità e l'eredità del "decennio pericoloso" a cui i governanti hanno soltanto voluto porre fine. L'intervista esplora, inoltre, l'evoluzione delle forme di politica popolare del passato, gettando luce sull'opposizione, feroce e senza precedenti, di attivismo e pacifismo, che includeva la sottomissione alla legge e all'ordine. Le risposte sono tanto storiche quanto politiche.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Naxaliti; Partito Comunista Indiano; Maoismo; Sciopero; Ribellione.

SCIENZA & POLITICA, vol. XXX, no. 59, 2018, pp. 105-130
DOI: https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1825-9618/8905
ISSN: 1825-9618

Introduction

Usually, the person who has given an interview does not introduce it. It is also probably unethical because the introduction may seem to be providing gloss post-facto to the conversation, which is strictly speaking not a text unilaterally written, but a script of a dialogue. In this case it was explicitly the editor's request for a brief introduction by me to help readers with the context of the interview, also the context of the time the conversation is about[1].

In any case, the relevant question animating the radical activists today in India in the course of recalling the time is: Did 1968 or as popularly called the *Naxalite Decade*, which some term as the decade of the '60s, or the decade of liberation – the 70's[2], inaugurate a new phase in the Indian history of rebellions? At the same time the question has thrown up a second poser: Can an insurgent movement be termed at the same time a popular movement? Can we find popular sources of an insurgency? Insurgency in the eyes of the State is supposedly a determined act by a minority, a group with resolve, and there is no "democratic" basis to insurgent acts, if by democracy we mean votes, parliamentary confabulations, widespread consultations, etc. Indeed, this was the unwritten and unacknowledged question that haunted the established Left as well as the Left-liberal intelligentsia and administrators in the late sixties and early seventies of the last century. They had termed the Naxalbari movement in India as extremist, anarchist, and sectarian. One can understand their point of view. Yet given that the movement spread so rapidly, engulfed large chunks of the country in that dangerous decade (1965-75), the question has been repeatedly asked: What was the nature of the dangerous decade? The answers are as much historical as political.

Such answers are bound to revolve around the issue of continuities and discontinuities, legacies and breaks. Thus the answers may focus on: What

[1] For a detailed account of the Naxalite decade including the issues raised here, R. SAMADDAR (ed), *From Popular Movements to Rebellion: The Naxalite Decade*, Delhi and London, Social Science Press and Routledge, 2019, forthcoming.

[2] Recall the slogan, *Shottor-er doshok muktir doshok* [The decade of seventies will be the decade of liberation] given by Charu Mazumder. His words were, «I do not indulge in day-dreaming when I say that by 1970-71, the People's Liberation Army will march across a vast area of West Bengal. By and by, the vast masses of people will be inspired with Mao Tse-Tung Thought. Remaining loyal to the revolutionary committees, they will take part in the struggle by supplying wrong information to the enemy, and at a certain stage, they will feel the urge to snatch away rifles from the police and the military». C. MAZUMDER, *March Onward, The Day of Victory is Near*, «Liberation», September-December 1970. http://cpiml.org/library/charu-mazumdar-collected-writings/formation-of-communist-party-of-india-marxist-leninist-22-april-1969/march-onward-day-of-victory-is-near/ (accessed on 1 June 2018); also the concluding line of his brief note, *Hate, Stamp, and Smash Centrism* (May 1970) was «Comrades, let us march forward. The seventies will surely be the decade of liberation». https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mazumdar/1970/05/x01.htm (accessed on 1 June 2018)

were the people doing in that period, what were their actions, why did they become mad, indeed what had happened to them in that age? How did the years of fifties flow into those of sixties? For instance, the food movement in 1959 re-enacted itself on a grander scale in 1966. How did the city of Kolkata become the theatre of violent struggles while peasant radicalism had given birth to the Naxalite decade[3]? These questions are important because even in the propaganda and agitation literature of the Left the unprecedented militancy of the late sixties and early seventies stands ignored. The madness is treated as exceptional, and the legitimacy of the sixties is denied.

One of the reasons why the years of the sixties and early seventies seem exceptional and without a genealogy is because of a disinclination to study the modes of popular movements in the preceding years – at least in the preceding decade – of how popular politics may become violent, and politics can reach an acutely contentious form. Without that genealogical awareness, the ten years from mid-sixties to mid-seventies – the Naxalite decade – appears as a spirit, a ghost, in Marx's famous language a "spectre". The spectral nature of the time repeatedly surfaces today in commentaries and invocations precisely because rulers have only wanted to put a living experience to death. There is thus a radical temporality in linking the Naxalite decade to its own past and to its own time, also to our time, because only by doing so we can appreciate its original energy to appear as an exceptional time within a time it was traversing.

Analyses and reflections extending to newer and newer aspects of the late sixties and early seventies tell of a pattern of popular movements transforming into an insurgency. That insurgency we all know opened up the politics of the country to new fault lines, new questions about the path of social transformation, nature of ruling regimes, the abiding relevance of street politics, peasant resistance, and many more ethical, political, and social issues. Most of those questions are still relevant and lay bare the self-complacence of parliamentary Left politics. The "Naxalite decade" throws light not only on the mode of politics of that time, but helps us to reflect on the evolving modes of popular politics of the past as well – including modes of assembly, mobilisation, protest, securing an area or a territory, burning land records, using handmade and other country weapons, ways of composing leaflets and mani-

[3] During the month/s I gave this interview, I wrote elsewhere on some of these questions; interested readers may see, for instance, *Fifty Years After* Naxalbari, *Popular Movements Still Have Lessons to Learn* , https://thewire.in/politics/naxalbari-communism-maoism (accessed on 1 October 2018); Occupy *College Street: Notes from the Sixties*, www.mcrg.ac.in/RLS_PML/RLS_PM/RLS_PM_Full_Papers/Ranabir.pdf (accessed on 1 October 2018); "Repertoires and Politics in the Time of Naxalbari", www.frontierweekly.com/.../50-31-Repertoires%20and%20Politics%20in%20the%20 (accessed on 1 October 2018).

festos, torching, occupying, staging plays on roads and open squares, and all other modes imagined and practised by a politics of confrontation.

Yet the Naxalite decade allows for more thought. The decade of 1965-75 known as the Naxalite decade was also the decade of plural currents of movements and activism. One current of popular movement played into another, exactly as in the anti-colonial age when the national mood swung from militant revolutionism to constitutional and peaceful mass protests. People giving support to revolutionary activities also were involved in the mass movements of non-cooperation. Indeed these periods often overlapped. In the decade the conversation focuses on here, the great Railway Strike (1974) took place. It involved 1.5 million workers and had the support of thousands of others across towns, cities, factories, colonies, and yards, exceeding in intensity even the activities of the insurgents[4]. The Strike of 1974 did not happen suddenly. At least three to four years of movements, agitations, organisational preparations, new techniques, and new formations were required for the display of militancy exhibited by countless rank and file workers – perhaps without another precedent in the history of working class struggles and in general popular struggles in India before or after. Without the general swing of the popular mood towards protest, non-conformism, and rebellion the Naxalite decade could not have come about. It is important to appreciate therefore the variety in the forms of restlessness and new thinking in that time. The decade was not monochromatic as many think the period to be. The suppression of these mass mobilisations along with the suppression of Naxalite movements in states like West Bengal, Bihar, and Andhra Pradesh remind us of the fact that the National Emergency in India (1975-77) had started in parts of the country several years before it was imposed on the entire land.

The crisis of the order had started earlier; indeed, it was gathering steam for nearly a decade – evinced in the Naxalite uprising as much as in the installation of non-Congress governments in states like West Bengal and causing deep instability in the ruling party, the Congress. The situation of civil war was ripening for quite some years before the imposition of National Emergency, much like the situation in Germany where Walter Benjamin feared that the war would start much earlier than when it was officially declared.

We should therefore reflect, even though briefly, on the crisis of that time to get a fuller sense of what happened in Bengal, Bihar, and Andhra Pradesh in that decade. The crisis was not a one-way street. It was not of the ruling or-

[4] Historians, particularly labour historians, by and large have avoided engaging with the railway strike and the general strike of 1974; on the strike we have only two full accounts: R. SAMADDAR, *The Crisis of 1974: Railway Strike and the Rank and File*, New Delhi, Primus, 2016; S. SHERLOCK, *The Indian Railway Strike of 1974: A Study of Power and Organised Labour*, New Delhi, Rupa, 2001.

der alone, but also of the Left mode of doing politics, hence of the Left style of organising a party. Parties split, unions split, quarrels flared up, at times to the point of death and weakening of ranks. Ideologies, social and economic status, styles of organisation, personalities, and orientations – all these became occasions of mortal contention. The division of the erstwhile united Communist Party of India into CPI and CPI (M), and the subsequent split between the CPI (M) and the Naxalites are only the two most well-known instances. However, split and the consequent "going one's one way" became the mode of articulating politics. Radicalism meant autonomy of existence. The resolution of the crisis in the organisational life of the Left came only after the National Emergency was over in 1977, after thousands of deaths, fragmentation of many totalities, the brutal suppression of a general strike, and the passage into history of a time that had been there only a decade ago, but now seemed unbelievable, and lost forever to the contemporary age that began with 1977. The crisis was felt in also the revolutionary ranks, and it was thus much deeper than the economic level. Close relationships were torn apart. Activists became surly and unfriendly as allegiances began to be formed along the lines of politics. To many, the national temperament appeared to have become barbaric and violent in an incomprehensible way. The response of the liberal intelligentsia and the parliamentary Left in general was pacific or even "bourgeois" in the sense that it saw the crisis as a catastrophe while people felt that things could not go on in the old way. Just as fire lays bare the foundations of a structure, crisis laid bare the habitual basis on which politics was conducted till that time. Never before was the country faced with such stark opposition between activism (acts of protest, literature, resistance, rebellion, organisation, etc.) and pacifism including submission to law and order.

At the same time, this crisis produced an aesthetic politics of radicalism. Oppression made the social order ugly, but ugliness could be challenged by aesthetic means, ranging from new styles of writing, new slogans, new theatres and songs, to new ways of leading life and courting death. Crucial to the crisis was how the people participated and how new writers, dramatists, singers, and poets were produced. Activism became participatory in such a way that it led to the construction of new spaces. New compositions in art and literature, and new styles of expression in that time of rebellion were intended to convey the restlessness in the aesthetic universe of the people.

The question of continuity and discontinuity therefore lurks behind the story of the changing face of rebellion – from popular movements to insurgency. If the Naxalite decade had continuity with past popular movements, and at the same time was a break from them, how did it end? Will not the

same law of continuity and break be applicable to it? This will require another occasion for a conversation.

In any case the decade ended with the defeat of the insurgents. Splits, unities, debates, new fronts, and new attempts at struggles marked the post-Naxalite decade scenario. It is a difficult story of how it continued, and a difficult discussion of whether the struggles taking place today carry that spirit or scenario of upsurge. Even though questions like these will haunt us, namely, what happened with the land question with which Naxalbari and other peasant struggles, and the entire Naxalite decade were identified? Did the land question leave the political scene with the end of the Naxalite decade? Did the much praised land reforms programme of the first Left Front government (in West Bengal) address and satisfy the land reforms agenda? Or, was the land question, indeed the peasant question, solved passively through certain administrative measures, which could only selectively and that too marginally engage with the land question? Did "land to the tillers" become an out-dated programme? And more fundamentally, was a new balance created between the "city and the countryside" in continuing annals of rebellion?

In this conversation I have tried to indicate the difficulties of trying to understand the Naxalite decade, because in order to appreciate its nature the decade must be put in the perspective of the history it grew from, the history it was part of, and the history it created. At the same time the difficulty is greater because the Naxalite decade appears as exceptional, as if it had wrenched its own existence from the past. It is this paradox of two contradictory phenomena from which the difficulty stems, namely the difficulty of interpreting the past that Naxalbari inherited and at the same time treating the Naxalite decade as a time of the past. As we know, Marx and Engels, the children of 1848, wrestled with this paradox as they kept on interpreting and re-interpreting 1848 through the rest of their lives.

But, remember, interpretation is always along certain motifs, signs, and axes of analyses. Thus, themes of renaissance, democracy, elections, class origins of combatants, weapons of struggle, the institution of family, gender, caste – nothing was left out of interpretation by the Naxalite decade, even though, not every possible theme was subjected to interrogation and interpretation in the same way, and to the same measure. Yet interpretation can be only one of the many ways of responding to the present; and unbridled interpretation could only lead the political struggle into a labyrinth to the point of losing way and dying. Interpretation never clarifies, it is never complete. The struggles of late sixties and early seventies were interpreting a past that was already interpreted through a received history, and these struggles were only trying to lay bare a present that was already appearing to them as interpreted

through their interpretation of the past. The insurgents were caught in the violence of interpretations, which never ceased. The differences of interpretations soon expressed themselves in splits and disunities – the history of Naxalism after the Naxalite decade. How the insurgents have tried to come out of this malady is a separate theme, which this interview does not discuss, though it is important to point out that this may be one way in which one can see the intractable relation between the task of interpretation and making sense of the present. And after all, engaging with the present and changing it is the goal of revolutionary politics, and not endless acts of interpretation.

CALCUTTA RESEARCH GROUP: You entered the students' movement and the larger movement during the sixties, in the climate of Naxalite politics. You were then a student of Presidency College. Could you please tell us something about the relationship between the students' movement of Presidency College and other movements of the time? For instance, did you participate in the Bangla Bandh of 22-23 September 1966[5]?

RANABIR SAMADDAR: Shyamal Chakraborty, Dinesh Majumdar, Biman Basu, and Paltu Dasgupta were the leaders of the two Student Federations (linked to two communist parties – the CPI and CPI-M), but like them many others were also providing leadership then to the students and youth in the food movement. The CPI's student front, the All India Students' Federation, was the mother organization. The name CPI (M) was not yet in currency, they were called the Left CPI. The latter was more militant and they had greater presence in the trade unions. The CITU had not yet been established, but left-wing workers' organizations were very powerful.

After March 1966, when the food movement erupted, there was a rapid radicalization over the next three or four months, and students participated in the *Bandh* (strike) of 22-23 September 1966. Presidency College caught in the maelstrom was the elite college of that era. But besides Presidency, there were other important colleges in Calcutta like Bangabasi, Surendranath, City, Manindra Chandra, then Narsingha Dutta and Lal Baba in Howrah, Dinabandhu in Garia, Peary Mohan in Uttarpara, Hooghly Mohsin in Chinsurah and Rashtraguru Surendranath College in Barrackpore. When the boys and girls of all these colleges heard that Presidency College had joined the movement, it became a matter of joy for them. They began to think that their

[5] In protest against the food policy of the government, all the Left parties called for a 48-hour general strike on 22-23 September 1966.

movement was so strong that even the boys and girls, who were the cream of our society, academically speaking, had entered the fray. So they began to come to our college. We too used to go to all those colleges.

CRG: In what way did the students of these other colleges ally with you?

RS: The Students' Federation was already there. By then the Students' Federation in Bengal had been split into the left and right factions. Saibal Mitra and others tried to get organized separately. We lived in the Hindu Hostel then. The entire responsibility for College Street came on the shoulders of the organization of the students of Presidency College. Students of Calcutta University were also with us, just as boys and girls from Surendranath, Vidyasagar, City, and Bangabasi used to come frequently. Bimanda (Biman Basu) too used to come regularly. During the hunger strike in Hindu Hostel, Bimanda used to come every evening and advise us on how we should proceed[6]. Boys from Maulana Azad College, who lived mainly in a separate hostel, also used to come. Having control over a hostel in College Street meant possessing a striking force of students. It could be said that one of the reasons for our being thrown out of the college was that we had the striking ability to create disorder in the college. Perhaps the authorities would have tolerated that, but an even more important reason was that Presidency College was turning left-wing. And leftist politics was being organized extremely militantly. I don't mean that the children of affluent people were chanting Marx from time to time. There were strikes; processions of boys and girls used to go to factories. That is when we decided that the people of *boipara*, the books district of College Street, had to be organized. That *boipara* was not like the *boipara* of today because text books and such like were not sold that much then, in that *boipara* old books were really sold; so unionizing them, and then going to the various small factories and workshops… all that started, and these efforts began before word about Naxalbari reached College Street or Presidency College.

During the Bangla Bandh of 22-23 September, we set out with a squad from College Street. Biplab Halim was with us. Biplab was a student leader of City College and a great organiser; he was the son of the communist leader, Abdul Halim. He was arrested together with us. Kaka (Ashim Chatterjee) and Amal-da (Amal Sanyal) – the two leaders of the students of Presidency College – were also arrested.

[6] The hunger strike was on various demands pertaining to the hostel, particularly the living conditions.

CRG: What happened after you were arrested during the Bangla Bandh of 22-23 September 1966?

RS: They took us to the lock-up in Muchipara Police Station, and a case was registered against us. We had to stay in the lock-up for quite a while. Biplab Halim then communicated with the party, Abdul Halim had passed away by then, but Abdullah Rasool sahib, unless I'm wrong, was in charge of the legal cell of the party. They arranged our bail. We were charged with various offences. And the case dragged on several months.

CRG: Was bail obtained?

RS: Yes. After all we were then studying in the most famous college, and all of us had now cases against our names…

CRG: You became branded…

RS: Yes. There were cases against us. And we had also *gheraoed* the principal; I'm not saying that all this happened within three-four months. The agitation in Hindu Hostel, the demand for the hostel superintendent Dr. Haraprasad Mitra to step down, class lectures everyday in college, and strike, processions, organization, meetings, study sessions, etc., were happening. Unions began to be formed outside the college, in the neighborhood of College Street; there was a protest demanding an end to *goondaism*; we became foot-soldiers of the food movement during the Bangla Bandh of 22-23 September. After that, there was an agitation in the college asking why shouldn't college teachers participate in the movement of the ordinary school teachers…

We had started winning overwhelmingly in the student union elections; Amal Sanyal became the general secretary at that time, and after that there was a movement within the college too, demanding that a cheap canteen be started. A "Magnolia" canteen had been set up earlier by the college authority, it was pricey, the canteen chairs and tables were kicked and broken down, we didn't want such a "sahebi" canteen, and costly as that; we wanted a canteen where ordinary boys and girls could eat. With all these culminating in a demonstration before the Principal's chamber, we were expelled from the college, and this led to probably the most famous student movement in the second half of the twentieth century in Bengal – the Presidency College student movement against expulsion. It continued for nearly six months.

After that the United Front came to power in early 1967; the CPI and the CPI (M) were in the United Front. Our old demand was that the rustication order against the students had to be withdrawn. The order was withdrawn and in that sense, a small victory was achieved. Had we been rusticated, we would not have been able to study anywhere else. Meaning, "rusticated" is not like getting a transfer certificate. So the expulsion order was later changed to "transfer certificate", and the seven of us were split between three colleges. I took the B.A. Part II examination from Vidyasagar College. The students' movement of Presidency College was later written about in the journal, *Anustup*. All the information can be found there[7]. Sabyasachi, Pratul, Subrata Sengupta, Arun, Amalda, and I were given transfer certificates. Sudarshan-da (Sudarshan Roychoudhury), Saradindu-da (Saradindu Roy), and Kaka – their post-graduate studies through the college were blocked. I may be wrong in recollecting names and numbers. It was after all fifty-one years ago!

The importance of this movement was much more than anything I have said. The foundation of the subsequent rebellious youth and student movement had been laid by the anti-expulsion movement. I won't say any more about this because there has been some good writing about it. Dipanjan-da (Dipanjan Roychoudhury) has written, Kaka has written. Achinta Gupta has written. Swadhin-da (Swadhin Dey) has written.

CRG: Could you say something about your relationship with the United Front government?

RS: I want to emphasize that a major section of the students was becoming radical on account of being associated with the communist movement. Peasant comrades in villages set up peasant organisations, worker comrades engaged in workers' movements. The Left movement, the communist movement, had by then started becoming radical in a new way. We were waiting to know what the CPI (M) would do next after joining the government. The presence of the CPI (M) in the government was something radical. Besides, leaders like Dinesh Majumdar were very good people, at a personal level. We, young student activists of Presidency College, had no political pedigree at all, yet we would be taken along to party meetings, we used to have meetings with all those who were big leaders of the party at that time. We used to be invited

[7] A. ACHARYA (ed), *Shottor Doshok* (*The Seventies*), Calcutta, Anushtup, 1998 (in 3 volumes); the theme of the third volume is *Students Movement in the Sixties-Seventies*. It includes writings by A. CHATTERJEE, *The Students' and Youth Movement in the Sixities*; D.R. CHAUDHURY, *Students' Movement and Presidency College*; R. SAMADDAR, *Rebellious and Non-Conformist Student Movement in Bengal*; the volume includes other significant writings by, for instance, Saibal Mitra, Subhash Gangopadhyay, etc. All articles were written in Bengali.

and taken to the Cal DC (Calcutta District Committee). Krishnapada Ghosh was then the secretary of the Cal DC. We had come from outside to study in Calcutta, and so, having been thrown out of college, we had no place to stay. We used to go to the District Committee's premises in Taltala to sleep at night.

CRG: But had you not been given membership of the party then?

RS: No, some people were party members. But I was not. Many were "candidate members" then; we were "party SG" i.e. sympathizers' group and so on, as it existed in the party structure. When the United Front government came, it was not as if there was great hope on the part of students about what the government would do and how far it would go. However, let us remember, for us there was no other party than the CPI (M), after all this was our party. But it is also true that we had a big grievance that while they had directed the Presidency College students' movement, they had withdrawn the movement after they came to power. I won't say they had incited us to begin the movement; our responsibility was ours alone, after all no one else could be responsible for our ideas and actions. But we felt that they had not taken the movement as far as it should have gone. The party's position was: how much longer will you agitate, after all you have to reach somewhere; you have to arrive at a settlement. And this demand of revocation of expulsion of students and their return to Presidency College, had been made from the Maidan, from such a huge rally... Formally speaking, the CPI (M) did as much as a parliamentary Left party of that time could do, but we had a big grievance that the movement could have carried on, we ourselves had taken the initiative and made all the arrangements for an all-Bengal students' agitation, we worked very hard, there were a large number of boys and girls, so why had the party put an end to it midway? Subsequently when the party came into power they did not bring us back to Presidency College, so that grievance was also there. That was the first time we felt that the party had compromised.

CRG: That is completely understandable.

RS: Meanwhile, the situation around us was in a radical mode, there used to be a lot of secret discussions; secret documents and secret periodicals were circulating and used to come into our hands. I used to go to the National Book Agency to enquire about new radical books that were available. And the age-old debate: whether there was any path other than that of armed struggle.

The party had begun to say that they had captured power and the CPI had publicly stated that there was no path other than the non-violent one. And the section within the party that was progressively becoming militant was saying that there was no other path than that of armed struggle. Hence, what was the road to revolution? With students, with peasants, with workers – everywhere, it was the same question. The CPI (M) was at that time full of ifs and buts, I mean they never said that armed struggle was not the path, after all, the war in Vietnam was going on, and Vietnam had a big impact. Consequently, until Naxalbari happened, our attitude towards the party was a mixed one. This was the party, our party, but there seemed to be something wrong…

CRG: But the party was compromising…

RS: They were compromising. And they had come to power, joined the government, so the question was: Will this party take adequate steps now that they were in power?

CRG: They were "revisionist" in the language of those days…

RS: Yes, the CPI was the reformist that was what we thought; and the CPI (M) neo-revisionist.

CRG: So, these people were revisionists.

RS: That term was not used widely at first, but gradually it gained currency…

CRG: It was not used. In those days, if someone was called "revisionist" that was a nasty term of abuse…

RS: Two terms were used, the first was social imperialism, referring to the Soviet Union, and CPI was reformist.

CRG: Was that term used against you people?

RS: We were called "extremists". But we used to say the charge against us was not correct. We were called followers of Che Guevara, anarchists, and not proper Maoists; yes, we had never criticized or abused Che, we did not know how many groups and factions there were bearing these kinds of nomencla-

tures, and I was very young then. I knew little about various wings and factions...

CRG: You must have been twenty years old then?

RS: No, even less... do you know why I came from Delhi to Calcutta for my higher studies? Because I was underage, at that time there was an age restriction in Delhi University; one could not join a college before one was seventeen. We had the old higher secondary examination then, and I had passed the higher secondary barely when I had passed the age of fourteen, as a result I had to come to Calcutta. Otherwise there was no need to come to Calcutta. But then life for me took a different turn in this city.

CRG: Let me ask you about something else. What happened after the formation of the All-India Coordination Committee of Communist Revolutionaries (AICCR)[8]?

RS: In the All-India Coordination Committee too, the old-timers, who were leaders of the CPI (M), its left-wing, I mean all those who were militant leaders, they wanted to bring back the party structure. We felt that they were less inclined towards open mass movement. They called for a boycott of the mass organizations existing at that time, which meant boycott of elections, of trade unions, of old peasant organizations, student unions, etc. We were not in favour of these policies of boycott or abstention or what can be called withdrawal; we opposed them. We felt that union elections ought to take place, and that we should go to the unions. We should form mass organizations and work in the existing ones also. So it is crucial to understand as to why we did not want to join the Coordination Committee and why we felt that forming the CPI (ML) so hurriedly was not correct.

The "popular phase" of Naxalbari, if that is what you want to hint at, if you call that the real phase, then that was an intense but short period, from 1967 to 1970. After that came the repression. And that was the end. Then began the attempt at guerilla warfare and the effort to build the party on that basis; politics moved to a different direction. But the attraction that people cutting across many divisions have towards Naxalbari even today, the fact that they are drawn so much by that, so that anyone who protests is labeled as a Naxal-

[8] AICCCR, formed in November 1967, claimed that the Indian political situation was ripe for armed revolution and denounced participation in electoral politics. The leadership of AICCCR included Charu Majumdar, Kanu Sanyal, Shivkumar Mishra, S Tiwari, Satyanarayan Singh, Appu and others. Later leading comrades from Andhra Pradesh also joined the AICCR.

ite even today, or more today, all the literary narratives and theatre and films – the overwhelming social nature that the movement had – that was the mark of those three, four, or five years. We thought that forming a party all of a sudden without adequately understanding this social and political popularity was incorrect. And the party was being established from the top, that is to say, those who were top-level leaders were again becoming leaders, and young activists were not be given recognition, exactly like it was in the old parties. Those who were grassroots-level leaders were nowhere in this new set up – the AICCR or the Party. As a result the party would soon become coterie controlled. There was a hiatus between them and the masses, and secret organization became the be-all and end-all for them. These strains were visible in the new party, which acquired some bad features of the old party too.

CRG: Tell us a bit about going to the village.

RS: I do not like these kinds of personal questions. Personal information is of little importance in this discussion, which must focus on the time and the broad trends. However since you ask – As a first step, we had to go in groups to villages for about a week or make week-end visits to villages near the city… which used to be called "red guard" action. We were "red guards". My first introduction to Bengal's villages was in this way – Kalikapur, in 1967-68. The place was not like it is now. One only saw dim lights beyond Jadavpur – in Santoshpur and other areas. The gleaming Bypass beyond that was not there. Along with some other colleagues I also went in a small group to Debra later in a week long "Red Guard" campaign. Then of course about a year later I went to Debra not for a week, but I was placed there as part of organizational work. If I'm not wrong, I left the city and went away to the village towards the beginning of 1968, not to Debra at first, but to Bahraghora, on the Bengal–Bihar-Orissa border, where we had decided to work. I think it was in the first quarter 1968. After probably five-six months some of us were asked to return to Kolkata on organizational instruction as were told that we had to help the work in the city for some time, and as part of that help the student movement in the university. The famous anti-McNamara agitation and turbulent protests of 1968, the solidarity with various workers' movements, was the outcome of our, I mean the students' and youth movements' combined efforts. By then some of us had given up formal education. Later in the beginning of 1969 I returned to village – this time to Debra, where I had gone a year back for a week as part of a red guard campaign.

CRG: But it was in Calcutta University that you finally completed your studies, isn't it?

RS: As a private candidate.

CRG: Why was that?

RS: I had given up studies when I left for the village. Before that as I have told you, I had been thrown out of college. I completed my M.A. seven years later as a private examinee. So the less you hear about my academic record the better!

CRG: So you were completely immersed in the village. But were you getting reports?

RS: We used to get the CPI (ML)'s paper, *Deshabrati...* also other communications.

CRG: Another question. You referred to the popular phase, but are you not forgetting something about that period, when the second United Front government came in, in March 1969, there was massive public participation, tremendous public enthusiasm. If everyone had gone the Naxalite way, all their support would have remained with the Naxalites alone, but such exuberance, such excitement about the election result, would not have been witnessed.

CRG: You haven't understood what I was saying. I'm saying that the popularity of the Naxalites, and the idea that if you are idealistic you must be a Naxalite... that was the age, and that was the issue. There was support for Naxalbari. But that doesn't mean that they wouldn't vote for the CPI (M). The latter was an organized party. But CPI (ML) was from the very beginning a banned party, it did not contest the election also. I reiterate, that 1967, 1968 and 1969 – was a very *grey* time. Grey in what sense? Yes, there was great radicalization of people, but this radicalism was not exactly anti-CPI (M), within the CPI (M) too groups were radicalized... and so, there's the CPI (M), there was the United Front government, and if this United Front was not in government, I doubt Naxalbari would have taken place. Maybe it wouldn't have happened, though there is no point in us asking a counter-factual question. But it's true that with the coming of the United Front, there was a great enthusiasm

among the people, they felt that it was their government that had come in, and then they began making more and more demands and claims for justice, while those who were sitting in leadership positions began to block those, because their will, the power they had, and their programme – were not oriented towards the aspirations of the common people. They thought, they had to strengthen the administration and make it stable. Naxalbari happened in this milieu. I have heard that Harekrishna Konar, the then Land and Land Revenue Minister of West Bengal government and himself a senior peasant leader, had gone to talk to Charu babu and Kanu Sanyal, and there was an attempt to resolve the matter, but it could not be resolved.

Kanu babu's position was: How can the peasants of Naxalbari stop the armed movement if they had to give up the land they had taken possession of? Harekrishna Konar had reportedly almost accepted this that they could hold on to the land for the time being, but first arms had to be laid down and the cadres against whom there were police warrants had to surrender first. In any case, no arrangement could materialize due to bureaucratic, police, and right wing pressure from within CPI (M). I have heard that Debabrata Bandopadhyay as the land reforms secretary had accompanied Harekrishna Konar in that mission. If a midway settlement had taken place, I don't think there would have been any great loss. Maybe it would have been better. This was the first such remarkable movement, it had gone quite far and achieved a lot, and whatever had been gained by the movement could have been retained. Besides, sharecroppers or *bargadars* would have gained also some rights. Politics too would have remained intact.

After all, the gains have to be protected. It can't be that you will go on making gains without interruption. Anyway, if the impact of the movement had to be carried to the city, and as the movement began to spread across rural areas, then, merely saying «carry on armed struggle» was not enough. All this business of beheading, which we were strongly opposed to... we didn't say all this outside, none of us dissented publicly at that time – beheading, breaking statues... these things did not happen in the student movement we led. Our organization was then called the Presidency Consolidation, and we had huge support.

CRG: What had huge support?

RS: Support for how we wanted to work, for our "mass line", the way we built up organizations and aimed at coordinating them.

CRG: Did you people oppose all that beheading, statue-breaking etc.?

RS: Yes. We have never spoken about that outside, but we declined initially to join the CPI (ML). Meanwhile, as you know, the All Indian Coordination Committee of Communist Revolutionaries (AICCR) had been formed, and it moved rapidly towards party formation. In a sense what we wanted or did not want is not important. We have to see how the major trend developed. That was the reality. At that time, the way things were shaping, Naxalbari meant Kanu Sanyal; it meant Charu Majumdar. Srikakulam meant Vempatapu Satyanarayana, the movement in Andhra Pradesh meant Nagi Reddy and Pulla Reddy, who left CPI (M) after the Burdwan Plenum of the CPI (M). So, there was this kind of thinking on one side, and on the other side common people thought that their government had come to power, with Jyoti Basu, their long-standing leader, at the helm. The choice for the common people was between Congress and CPI (M). And the CPI (M) did finally come to power too, in 1977. That CPI (M) was not today's CPI (M), though one cannot deny the logical connection between different phases of the evolution of CPI (M). In any case they were labeling the path of Naxalbari as "extremist". So, both coexisted. In a family you would have a father who would be with the CPI (M) and his son with the CPI (ML) or in general with the Naxalites; that happened frequently. If you think about the freedom movement, then you will understand this. During the freedom movement, did anyone distinguish between *Anushilan*[9] and Congress? When Anushilan was at a low ebb, the Anushilan people used to join the Satyagraha movement, they joined Gandhi-ji, they had not decried Gandhi-ji; for that matter, even Bhagat Singh did not. On the contrary, Gandhi vilified them, saying «You are philosophers of the bomb». Nehru decried Chandra Sekhar Azad[10]. And you would typically find that throughout the freedom movement, as soon as the momentum of armed struggle increased, people went in that direction in large numbers; and then when it was at low ebb, people went and joined Gandhi's movement. That's what I mean when I say it was a grey time.

The period from 1967 to 1970 was a very interesting time, and I don't say this because I am infatuated with the Naxalite path or because I think it is correct. That a political movement could become so popular, so left-wing, so

[9] Anushilan Samity was a revolutionary terrorist organisation in Bengal in the early decades of the twentieth century. It propagated revolutionary violence as the means to end the colonial rule. It began as a federation of local youth groups and gyms (*Akhara*) in 1902. It challenged British rule in India by engaging in militant nationalism, including bombings, assassinations, and politically-motivated violence. It gradually dissolved in the 1930s.

[10] Chandra Sekhar Azad (1906-1931) was a militant revolutionary in United Provinces, and was a member of Hindusthan Republican Association. He was killed by the British police. In his autobiography, Nehru called him a "terrorist".

militant, that so many completely new demands could be raised and so many new kinds of organizations could be built – all this was witnessed during that time.

And there were issues of ethics. Discrimination in regard to participation of women in the Naxalbari movement, unnecessary violence towards fellow-activists accused of signing confessions to police (under severe torture) – all these things happened. I cannot say these things did not happen. But that was later. That happened when the movement broke down and hopelessness spread. But remember, large numbers of inspired boys and girls went to the villages. If a hundred boys and girls gave up everything and went to the villages, it means then that at least in one hundred thousand or ten thousand people that inner longing had emerged, and that's how a hundred persons would say, give up your studies and go to the village. Once again, I am asking, why don't you think about the old days, the days of freedom struggle? When young men and women would say we don't need British run school, we don't need British run colleges, burn everything down, we will work for the cause of the nation, there's no point studying all these colonial things… Hence, my or someone else's doing so meant that a hundred persons were thinking that way. It's not that I was precocious, or brave, and therefore I was doing what I did; and same with others. In other words, we can think of the immense possibilities of the development of a kind of radical politics if the Naxalbari movement was allowed to develop further, and had not been given a sudden anarchist turn. But, yes, this is a counter-factual statement, though it is necessary to reiterate: if the CPI (ML) was formed later, if they could have stayed more on the path of people's movement, if in the rural areas too they could have stuck to the policy of abjuring the line of needless killing and annihilation without building the popular foundations of the movement – then it's very difficult to say what would have happened. Probably revolutionary politics would have developed further and taken an unforeseen turn not experienced in India.

There was then the ruthless suppression of the movement by the government, wich the military brought in, and after 1970, one massacre happened after another – what we call "white terror". Revolutionary politics could not develop any more as organizational tasks had been neglected. Red terror had entered the picture in an unprepared state. I don't think the time was right when red terror started. More importantly, what's the meaning of deploying red terror? You have so many people with you… Take for instance Krishnanagar, where throughout the area doctors were told the maximum fee they could charge their patients, private tutors were told that they could not charge more than a specified amount for their tuition. These were perhaps considered by

the middle class bad, coercive, and wrongful activities; but behind the application of force there was something ethical. This ethical undertone or overtone, whatever you may call it, that lay behind such actions, this tone or stance of morality, was there from 1967 to 1970, in a huge way. After 1970 this declined drastically.

This were for two reasons – First was Bangladesh, 1971. In the whole Bangladesh affair, just as there were matters internal to Bangladesh or East Pakistan, one should also ask why, when the movement in East Pakistan also took place in 1965, or in 1968, why was it that when such a big movement had taken place there in 1968, there was no major reflection of that in West Bengal? Why was there no attempt at forging a unity with the militant democratic movement in Pakistan? We lost the possible moment of South Asian toilers' unity[11]. But after 1970, on the issue of support to Bangladesh the direction to which Indira Gandhi took the people of India, standing on that ground, it was not difficult to carry out mass murders of Naxalites. Second, by then people had become fatigued and afraid, they were gasping, and no society can carry on this kind of intense and dense political activity for very long, least of all Bengalis. Everyone knows what the Bengali way of working is, and especially for middle-class Bengalis it was difficult to keep alive the density and intensity of the movement. Can you take out a procession everyday without thinking about what the next step would be? Can you form a squad everyday? Can you say everyday that there's no need to read anything other than Mao Tse Tung? Can you say everyday that we don't need to have the imagination of an alternative society, but it will come into being as we act? Can such things happen every day?

Yet the point is why do I call the society or the time during the period from 1966 to 1970 a grey time? Let me make a comparison on a larger scale, or perhaps it's not so large: during the French Revolution, when it reached the stage where the revolutionaries killed each other, take for instance Robespierre, Danton… it can always be said later, that unless that had happened at the end of the Revolution or that ended the Revolution, dictatorship would not have come, that there wouldn't have been a Napoleon; that after all, the whole society did not move in that direction. Perhaps we can say that now, perhaps some of us said it then. Many say it now, and perhaps we should have said it even more then. Actually, because we were very young, our political maturity was also limited, we instinctively understood lot of things, or maybe

[11] The best portrayal of that phase is still the classic Monthly Review publication, C. GOUGH – H.P. SHARMA (eds) *Imperialism and Revolution in South Asia*, New York, Monthly Review Press, 1973.

we had read a lot; but we did not have the courage of truth, we did not have the ideological or political courage to go against the stream. Consequently, we raised questions and then surrendered to the forces of anarchy.

CRG: Tell us something about the movement in Debra?

RS: You can get an idea about the popular foundations of the movement in Debra just from the fact that there were at least two hundred to two hundred and fifty peasants of Debra in Mednipur jail for at least four or five years. The classes organized in jail, I mean literacy classes and political study sessions, were all with peasant comrades. You may get accounts of the Debra peasant movement in the reports published in *Deshabrati*[12]; the movement however deserves much more serious study.

CRG: Which jail were you in?

RS: Again a personal question... I was in the Medinipur Central Jail. In each of the study classes in the jail, there were, say, thirty forty persons. These were literacy as well as political classes mainly around reading the Red Book. The situation in Jhargram jail was very bad because it was not a central jail and whoever went to Jhargram jail were invariably afflicted with skin ailments, because there was no water, as many as forty persons had to huddle together and stay and sleep in a small room.

There were as many as four or five persons in cells where one or two persons were meant to stay. At night, after lock-up, where would they go to relieve themselves? The situation in Mednipur Central Jail was also similar. Some people were subsequently transferred for lack of space. There were almost three or four hundred people from Gopiballavpur, Nayagram, Keshiari; also from Binpur, nearby Salboni, from Pingla, Sabong, and Panskura.

You can see, a huge number of peasants joined the movement. It is also true that a lot of people came out of the CPI and CPI (M), but there was also another side to this mass participation. To make myself clear, let me speak once again about the freedom movement. Do you know, during the era of the freedom struggle, you could be perhaps a member of the Communist Party, and also be a member of the Congress? There was nothing surprising about this. Like Somnath Lahiri, or Bankim Mukherjee, who was a leader of the old Communist Party, but also in the AICC (All India Congress Committee) – I think in 1936. Bankim Mukherjee, a significant communist leader, was a

[12] The proscribed Bengali organ of the CPI (ML).

member of the AICC for perhaps for nearly two decades, and in the pre-independence era a member of the Bengal Legislative Assembly. So, although one can speak of clear political choices today, it may not be like that at all times and in all places. I say again and again that a major characteristic of a popular movement is that boundaries become very unclear. On the other hand the person who came to identify us in jail for police trial parade was a communist party (CPI) member! Some communists became jail visitors. Once there was a serious discussion about a big communist jail visitor, who was always seen in the company of the police. The idea was to take action against him. Think of the Satyen-Kanai incident[13]. Inevitably six or seven persons would have been charged with serious offence and probably hanged. Luckily that leader did not come again.

Why were people joining the movement? The first reason was because they felt we were saying something new, we were militants. I've seen again and again that though the members of the agrarian laboring class may not say much, but they have great anger inside them. There was something else that created a great attraction, and that was looting the houses of the landlords or *jotedar*s. See, we did not have much experience in organizing these assaults on the landlords, but there was massive mobilization, massive peasants' gatherings, you go in a procession and surround the house of the *jotedar* and burn the land records or documents of land mortgage… Mao Tse Tung had written about all these of the Hunan peasants movement. These things are real…We wanted to recreate Human. Think of these things as the form of a movement and as symbols of actions. Now definitely many, many things have changed, but this was something to see, and probably this left something to think: what has this history left for us in these changed times? Annihilation was not the main aim. The contribution of the Naxalites was – there had to be a beheading too. Everyone knows what the outcome of that was. But it was also true that the burning of old land mortgage documents was symbolic in a major way. Because there was money-lending in the villages, it was from the jotedar also that people took loans, the jotedars and money-lenders or mahajans were all together, and people had to mortgage their possessions, so burning the documents including the land deeds was very significant – as was the loot of gold and jewelry. After all bank nationalization had not taken place yet.

Thus you could be a part of CPI or CPI (M) in your neighbourhood, and at the same time you could join the peasant procession of the Naxalites. In the Gopiballavpur peasant movement, on two occasions there were opportunities

[13] Satyen Bose and Kanailal Dutt killed Narendra Goswami in jail for having turned state witness during the Alipore Bomb Case (1908). They were hanged.

to kill the jotedar. The one who was supposed to carry it out was an agricultural labourer in the jotedar's house. Perhaps he got scared, or perhaps out of awe and regard for the rich man he was unable to use the spear… he let him off even after finding him. The peasants only looted grain and went away. After that we were criticized by higher ups in the Party, we were reformists, moderates, etc. Why had we not finished off the jotedar? Likewise we were criticized by our leaders that we were involving the peasants in seizing the paddy and cutting the grains. What was the issue there? Forcible paddy cutting in jotedar's land was a time-honoured action in peasant movement, so we were asked, what was new about that? We were told that we were making the peasants reformists by saying, «Come along you'll get some grain». But the fact is that the peasants were entitled to the grain, there was nothing reformist about this. Surrounding the jotedar, cordoning his house, looting the granary, burning all the loan documents or debt papers, looting gold and jewelry, money, and driving him away, from the village, all these were significant. That's why in the Naxalbari movement triggered by the eviction of the sharecropper, Bigul Kishan, by his jotedar employer, all the jotedars of Naxalbari and Kharibari had to flee to Siliguri. Why were they driven away? Because the physical presence of the jotedar in the village would be a problem for peasant power. Look at the power dynamics. When the jotedar is in the village, it means his clientele are also ensconced there. When the jotedar flees the village it means his sycophants too would have to leave the village. And once they are gone, how long does it take to loot the jotedar's house and the grainstore! After all the jotedar who is driven away from the village cannot inform the police any more. You know, people from the police station always come to the jotedar's house whenever they have to visit a village… which was a very accepted way of suppressing the peasant movement in the villages in olden times. When the police or the magistrate arrived and stayed in the village, lodged in the jotedar's house, with arrangements made for feeding them, possibly arrangements also made for one or two women to be provided, the police or the magistrate would then do whatever he wanted to. He would have peasants dragged there, scold someone, slap someone, or take someone away, and so on. But if that jotedar himself was not there, it would be the first decisive step whereby the role of the peasants in the rural areas would be transformed. But this in no time turned to slitting the throat. As a result, irrespective of whether or not the jotedar's house was looted, the idea was, let's slit his throat at the very outset. This led the movement towards destruction.

There was a difference between all those areas where the Naxalbari movement had a popular base or a mass base, and places where the peasants' movement had to be built anew. The difference was regarding building the

popular base. The CPI (M) was reformist… how were they reformist? That was because, the CPI (M) line was: *benami* land (land registered in others' names) would be recovered, vested land would be distributed, and the government would try to raise the wages of agricultural workers, and the share of sharecroppers would be increased… That is to say, other than seizing ownership of land and establishing peasant authority in the village, whatever else needed to be done for the peasant would be done. On the contrary, what was the meaning of the path of Naxalbari? The call was: «Land to the tillers»! Peasants must get land title, and in rural areas, land must belong to the tiller. Thus, what was the path of Naxalbari and what was a reformist path – it was clear in that era. The main thing was, the peasant will get land, will have the right to harvest, and will establish power in the rural area. The peasants' association (*krishak sabha*) will rule. If you don't join the movement to bring about your rule, you do not get the ownership of land – this slogan of Naxalbari earned huge popular support.

But when popular support had to be built afresh, the question was: which direction the movement must take? As an answer to the question, eliminating the class enemy became the line. The movement was finished when that path was adopted. Annihilation of class enemy soon led to self-annihilation.

Peasant movements took place in rural areas mostly where popular base existed. After all, in Naxalbari the party itself took up the Naxalite line… the movement did not start suddenly in Naxalbari. A major part of the party went that way in Birbhum. In Mednipur, or in the railway workshop in Kharagpur, or in Debra, a major part of the party went in the direction of Naxalbari. For instance, in Mednipur, Bhabadeb Mandal had been in the CPI and was then in the CPI (M)… similarly, Gunadhar Murmu was a very militant CPI(M) peasant leader… The entire tribal peasantry in Medinipur district went the Naxalbari way, not today's Mednipur, but the erstwhile big district of Mednipur. Naxalite boys and girls had gone there to organize the peasants, in turn they were inspired. But later, as I said, after joining the CPI (ML) and then moving towards the line of annihilation finished everything. It became easy for state terror to come down heavily.

CRG: In your article in The Wire[14], you had written that a radical subjectivity was being formed at this time, and after that, you said that although the movement could not achieve its desired end, streams of influence and

[14] RANABIR SAMADDAR, *Fifty Years after Naxalbari, Popular Movements Still Have Lessons to Learn*, «The Wire», 6 March 2017, https://thewire.in/111691/naxalbari-communism-maoism/ (accessed on 4 October 2018)

memory remained in society though in subterranean way. You have traced the influence of the Naxalite movement on the railway strike of 1974 too, or in those who still continue to put hope on the Naxalite party or a group… this lingering impact, or legacy, could you say a bit more about that?

RS: That is an important question. If you ask about the legacy of Naxalbari – on the one hand you can say that the path of Naxalbari failed. The failure may have been on account of disorder or anarchy or frustration, or state terror, or as a result of all of these combined; in any case the path proved abortive. It failed, it was finished. And, the way in which CPI (ML) is now trying to proceed, it is unable to succeed, at least in West Bengal, though it has achieved some success in Bihar. The CPI (ML) has now joined the politics of the Left Front in West Bengal, even after the struggle of Singur–Nandigram, – a struggle which is very difficult to fit into any previous template. It won't do to say that only the Naxalites fought in Nandigram or in Singur. Therefore the question of path is a complicated one. A straightforward answer – succeeded or failed – is not possible. And this is what I'm trying to tell you… I had tried to write about this in the book *Passive Revolution in West Bengal*[15], namely that a massive radicalization had happened in the late sixties, which the state wanted to put an end to through terror. On the other hand, the revolutionaries including us, owing to our own foolishness had the movement destroyed in the vortex of anarchy. But see, how within society the lingering echoes of the past remain. After the railway strike, we had thought that it was over. But after the CPI (M)'s coming to power in 1977, first of all through the CPI (M) itself the legacy of struggle found some expression. There was an overwhelming awareness that, yes, wages need to be increased, sharecroppers' share has be increased, there will be *Operation Barga*, the peasants will have the right to register as sharecroppers to secure their dues, peasants' dignity had to be ensured… in all these the traces of 1967 remained. But the idea that the CPI (M) shouted from rooftops that class oppression ended during the period of their rule, there was no class struggle in rural Bengal… meaning, class struggle existed until the CPI (M) came into power, and then came the period of peace and stability so that the lot of working people could improve… To say, that after the coming of the Left Front the villages now turned peaceful, that was impossible to accept, this just could not be. The struggle came to an end in the minds of many radical intellectuals – many who thought that way because they were not prepared to look closely into the contentious history of the time. Some tried to hold the hand of the Congress, while the Congress said that the

[15] R. SAMADDAR, *Passive Revolution in West Bengal: 1977–2011*, Delhi, Sage, 2013.

CPI (M) had cut off its hand. In the decade of the 1980s, the *basti* (slums and shantytown) movement began, title to land in the basti was demanded, followed by the anti-eviction movement, then the workers' autonomous movements in various mills and factories... in various ways one can see the continuity of class struggle, the legacy of Naxalbari. Recall the massive unrest by the workers in the wake of Bhikari Paswan's forced disappearance[16].

The question of course is: when do we see the result of all these? Nandigram happened – once again, in a combustible situation. An enormous amount of land was grabbed in Rajarhat. Apparently there was not so much protest, but we later investigated the Rajarhat land grab and found that at least a hundred people were murdered in course of land acquisition and land grab[17].

CRG: There was protest, but it was not accorded any significance.

RS: Yes, it takes time. After all Naxalbari did not happen suddenly. I would say again and again, it was a political process in operation over a long period; people were thinking; various things kept happening. But it is like when people finally decided to fight back in Singur. Did they fight so that they could join Trinamul! That's not true. Those who went to Nandigram, did they go there on behalf of Trinamul? No, they didn't. So, in popular movements these boundaries of parties, which we usually think about, these boundary lines, are wiped out to a large extent as the movement proceeds. The boundaries of parties, a party-led movement with proper boundaries, etc., – things which we later say or believe in, are to a large extent *post facto*. In short, I am trying to say that during the CPI (M) and Left Front era, there was struggle; it took time; it took time for the people to become aware. After all, a new government had come to power; it had done a few good things, so people also took time to judge. If you look at the field of education: during the Congress era, the schoolmaster had to be subservient to the village *jotedar*, he would be paid his salary once in three four months, he used to get some fruits and vegetables, perhaps it would be deducted from the salary! He would have to be a supplicant to the local bad gentry. Now in all these areas and places, a huge

[16] Bhikari Paswan was a worker in Victoria Jute Mill, in the municipal town of Bhadreswar, near Kolkata, who disappeared in October 1993 following a clash between the management and workers, in which a policeman was killed. It was alleged that he had been abducted, tortured, and killed by the police. For details of the case - http://www.masum.org.in/activitiespdfs/Activity3.pdf ; also, https://www.epw.in/journal/1995/36/commentary/west-bengal-left-front-and-police-case-bhikari-paswan.html

[17] For details of the land grab and resistance, I. DEY – S. SEN – R. SAMADDAR, *Beyond Kolkata: Rajarhat and the Dystopia of Urban Imagination*, London and Delhi, Routledge, 2013.

governmental expansion took place, the government took responsibility of schools and colleges; bank nationalization also took place, banks were not failing any more, you could even buy even a rickshaw with bank loan; buses were put on the road with bank loans… I heard Jangal Santhal on his release from jail got a bus permit and a bank loan. I don't know, certainly some poor people got bank assistance. The Left Front government facilitated.

CRG: You and your comrades had organized a meeting after Jangal Santhal passed away.

RS: Yes, we did that, Jangal Santhal was our leader, one of the main leaders of Naxalbari peasant movement. He was the leader of our group when he died.

But to go back to the theme we were discussing: The impact of such a major movement as the Naxalbari, remains deep in society. Struggle, particularly a major struggle like the Naxalbari movement, creates impact; and those who continue the movement later in difficult times may think at times that the work has been fruitless. However, only a fortune-teller can tell when the impact will materialize in form of a new event or movement! We used to memorize Mao's words, «A single spark can spread a prairie fire». But all sparks do not spread prairie fire, isn't it? When we come to the time of Bhikari Paswan, we know how many closed factories had closed down; so many movements were conducted on the issue of closed factories. We also tried. Mobilizing support for jute mill strikes, movements in support of tea-garden workers, support for workers in the tanneries – through the entire decade of the eighties, we continued doing all that. Nagarik Mancha led movements. Various kinds of workers' associations, organizations, and platforms were created. There was a significant movement in support of the victims of the Bhopal gas disaster. There were anti-eviction mobilizations and gatherings. A National Relief Committee was formed in protest against man-made floods. However the feeling also was natural, that nothing was being achieved, who would pay any attention to these long, fruitless efforts? But we finally saw the impact of these movements and struggles at the time of the Singur-Nandigram.

So class struggle does not end. The Naxalbari era had taken that very struggle to another level. Popular foundation, ethics, thinking about alternative means of power, and attempting to act upon that – everything taken together, that era had a unique character, and if you allow me, an everlasting impact through the changing face of revolt.