

Eruption of the Simmering Resentment of the Downtrodden in Naxalbari: Naipaul's Observations

Mayank Rohitasva Garg

Lecturer in English,

Department of English, BSR Govt. Arts College, Alwar (Raj.) 301001

Abstract: V. S. Naipaul undertook three major tours to India in the later half of the previous century and wrote three interesting travelogues based on the three tours. He observed the social, intellectual and political life in this country and analysed them in his Indian trilogy. While in Bengal he came to know about the Naxalbari Movement during his second visit. He interviewed several persons associated with the Movement during his third visit and analysed their views in his last Indian travelogue. The analysis by Naipaul may be tinged with his own prejudices. I have tried to study Naipaul's opinion objectively by pointing out the slight changes in his views from the second to the third travelogue of the India trilogy.

Keywords: uprising, landlords, insurgency, Naxalite, discontent, repression, landlords.

The name Naxalite is derived from the town of Naxalbari (Naksalbari) which was the centre of a tribal peasant uprising against local landlords in 1967 in West Bengal. This uprising was in Naxalbari village of Darjeeling district in West Bengal, was "organised by communists from outside" (India: A Wounded Civilization, 89). This uprising may be called the fountainhead of Maoist insurgency in India. Naipaul commits a minor mistake in giving the year of the uprising. In *India: A Wounded Civilisation* he states that the uprising took place in the year 1968 although he corrects himself in the third India travelogue where he states, "in April 1967 the Naxalbari incident occurred" (India: A Million Mutinies Now, 366). Naxalbari is a gram panchayat, with its 21 villages. It comes under the jurisdiction of Siliguri subdivision of Darjeeling district. In IWC Naipaul wrongly calls Naxalbari "the district in the far north of Bengal" (Wounded, 89). The discontent brewing in the tea gardens after the cruel repression of farmers during the Tebhaga struggle by the then state government in the fifties gave birth to a seething rage that culminated in Naxalite revolt. The movement was sparked by a small incident in Naxalbari. "[P]easants had surrounded a police party with bows and arrows and had shot down a police inspector, in the course of a struggle to occupy the lands monopolized by landlords, illegally for the most part" (Mutinies, 366). Once the fire was kindled it caught the imagination of the young graduates of Kolkata who had been reading Marxist literature and had romantic feelings for the poor. Depanjan, a communist activist recalls his feelings about Naxalbari incident thus:

This was a dramatic incident. I just couldn't believe it— that this thing, which we had been reading about in our books, in Marxist literature, in history books, could really happen: that the toiling people could really take up arms, and they could fight for their rights. And my mind was made up, and that of most of our friends at presidency College: that this was the struggle with which we were going to link our lives. (366).

The movement was spearheaded by CharuMajumdar. It was after this incident that the seething rage lost its agrarian character and became a militant movement. In the beginning the state government was slow and indecisive as a result of which the movement "spread, catching fire especially in large areas of Andhra in the South" (Wounded, 89). Although the rebellion was suppressed later on, it became the focus of a number of communist-led separatist movements that sprung up in remote, often tribal areas in India. The movement was affected by the political developments in the state of Bengal and Bengal's political activities were affected in turn by the Naxalite movement.

Communism in Bengal has a long history, according to Naipaul. "It was another colonial import, one of the things that had come after the New Learning of the 19th century, and the mixed culture" (Mutinies, 349). There has always been intellectual turmoil in the Communist Party of India which has led to its several splits in the 20th century.

In 1964, the CPI split and the CPI (M) was formed. Three years later Naxalbari happened in 1967, two years after this, at a huge May Day rally in 1969, in Kolkata, KanuSanyal announced the formation of a third party, the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist). The founders of this new party were the same persons who had mobilized the revolutionary peasants' movement in Naxalbari. CPI (ML) advocated armed revolution and denounced participation in the electoral process. The party organized guerrilla units in the neighbouring states. CPI (ML) got moral support from China, which actively encouraged the attempts of CPI (ML) to launch revolution. "It was this last, Maoist faction that had the peasant revolt going" (Mutinies, 350). The formation

was merely an attempt to rally various Maoist tendencies into a unified organization. Some of the groups were merged but some other groups like The Maoist Communist Centre of India (MCC), which adhered to Maoist line and the People's War Group (PWG), then active in Andhra Pradesh which followed Marxist-Leninist line, retained separate identities and preferred to remain outside of CPI (ML). "By 1973 the Marxist-Leninist camp was divided into 20 sections" (Mutinies, 398). There were around 40 Left wing extremist groups working in India at the end of the 20th century. MCC and PWG merged into CPI (ML) in 2004, to form the Communist Party of India (Maoist). This unified group declared to follow Marxist-Leninist-Maoist line.

The activists of the CPI (Maoist) are often popularly referred to as Naxalites in reference to the Naxalbari insurrection conducted by radical Maoists in West Bengal in 1967. The members of this unified Maoist group intensified their activities in the first decade of the 21st century so much that it led the then prime minister of India Mr. Manmohan Singh to proclaim in 2006: "It would not be an exaggeration to say that the problem of naxalism is the single biggest internal security challenge ever faced by our country" (M. Singh).

Today, the territory where the Maoists are engaged stretches from the Nepalese Border to the northern parts of Kerala. 223 districts in 20 states in India are affected by Naxal menace. Seven of these states are severely affected. This particular region is referred to as red corridor within the public discourse and comprises the least developed and poorest regions of India with a noticeable high amount of tribal population (Adivasis), untouchables (Dalits) and other vulnerable groups. The poor, exploited and discontented, have been mobilized by the Maoist leadership.

Naxalbari and Naxalism has over the years, however, entered into collective consciousness through a large number of creative works— at the head of these are Mahasweta Devi's *HazaarChurashirMaa*. SudeepChakravartih has chronicled his travel to Naxalbari in the book *Red Sun*. JhumpaLahiri's *The Lowland* is the recent addition in this chain of works on this topic. Naipaul, too, touched upon the leftwing rebellion in Andhra Pradesh in his earlier work *Half A Life*.

Films like MrinalSen's *Padatik* and *Calcutta 71*, RitwikGhatak's *Jukti, Tokko Aar Goppo*, BuddhadebDasgupta's *AndhiGali* and, more recently, Sudhir Mishra's *HazaaronKhwasheinAisi* and PrakashJha's *Chakravyuh* to name a few have attracted interest of the audience.

Naipaul visited Naxalbari during the Emergency where life continued as before in the lush green fields, where the crops waited to be harvested, and where the old and the young whiled away their time. The fire that sparked off in Naxalbari now singed the political machinery of the state. "It is mainly in the cities that people remember it" Naipaul says. "But the movement", according to him, "lasted long enough to engage the sympathies of young people at the universities. Many gave up their studies and became Naxalites. [...] Many were killed; many are still in jail" (Wounded, 90). At another place, he repeats the same sentiments, "...the movement, while it lasted, had attracted and consumed many thousands of educated people in Bengal and other parts of India" (Mutinies, 350). Naipaul calls it a middle class movement in *India: A Wounded Civilization*. It is proved in the third travelogue when Dipanjan, a science professor in a college in central Calcutta, and a survivor of the peasant revolt, admits in an interview to Naipaul, "Many of them were sons of impoverished gentry on this side of the border. We were all middle-class people" (Mutinies, 366). Dipanjan visited several small villages during his active days in mid-68 and he was surprised to note that in "cities everyone was boiling, and here were these peasants, who were supposed to be the main force of the revolution, quite impassive" (Mutinies, 377). The middle class involvement in the movement is proved by this statements and the life of Debu also who is "a foreign returned and English speaker" communist. He "joined the Communist Party (Marxist) and began to work in the villages. He lived with the peasants. In the main he did propaganda" (Mutinies, 391)

After drawing a very pathetic and moving picture of the aborigines who work in the tea gardens Naipaul states that the revolutionaries chose Naxalbari not because of the tea workers. The reality was that "illiterate, alcoholic, lost, a medley of tribal people" were in fact left alone.

The Naxalbari district was chosen, by men who had read the handbooks of revolution, for its terrain: its remoteness, and the cover provided by its surviving blocks of forest. The movement that began there quickly moved on; it hardly touched the real distress of Naxalbari; and now nothing shows (Wounded, 91).

Naipaul calls the Naxalite movement "an attempt at Maoist revolution" (92). The movement was based on an imported ideology "it was an intellectual tragedy, a tragedy of idealism, ignorance and mimicry" (93). These words remind one of the recently published novel by JhumpaLahiri in which a character Subhash "wasn't convinced that an imported ideology could solve India's problems" (Chapter 5). In order to objectively study the movement Naipaul considers the views of other writers such as the famous Marathi playwright Tendulkar. He mentions Vijay Tendulkar's theory on this movement. He believes that as Naxalism developed in Bengal it became confused with the Kali cult. "Many of the Naxalite killings in Bengal, according to Tendulkar, had a ritualistic quality. Maoism was used only to define the sacrifice" (Wounded, 92). The good cause was lost in the cult of Kali. The best university students, according to Naipaul, "borrowing something deadly, somebody else's

idea of revolution” fought for the poor, landless and depressed without understanding the consequences. Debu, a communist tells Naipaul that there has been gradual deterioration in the Naxalite movement in India. In the beginning “the Naxalites were not using quotations only from Marx, but from Rabindranath and Vivekanand and Romain Rolland” (Mutinies, 393). Later on individual killing was sanctioned by the leadership. This led to “[t]he seizure of college and school buildings, the destruction of laboratories and libraries — since it was considered that this educational system created enemies of the people” (394).

Naipaul listens with patience the gory tales of Naxalite movement from the surviving revolutionaries and feels that they knew little about India. They fought because they could not generate new ideas of their own. He feels that Marxism has become the opiate of the idle people and “the governments are dogmatic and foolish, killing where they cannot create” (406).

Rajan, a Brahmin and a private secretary of an influential politician and businessman, recalls and tells that the situation had become turbulent in Bengal after the rise of communism. He says, “Labour was unruly. The leftists had more or less gained control of the unions and the state. And the physical conditions in the city also started deteriorating” (151).

Ashok, a Brahmin, in the marketing business in Calcutta, either because of his fear of alienation or threat to his community, is against the rise of communism and trade unionism in Calcutta. Using a derogatory term for the unions in Bengal he says that the “red-flag-waving unions” play cat and mouse with the management. “The union leaders”, according to Ashok, “don’t do any work at all” (Mutinies, 404).

Naipaul’s statement that money, ambition and creativity are going elsewhere in India is proved by recent developments in the state. The atmosphere in Bengal is not industry friendly. The downslide which began with the communist regime in W. Bengal has not stopped yet and the once industrial hot spot of India turned into the graveyard of industries by the turn of the century. It is because of this that Naipaul calls Calcutta a dying city where there is no activity. There is only illusion of activity with political demonstrations; and idle young men “take their red flags and slogans through self-perpetrating misery of the streets...” (Mutinies, 406). Naipaul sees the death of Calcutta clearly, the process of which began “when the British went away”. Since the great days of the city, with all its intellectual life over, he predicts, “Bengal might show as another Bangladesh— too many people, too little sanitation, too little power (407).

Thus, the simmering resentment of the downtrodden erupted in Naxalbari and it turned into a movement in Bengal which quickly spread to other parts of India. The downtrodden were left behind and the movement went ahead taken over by the middle class educated people. The people who led the movement formed political parties. The ambitions of the leaders and differences caused by different ideologies led to schisms, fractures, disintegrations, dissolutions, creations, mergers and divisions of the political parties leading to chaos and again to formations of new equations in the so-called Red Corridor of India. But Naipaul has never been pessimistic about these movements, whatever his critics may say about him.

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