

Understanding Naxalism (Maoism) through SAARC English Fiction

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Abstract: Naxal Movement, a much controversial trauma in contemporary South-Asian socio-political era, has its root in 1967 with the establishment of Naxalbari (a village in Darjeeling district, West Bengal) where tea farmers protest against dictatorial reign of teagarden owners and landlords to uplift the flag of liberty and equality. Being inspired by Marxist-Leninist theory of Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 and Maoist theory of Chinese Communist Revolution in 1949, the emerging ideologists, especially the students and youth, under the leadership of Charu Majumdar, Kanu sanyal and Jangal Santhal oppose CPI (M)'s vote bank theory and form CPI (Marxist-Leninist). The success of Naxalbari Movement adds fuel in the enthusiasm of these left-winged activists. With the help of liberated zone creation and formation of grass-root activity by assimilating exploited farmers, the young ideologists' start dreaming of establishing an exploitation free Utopian society. But the repressiveness of government, lack of communication, betrayal, lack of leadership, wrong assessment of socio-political situation force this movement to fade within a decade. Since 1968, Naxalism has been depicted both in regional and in English language, with major or minor reference in many SAARC literary works. This article is an earnest endeavour to delineate the impact of Naxalism in society and to make a reader understand what Naxalism is as depicted in the SAARC English Fiction with special reference to Neel Mukherjee's *The Lives of Others*, Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084* and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*.

Keywords- SAARC, Naxalism, Revolution, Understanding, Socio-political, Repressive Government, Grass-root activity.

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation or SAARC is a regional intergovernmental organization which contains eight countries from the Indian Subcontinent like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Maldives and Afghanistan. SAARC was established on 8th December, 1985 in Dhaka, Bangladesh and it has its headquarter in Kathmandu, Nepal. There is a strong similarity among these countries not only in their geographical appearance but in their culture, tradition, ethnicity and literature also. English is not the mother tongue of any of these countries but in modern global scenario, many contemporary writers from these countries have started writing in English. Thus, a separate genre of literature which is known as South Asian English Literature has been created. Most of these countries were once colonized by the British. So, English makes a fluent journey here-from a language used in

administrative, military purpose during British rule to a language of much craze and interest in common people.

From the beginning of civilization, politics has a close relationship with society and they both juxtapose to coin a new term called 'socio-political'. Naxalism is a burning socio-political issue especially in India and Nepal. It is essential to remember that Naxal Movement first began in West Bengal in the sixth decade of twentieth century. Gradually, it spread all over India especially where the farmers and common people were exploited by the landlords, zamindars or money lenders. It was not the first time that a different cult of philosophy emerged in Bengal. During the medieval age, Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu in the form of mental purification of society introduced religious revolution. In the modern period, Rammohan Roy's movement of Abolition of Sati (1829), Vidyasagar's movement of Widow Remarriage (1856) brought social revolution. Even, in the field of Political revolution, Sepoy Mutiny (1857), Peasant's Revolt, Santhal Movement against the English-everywhere Bengal has shown the path of revolution. In the same way, in the post-independent era, communist mentality of the Bengalese paved the way to the introduction of Naxalism. Fruitful implementation of Marxism, Leninism and Maoism in the different parts of the world, availability of social media, and English newspaper and journals that carry international news bring a new hope to the communists to create an exploitation-free world in the form of armed revolution and Naxalism is an obvious outcome of it.

It is quite surprising to note that in India and Nepal, Naxalism has been treated in a totally different way. In India, Naxalites are treated as violence monger who anticipate government policies, attack the police or government officials, love bloodshed, aim to create an independent zone where they can establish their secular, socialist society. Naxalites protest against the exploitation of the government, unemployment of students and youth, poverty, starvation and hunger of the poor especially the tribals, government policies, corruption, caste prejudice, difference between the poor and the aristocrat, basic needs that government is unable to provide etc. Intellectuals, writers and common men sympathise them, but none supports their ways of protest-bloodshed, attacking police officers or common mass, kidnapping etc. Whereas in Nepal, the Naxalites rule the nation. Pushpa Kamal Dahal, the leader of Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist-Centre) who is known as Prachanda, is now the Prime Minister of Nepal since 2016. In Nepal, Maoist activists with the help of common mass organized civil war, dethroned the king and established a Democratic Republic. In India, Maoists lack the mob support but in Nepal common mass helped to form government and chose a Naxalite as their Prime Minister.

There is no doubt in dedication and commitment of Indian Naxalite comrades. Their demands and dream are right, but they have misjudged the contemporary socio-political condition. They lack patience. Being impressed by Mao's famous philosophy-Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun, they declared bloody war against the government without having voluntary mob support and paid the price for it. Their inability to calculate the contradictory social-political situation between contemporary China and India backfires. They never opted for cultural, economic and industrial revolution that Mao ze Dong had done at the time of Chinese Revolution. So the repressive government, without caring law and order, without analyzing proper reasons, launched extreme violence, massive police operation like Operation

Steeplechase and declared shoot at sight order to suppress this movement. Ironically this movement appeared in a more violent way causing anarchy, bloodshed and terror from both the sides. Within six to seven years of its beginning, most of the Naxal leaders were either murdered or sent to police custody. They started losing public faith and co-operation as common people informed police about their hiding places and leaked secret information. Even a few Naxalite comrades also betrayed their fellows in the hope of gaining government facilities. Thus, this movement gradually lost its sting and scattered in fragments in many states of India. In Nepal, in the form of Nepalese Civil War (13 Feb 1996 – 21 Nov 2006), Maoist activists confirmed their stronghold over the king and established their domination to form a republic government. The Maoists of Nepal rightly judged the contemporary socio-political situation. They took their time, organized grass-root activity, awakened the common mass about the benefits of socialism and democratic republic, described the anarchy and dictatorship of the king to common mass, helped the exploited and labourers to gain their social dignity and finally with the help of common mass, they declared a battle against the king and brought revolution. Indian Naxalites never take care of mob support, so they backfire in their approach but Nepalese Naxalites organize the battle with the help of common mass and achieve their goal.

Many writers of SAARC countries delineate various aspects of Naxalism through their writings. Naxalism has been dominantly described in the following SAARC English fiction:

1. *Mother Of 1084* (1974 in Bengali) by Mahasweta Devi
2. *Palpasa Café* (2005 in Nepali) by Narayan Vagle
3. *Revolution Highway* (2010) by Dilip Simeon
4. *Walking with the Comrades* (2011) by Arundhuti Roy
5. *The Lives We Have Lost* (2011) by Manjushree Thapa
6. *The Lowland* (2013) by Jhumpa Lahiri
7. *The Lives of Others* (2014) by Neel Mukherjee
8. *Hello Bastar* (2011) by Rahul Pandita

Neel Mukherjee's 2014 Man Booker Shortlisted novel *The Lives of Others* is a burning depiction of Naxal Movement of 1970s. It specially depicts the progress of Naxalism. The novel is a kind of 'Social-Saga' as it describes three generations of a particular Bengali middle class Ghosh family residing at 22/6 Basanta Bose Road, Kolkata. Prafullanath, the head of the family marries Charubala, and struggles a lot to establish two paper mills. Their four sons-Adinath, Priyonath, Bholanath and Somnath with their respective wives Sandhya, Purnima, Jayanti and Purba; and only daughter Chhaya are miles apart in their approach, philosophy and belief. Adinath and sandhya's elder son Supratik directly gets involved into the storm of Naxalite movement while studying graduation in reputed Presidency College. Supratik describes all his activities as a Naxalite in the form of fourteen unexposed letters dedicated to his widowed aunt Purba. This segment of the novel assimilates with the main plot when Supratik returns Kolkata after five years of grass-root activity.

Being fed up with the needless luxury of three vegetables and fish in lunch and dinner, Supratik suddenly leaves home to join the exploited farmers of remote villages of Bengal-

Jharkhand border to set up grass-root activity. He makes his intention clear in a letter to her mother-

“Ma, I feel exhausted with consuming, with taking and grabbing and using. I am so bloated that I feel I cannot breathe any more. I am leaving to find some air, some place where I shall be able to purge myself, push back against the life given me and make my own. I feel I live in a borrowed house. It’s time to find my own. Trying to discover my whereabouts won’t get you anywhere, so save that energy; you might find you need it for something else. I’ll write periodically to let you know I’m alive. Forgive me. Yours, Supratik” (60).

For a revolution, interaction with the common mass is essential and the chief protagonist Supratik, along with other city comrades, informs the peasants and landless people of Gidhighati and Majgeria about their rights over land, the process of exploitation by landlords and government, the way to get rid to it- guerilla action, liberated zone creation, assassination, receiving inspiration and direction from Mao’s Red Book. Finally, they are able to motivate the peasants with the philosophy “Only he who has dipped his hands in class enemy’s blood can be considered a true revolutionary” (304), or with the famous quote from Red Book by Mao as: “All the guiding principles of military operations grew out of the one basic principle: to strive to the utmost to preserve one’s own strength and destroy that of the enemy” (306).

In order to prove themselves as a well-wisher, friend and family member, Naxalites like Supratik need to assist the farmers during cultivation, reaping or harvesting. Their agony has been described by Supratik, “...my palms and fingers were made a crisscross of little cuts from the sharp, dry edges of the rice leaves and stalks...I would learn how to harvest properly ... It was the only way my hands could stop being the shamefully middle-class hands they were now” (145). The uphill task of executing the guerrilla attack at the night after covering a long distance really makes their life miserable. Supratik describes, “...to walk for eight to nine hours from Belpahari at night, hide in Majgeria for the day, do a guerrilla action at night, hide in the forest, walk back again under the cover of night through the forest to Belpahari- this hardly seemed a feasible way of going about it. It would put paid to both revolution and revolutionaries” (335).

Supratik returns Kolkata and starts guiding his fellow comrades how, where, and when to explode. But, he is taken into custody in the charge of Shyambazar police station attack. He faces inhuman torture at custody and finally is shot by the police in 1970. In the prison, he has to go through inhuman torture as described- “The needle artist has dotted out a pretty outline of a sickle and hammer over an area of nearly twenty square inches on Supratik’s thigh in pinpricks of blood. He pokes a sharp knife at one corner of the sickle and with a quick, sharp dig-and-twist movement loosens a little bit of skin...” (487), but his iron-willed determination and love for the fellow comrades enables him not to reveal any secret. Through the character of Supratik, Mukherjee artistically describes every activity from the beginning to the demise of a Naxalite.

Mahasweta Devi’s *Mother of 1084* describes Naxalism in the form of psychological quest of a bereaved mother to find out her own identity in the suffocating society and to justify her

son's ideology as a Naxalite. The novel describes the incident that occurs on 17th January, 1970 in an aristocratic Chatterjee family, correlating the past events in the form of flashback. The head of the family Dibyanath, an aristocrat businessman having illicit relationships with many young typist girls, marries an educated girl Sujata who also works in a bank to get rid of needless luxury. They have two sons Jyoti and Brati and two daughters Nipa and Tuli. Jyoti, an earnest follower of his father, Nipa, a victim of nymphomania, and Tuli, a supporter of aristocracy and luxury are poles apart from Brati in thought and belief. Brati, the Naxalite, in order to save his fellow comrades (Somu and others) sacrifices his own life in a fake encounter at midnight with police toddies. The very next morning when a call comes from Kantapukur morgue, Dibyanath refuses to send a car to identify his dead son tagged as 'corpse no 1084'. He even pays the local newspapers to hide his son's death.

Brati is very close to his mother who leads a life of suffocation and barriers in a male dominating society. Except Sujata, everyone blames Brati for defaming the family reputation. Brati usually shares his feelings with his mother, provides her mental support and promises to provide her own identity in society. So, the bond between the mother and the son is completely unbreakable. Two years later, on the same day, i.e. 17th January (which is coincidentally both the birthday and death day of Brati) Tuli fixes his engagement on 17th January (which incidentally both the birthday and death day of Brati) with a businessman Tony Kapadaia without caring the sentiments of her mother. On that morning, a call comes from Nandini, a fellow Naxalite and girlfriend of Brati and meeting Sujata she informs her about the Naxalite ideology, grass-root activity, its impact in society etc. Thus Sujata acquires knowledge and fulfills her quest after meeting Nandini and Somu's mother.

By listening stories from Nandini and Somu's mother about a completely different Brati who laughs, sleeps on torn mattress, eats only rice and lentil with other Naxalites, Sujata gradually understands the burning socio-political issues behind the uprising of Naxalism viz. unemployment, poverty, economic differences, exploitation, unavailability of government facilities, political turmoil etc. and the impact of Naxalism upon the common mass. Finally, she comes to the conclusion that Brati, Nandini and Somu are right in their demands and she agrees with Nandini when she asks, "Has nothing changed? No, nothing has. Why did they die? What has changed? Are men now all happy? Have the political games ended? Is it a better world?" (86)

The novel describes the grass-root activity of the Naxalites in the form of frequent meetings, discussions on contemporary socio-political situation, interaction with the exploited farmers etc. After Brati's death, Sujata sees anarchy pervaded everywhere viz. a generation of youth from sixteen to twenty-four completely were wiped, helmeted policemen and gun-tottering soldiers chasing a desperate young boy, police van dragging bodies tied with rope, callous aristocracy still dominating the society, an apparent tranquility in the disguise of hurly-burly politics and walls lettered with new slogan to pay tribute to the dead Naxalites. She always questions herself, "Why Brati had come to place such absolute faith in the cult of faithlessness? Was Brati's death futile? Did his death stand for a massive NO?" (20) until Nandini awakens her about the Naxalite ethics by answering, "How can you? Did any of you ever take a personal

loyalty pledge like we did? To everything of everyday life?” (77). Finally, Sujata understands Naxalite ideology, finds justification in the Naxalite uprising and realizes futility of repressive government to nip the movement into bud. Even two years after Brati’s death, inspector like Saroj Pal remains on duty at midnight to find any Naxalite roaming in the street.

The novel also describes brutal and inhuman torture faced by the Naxalites in police custody. Nandini almost loses her eyesight because of thousand watt bulb that is kept in front of her eyes. Other Naxalites are also beaten until saliva, blood come out from their body or they become unconscious. The family members of the Naxalites are even deprived of all government facilities. Mahasweta Devi, being a contemporary writer vividly depicts the impact of Naxalism on society with utmost reality.

Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Lowland* also vividly portrays the initial years of Naxalism. It is the story of three generations revolving around two brothers-Udayan and Subhash. After completing their post graduation, Subhash moves to USA for further study and Udayan stays in Kolkata, marries Gauri and joins the Naxalite Movement. He is killed in front of his family members. Subhash returns Kolkata, marries Gauri, takes her to USA, helps her in pursuing PhD, and gives the identity to Gauri-Udayan’s daughter Bela as his own. Later he demands divorce from Gauri, marries with Elise and Gauri being frustrated marries Drew leaving their daughter Bela to suffer. Bela and her daughter Meghna have to suffer a lot because of Subhash and Gauri. The novel ends with the reminiscence of Gauri and Subhash about Udayan and his Naxalite days.

The novel describes the details of the beginning of Naxalbari uprising, “Most of the villagers were tribal peasants who worked on tree plantation and large estates.... Eleven people were killed. Eight of them were women” (23-24). Udayan is also directly involved in it as he teaches the other comrades how to prepare bombs, hand grenades, how to execute the plan of attacking the armed force, how to write on walls at midnight, how to exchange secret information etc. He is caught once and shot dead in front of his family members. He tries to save himself hiding under waters in a nearby lowland, but he is forced to surrender as police threaten to kill his family members. The very image of Udayan starts haunting Gauri when Dipankar, a student requests her help for preparing a dissertation on Naxal Movement.

Repressive government is clearly seen, when

“In July the Central Government banned the carrying of bows and arrows in Naxalbari. The same week, authorized by the West Bengal cabinet, five hundred officers and men raided the region. They searched the mud hut of the poorest villagers. They captured unarmed insurgents, killing them if they refuse to surrender. Ruthlessly, systematically, they brought the rebellion to its heels” (26).

The speech of Kanu Sanyal undoubtedly impressed thousands of emerging youth and students by his speech-“By the year 2000, that is only thirty-one years from now, the people of the whole world will be liberated from all kinds of exploitation of man by man and will celebrate the worldwide victory of Marxism, Leninism, Mao Tse-tung’s thought” (39). At the end of the novel both Subhash and Gauri are seen haunted by the memories of Naxalite Udayan.

Literature is always the mirror of society. Among the aforementioned three novels, all the activities of the Naxalites have been depicted truthfully by these novelists. The writers have succeeded to portray the socio-political scenario of South Asian countries and have presented a clear glimpse of this movement with all its hope, aspiration and loss of string to its readers.

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