THE NAXALBARI MOVEMENT: REPRESENTATIONS

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REPRESENTATIONS IN INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE

Pritha Sarkar

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Pritha Sarkar asserts her moral right to be identified as the author of the book.

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To Azizul Haque, Mohiner Ghoraguli, and the people
who dared to hope.

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Foreword

When the Naxalbari uprising took place, I was still in senior school, too young to understand the happenings. But by the 1970s of the last century, as the scenario around me was heating up, I had stepped into the wider world of college. It was a metropolis, which by then had been drawn into the vortex of the movement. I was not a direct part of it, but I was never away from it! News, reactions, and counter-reactions from all around constantly impacted our minds, shaping our thought processes in ways that would have a lifelong imprint. We, who were not part of it, were yet part of it! So, no doubt, when I was requested to write the Foreword for this book, it brought back so many memories from the past, the reminiscences of which are still alive, to say the least.

The decade of the 1970s was indeed a tumultuous decade for India. It was a decade of daring to dream of a different world, a decade of action, and resistance. It was a decade marked by violence, vision, and mission. The Left Marxist ideology provided the inspiration that drew thousands of the brightest of youths into a movement of the magnitude that India had never witnessed after independence. The epicentre was West Bengal. A peasant uprising at a hitherto little-known place in the Naxalbari block of Siliguri subdivision in Darjeeling district of West Bengal in 1967 was to become the epicentre of this historic movement, which would stand to challenge many established norms, values, and power structures. It would perhaps not be wrong to say that ever since, India has not

been the same. The past haunts, positively and negatively. Individual lives, society, and politics bear their legacy. The world looks on....

It took no time for the movement, soon after the first spark, to spread across the length and breadth of the country. The movement had a profound impact on the intelligentsia. Over the years it inspired people from different walks of life to produce a significant body of literature. Perhaps, the volume of writings generated over time has been much more than what any single movement, barring the independence movement and the Partition, has ever generated. These literary exercises included fiction, non-fiction, poetry, and drama, seeking to reflect the movement's ideology, the conditions that led to it, and its impact on Indian society. It encompassed the writings of activists, sympathisers, and others keen on analysing the historic movement from various angles. The literature thus generated offers a range of viewpoints, from those critical of the movement particularly for its use of violence as a weapon, to those who see it as a necessary response to social injustice and inequality. Through the writings, the dominant social, political, and economic structures in India have been minutely viewed under the scanner, highlighting issues like poverty, inequality, and the prevalent social injustice that the movement exposed.

The vast literature related to the Naxalite movement generated over the last several decades provides valuable critical insights into the movement's history, ideology, logic, and impact. Much of the writings have been in the vernacular languages, particularly in Bangla, where a genre called *Naxal Sahitya* has emerged. Famous writers like Mahasweta Devi, Samaresh Majumdar, Samaresh Basu, Sunil Gangyopadhyay, and others took up the pen to explore the Naxalite experience in the language, even as their perspectives varied, ranging from criticising the violence to exploring the social and economic inequalities that generated the movement. The literary works have not been confined to the vernacular. English literary works, though limited in number, have been significant. Novels like *The Lives of*

Others by Neel Mukherjee and *Walking with the Comrades* by Arundhati Roy offer fictionalised accounts of the Naxalite movement, while studies like Prakash Singh's *The Naxalite Movement in India* and Sumanta Banerjee's review of A. K. Mukhopadhyay (ed) *Naxalites–Through the Eyes of Police* give historical and analytical accounts of the movement.

The present book engages with the association of the middle class in the Naxalbari movement (1965-1975) of Bengal, viewed through its representation in Indian English literature. Its significance lies with the fact that it presents an intersectional study between the literary renderings of the Naxalite movement in Indian English literature and the historical and sociological studies of the movement.The author examines extensive historical and sociological records, alongside literary texts, to identify the position of the marginalised sections who were participating in the movement. It is done through four lenses: class, gender, violence, and caste. This extremely interesting, well-documented, and lucidly presented work seeks to draw out the intricate features of caste, class, gender, and violence from the deeper analysis of the movement. Needless to say, the book will be of interest to general readers as well as scholars working in diverse fields of the humanities and the social sciences.

Debi Chatterjee

Kolkata
February 2026

Preface

The Naxalbari movement (1965–1975) of Bengal has left a profound impact on regional literature, but there has been a negligible study of the movement within Indian English literary studies. It has not only been excluded from the major history books on Indian English literature, but has also received scant attention in texts that specifically engage with Marxist literature. Even critics who have illuminated on the importance of leftist ideology in Indian English literature have paid more attention to the dialogue between literature and the leftist literary movements. This book is, therefore, a departure from these trends as it studies the engagement of Indian writings in English with this leftist movement post India's independence. It bridges the gap between a political movement and literary writings within the broader field of literary scholarship by reading the movement's association with the middle class and its representation in Indian English literature. By keeping the middle class at the centre and reading between the lines of middle-class narratives to identify the silences of the marginalised sections participating in the movement, it explores the movement through the lens of inter-class relationships, caste hierarchy, and violence, including a chapter dedicated to its gendered history. Thus, the literary study of the movement probes into the why(s) of the what(s) of the historical and sociological studies. This book is an academic endeavour to address a lacuna in movement literature by focusing on the literary studies of the Naxalbari movement, which opens up

further discussions regarding the movement as well as its afterlife within the broader scope of cultural studies.

This book would not have been possible without the guidance of my supervisor, Dr Sayan Chattopadhyay. In the journey of almost a decade, he has constantly supported me and has kept an unflinching faith in my work. I am grateful to him for granting his consent to adapt arguments in Chapter 3, 'Role of Violence in the Naxalbari Movement' from an essay—'Re-reading the Role of Violence in the Naxalbari Movement (1965-1975) through the Naxalites: An Interaction between History and Literature'—jointly published in *Nidan: International Journal for Indian Studies*, University of Heidelberg, in 2025 and in Chapter 4, 'Position of Caste'. Derived from another co-authored publication—'Caste Identity of Contemporary Naxalites: Reading the Battles of the Naxals against the Caste Hierarchy through a Close Reading of a Naxal Story'—that appeared in *Contemporary Voice of Dalit* in 2008.

The book would not have materialised without Dr Suchitra Mathur, who has been critically involved with my work and has offered unwavering, emotional support. I am indebted to Professor Abhijeet Majumdar, for his logistical support during my interviews, and critical interventions.

This book is also the result of the classes I had with Dr Sounak Samajdar, who was the first person to change my perception of society and helped me read through critical lenses. I am also indebted to Dr Saugata Bhaduri for his crucial inputs. I am thankful to Dr Diana Fox from Bridgewater State University for her insights, particularly on Chapter 2, Locating Women.

This book would be incomplete without the help of the Natyo Sansad Library in Salt Lake, Kolkata. With official permission from the head of this library, I have been able to get a copy of *Inquilaab: A Play in Three Acts* (1971) by Asif Currimbhoy, which went out of print. Also, Setu Prakashani provided me with an unabridged copy of *Footprints of Foot Soldiers* (2015) by Abhijit Das, which has been a

major help to my work. The book would not have taken shape without Jennifer Shaheen Hussain, who patiently helped me in preparing the manuscript and helped me with indexing.

I am also thankful to Shafi for his regular calls till he was certain that I was putting effort into formulating the book. The list will be incomplete if I don't mention Shradha, the woman who readily welcomes my every mood swing and gives me hope and belief when I had none left. I am fathomlessly grateful to Debojyoti Das, who offered mental support during the initial phase of the writing.

Most importantly, I am thankful to my parents, Purnima Sarkar and Ratan Sarkar. Words are incapable of surmising their contribution. Finally, and most unceremoniously, I am thankful to Kaushik, for being there. This book would never have happened without his critical comments and irreversible support.