Gender, Militancy and Memory: A Study of the Mau Mau and Naxalbari Women

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ABSTRACT Women's history is not only an effort to restore women to history, but perhaps more importantly, also to restore history to women. This paper attempts to look at two very significant protest movements of the Indian and the African subcontinents – The Naxalbari and the Mau Mau movements. The objective is to look at the significant contribution of the women involved in these movements and relooking at the collective silences regarding the documentation of the women's roles. The Naxal phase examined here is from 1967 to 1975 in West Bengal where the "spring thunder" struck in the form of the radically Left Movement. Though technically the spring thunder was short lived, its repercussion can be heard even today as the movement changes faces and names but continues as the rebel mouthpiece against the oppressive governmental regimes. The Mau Mau Uprising was a military conflict that took place in Kenya between 1952 and 1960. The conflict set the stage for Kenyan independence in December 1963. The Mau Mau was a top secret movement which came into being as a protest against British Land policies. This paper attempts to analyse the significant role played by the women in these Movements and seeks to question their erasure in the documentation of these Movements.

"Anyone who knows anything of history knows that great social changes are impossible without the feminine ferment" (Karl Marx).
"...the real fundamental human difference is not between White and Black, it is between man and woman" (C.L.R. James, 1981, reviewing Toni Morrison's Sula).

INTRODUCTION

Women's history is not only an effort to restore women to history, but perhaps more importantly, also to restore history to women. Writing women's history, therefore calls for overcoming the isolationist celebration of individual women and to posit gender as an analytical category for studying history. Since women do not constitute a composite, ahistorical, perennial "other" with their distilled autonomous history, their histories are inextricably marked in the grid of caste and class relations, community life and collective mobilization, colonialism and capitalism. Capturing the continuous fluidity of domination and resistance in the lives of women belonging to various socio-political, cultural, economic locations demand an identification of both subordination and expression of defiance imprinted in the micro histories of biographies, oral traditions, legends and myths. This paper attempts to look at two very significant protest movements from Kenya and India respectively - the Mau Mau and the Naxalbari Movements. The objective is to look at the significant contribution of the women involved in these movements and relooking at the collective silences regarding the documentation of the women's roles. The movements grew out of an increasing disenchantment with developmental policies that were impoverishing the tribal and peasant communities and forcing them to abject penury. Both movements are land based as the struggle initiates with the landless peasants fighting for the rights of their land.

The central argument of this paper is to show how in spite of all odds being against them, the women not only participated in the freedom struggle but were also forerunners in it. The researcher argues that both the Colonial discourse and the anti- colonial/ nationalist discourse fashioned by the Kenyan men choose to look at women merely as mothers and daughters of the future creators of the new nation. As a result the women entered the nationalist literary and political imagination, not as subjects with political goals of their own but as mothers of the nation's children and wives of men who are the real political subjects. This does not mean that in actuality the women have not participated in the struggle against the colonial imposition nor does it mean that they have not substantially contributed to the culture and politics. Both the colonial and the "nationalist" discourse chose to

look at the women in sexual terms. In the process of constituting the Kenyan nationalist literature, the female body provides a powerful symbolic space through which pristine, pre-colonial Kenyan culture and racial purity was imagined. The women's struggle therefore was not merely against the colonial forces but also the Kenyan male – both of whom sought to possess and control female sexuality.

Interestingly, in the anti- Nationalist discourse of Naxalbari, women were perceived in an almost similar way. While their services were required to keep the Movement alive, the male leaders fashioned themselves as the guardians of their sexuality. Though the Movement was perceived as anti-bourgeois, yet the same moral codes were forced upon the women. A widow of a Naxal leader was revered but if she found another partner, she was treated as a pariah even within the "liberated" party zone. The Naxal leadership inducted many women into politics, but were critical of any attempt made by women to interrogate patriarchy. Theoreticians of party politics openly accused feminists of deflecting attention from a straight forward class struggle by interjecting questions of gender relationships. This paper seeks to investigate the conspicuous gender blindness both in the radical political ideology of the Naxalbari movement and the available historiography of it. It is doubly conspicuous given the radical nature of this Movement. It was also the time when the second wave of feminism had created a space for discussion internationally. The male leadership of Naxalbari engaged in international debates and participated in them actively however the "woman question" within the party was not negotiated with. For the women within the struggle it was dual bind – while their activism freed them from the patriarchal confines of their homes, yet the same Party politics which gave them a voice sought to control their bodies and sexuality much like the organisations against whom they were seen to be rebelling.

THE MAU MAU MOVEMENT

The Mau Mau Uprising, also known as the Mau Mau Revolt and the Kenya Emergency was a military conflict that took place in Kenya between 1952 and 1960. The conflict set the stage for Kenyan independence in December 1963. The Mau Mau was a top secret movement which came into being as a protest against British Land policies. All the fertile and arable land had been divided amongst the Colonial officers and the White settlers. From October 1952 to December1959, Kenya was officially in a state of emergency resulting from a violent anti-Colonial Insurgency conducted by largely kikuyu guerrilla fighters. The term Mau Mau came to refer to the insurgent movement itself, to the guerrilla fighters and the rebellion's more passive adherents, and also to the oaths of allegiance that fighters and adherents took or were forced to take. The Mau Mau rebellion arose from decades of consistently increasing levels of socio-economic insecurity and political marginalisation experienced by the substantive numbers of Kikuyu squatters in the White highlands. Settler farms in the White Highlands in 1952 and the Colonial Government moved to squash the insurgency, which quickly transformed into a formidable guerrilla force. Despite the massive expenditure of force and intensified administration on the ground, the Colonial state's efforts to put down Mau Mau were unsuccessful and talks surrounding the end of the rebellion resulting in the Kenyan Independence in 1963. The State of Emergency did nothing to repress the movement and several bitter years of fighting the whole might of the British and colonial army followed. Between 1952 and 1956, the Mau Mau engaged in a campaign of terror against highland settlers and Kikuyu loyalists. Other than firearms captured from raids on police stations, their weapons were the forests of Mount Kenya and the Aberdares. They launched raids on neighbouring settlers with traditional clubs, knives, spears and arrows. As these would have been no match in an open confrontation with the colonial army, the Mau Mau engaged in guerrilla warfare and terrorism. The Mau Mau warriors were composed of urban workers, agriculturalists, the unemployed, World War II veterans, labourers, and unionists (Rosenberg and Nottingham 1966).

The Mau Mau Women

"Mau Mau is more than anybody who was not involved can fully understand. Mau Mau was a top secret movement of people who went to war with nothing - no guns, no spears...nothing but determination to get freedom and their land and the war was won because of us women" says Muthoni Likimani, a Mau Mau war veter-

an. (Likimani 1985: 56) The transition from being the guardians of the domestic front to becoming partners in a political and military struggle was a slow and painful process for the women involved. Kikuyu men resented and strongly opposed the presence of women in the forest and initially relegated them to familiar domestic chores. The women objected to this assignment and proved themselves capable of executing 'male' tasks. Meanwhile, thousands of women who did not go into the forest comprised the vital civilian wing of the struggle, the lifeline without which the forest guerrillas would not have survived for as long as they did. These women also took up new roles, modified the old ones, and grappled with extensive social reorganisation to accommodate their new dual politico-domestic identity.

Why did Women Join the Movement?

The Pre-colonial Kikuyu Woman

The idea that African women in pre-colonial times controlled more power and resources than they did in colonial times can be argued on two grounds. First, investigations document women's varied influences on social life. Second, recent scholarship describes how colonialism both devalued women's influence and restricted their access to new opportunities that developed in the contemporary situations. This argument is not to show that men and women had similar rights in the past but it is merely to show that women enjoyed a greater leverage during the pre-colonial times. Kikuyu women had central economic responsibilities. In most subsistence agricultural societies, women were the producers, processors, preservers and protectors of food supply. The organisation of the farm was a joint endeavour, with women and men contributing to the decision making process. Each had special expertise and hence control over specific crops, piece of land, etc. Both sexes were generally involved in clearing and preparing plots. Planting and weeding were generally women's work. Women were also involved in animal rearing and could even possess certain animals. Though they had no right to the ownership of land, their rights to the clan entitled them to land and property.

Marriage too was a central organising principle for Kenyan women. Each woman was expected to marry and to bear and raise as many children as she could provide for. Women were viewed primarily as members of family, clan or the *itungati*. Marriage was seen as empowering as it gave the woman status within her family and clan. Since there was a system of polygamy, the elder wife's position would be considered enviable. Motherhood was revered and women would be addressed as mother of her offspring rather than by being called by her own name. Thus within the patriarchal clannish structure, a woman would have certain rights and privileges which were threatened during the colonial regime.

The Colonial rule had profound consequences for the Kenyan women. The idea that women and her productive purposes were largely invisible to the colonisers resulted in the women being completely sidelined when the colonial rules were made and implemented. In at least four areas the colonial practises impacted the lives of women negatively – the introduction of scientific agriculture, the establishment of Western education, the creation of new political and religious authority and the control over access to market economy. The privileging of cash crops over others for which men were trained forced women out of plantations. Colonial labour policies directly spoke to the man – the farmer. Moreover, emphasis on a monoculture to the exclusion of home production eroded both women's traditional control over resources and the ability to withstand the onslaught of price fluctuations and droughts.

The provision of Western style education, likewise, was gender biased. In the privileging of sexes, men got more education than women did and the kind of education they received was different from what the women received. Women were taught domestic service while men were trained to work in offices. The colonial education was gender specific and predominantly single sex institutions. Moreover, the tutelage of morality and virginity further crippled the natural sexuality that existed within the *itungati*. Among the Kikuyu, women were primarily perceived as the custodians of the domestic welfare of the community. They were responsible for reproduction and production, ensuring that there was adequate food for the family and extra for the various social functions on which the status of the homestead depended (Kenyatta 1953). Men broke the land, and women planted, weeded, harvested and oversaw the disposal of

the food-crops. To cope with these tasks women evolved the *ngwatio* system under which members' farms were worked in rotation. A *ngwatio* was comprised of women married to men of the same lineage. There were several women's councils which dictated behaviour patterns for their members and enforced sanctions as necessary. Although these councils could be said to have provided women with a forum for participating in socio-economic matters which could challenge male authority, they were restricted to matters pertaining to domestic affairs, agricultural matters (but not the ownership of land), discipline and the regulation of the social life of girls and women. Formal political power was invested in exclusively male councils. Because women could not affect the wider political decision-making process, they were perceived as subordinate members of the community, a viewpoint which the colonial government strengthened by excluding women from any alliances or consultation.

The growth of urban centres and plantation agriculture represent another area where the result of colonial policies was detrimental to the women. Men were recruited to both these outposts whereas women were left behind to take care of their children and their *shambas* (farms). All these coupled with the *kipande* (pass) laws triggered off deep unrest among the kikuyu men and women both. Many men fled to the forests and slowly the Mau Mau started taking shape. By 1950 the term 'Mau Mau' had gained currency and the escalating breakdown in law and order forced the colonial government to declare a state of emergency on 20 December 1952. In the ensuing months thousands of men and women fled to the forests from where they waged attacks against British and loyalist troops, settlers and uncooperative Africans.

The Rulers of the Forest: The Male Order

Exactly how the Mau Mau started continues to be a matter of conjecture but as the colonial repression of the guerrilla soldiers started, the Mau Mau too started to orgainse its rank and files. One of the first-hand accounts we have of the Mau Maus in the forest is from Njama, one of the most trusted men of Dedan Kimathy. The reason for citing this incident is to show how the leadership of the Aberdare hills was structured exactly like the Colonial government it was fighting. Also, Kimathy's words sounds exactly like Christian gospel. Talking about their leader Kenyatta, Kimathy commented:

Kenyatta is a wise man, in fact he has predicted many of the emergency events. He is a prophet chosen by God just like Moses, who God chose to deliver the Israelite nation out of Egyptian slavery. so is Kenyatta chosen to deliver the Kenya people out of the colonial slavery… I still doubt whether Kenyatta knows the situation of the people he leads, for it is absolutely true that our tribe is like a flock of sheep without a shepherd. But Kenyatta is a good shepherd and he wouldn't keep quiet knowing of the loss of property and lives of unarmed people in the reserves (Barnett and Njama 1966: 76).

The event related here is of crowning of Dedan Kimathy as the Prime Minister of the "Kenya Parliament" of the Aberdare hills. The ceremony took place in consultation with an old man. Njama says:

After a long talk with him and accepting his advice, we resolved that the ceremony must be traditional, one which was performed in order to promote a man to the top hierarchy of the council of the elders. Traditionally, to qualify for this promotion one had to pass through many other ceremonial stages ranging from birth, circumcision, warrior, marriage, junior elder, and finally kiama kia mathai. Kimathy was fully prepared for the ceremony. He had brewed beer of pure honey and had stored it in his hut. He had three sheeps to be slaughtered and had kept lot of foodstuff in his room. There was only one problem. In these ceremonies, the wife had to stand on the left side of the men. Kimathy was married but his wife and daughter were under surveillance of the home guards. It was impossible to get her to attend this ceremony. Up to this stage, Kimathy had been living with a girl for about four months before abandoning her and taking another from our recent arrivals from the reserves. Wanjiru Wambogo, daughter of Waicanguru Wanarua, pretty, brown, healthy, medium girl had now completed almost 6 months living with Kimathy. Their love had grown so Kimathy did not hesitate to take her as a wife. Since he was to be the head of our government, she was to be the head of the women and the mother of Mumbi's children. She was then to be awarded the highest women's rank, colonel, and knighted with

knight commander of the Gikiyu and Mumbi empire (Barnett and Njama 1966: 43).

This incident like many others reveals the leadership's blatant usage of the women to perform multiple roles in the forest. Since traditionally women did not participate in warfare, their status and roles in the forest were initially highly ambiguous and tended to shift as the battle lengthened. At the beginning, they were allocated domestic chores including fetching firewood, cooking, washing, and cleaning. Initially there was a debate about the women's presence on the hills. It was argued that women could neither withstand the harsh forest conditions of torrential rains and bitter cold, nor could they defend themselves against enemies. Apart from being security risks, women would be extra mouths to feed, but would do nothing useful in return. It was also feared that women could cause tension and conflict among male guerrillas as the men would compete for sexual favours from the small number of women. Although sex was historically taboo for active warriors, the protraction of the Mau Mau war resulted in the violation of the taboo and the establishment of forest liaisons.

The *Kabatuni* or Platoon to be Commanded

In spite of the traditional kikuyu laws prohibiting warriors from having sex, the male leadership soon changed it to suit their convenience. Though the *kikuyu* traditional laws allowed a man to have multiple wives, the leadership was clear that the *kabatunis* would be used solely for pleasure and they would not become the wives of the fighters. This served two purposes. Firstly, these women would perform all domestic chores but in case she was impregnated by the fighter, she would be escorted till the edge of the forest and would be left there to fend for herself and her child. When the Mau Mau raided villages asking for food, impoverished families would sometime part with their daughters in lieu of food. These girls would be used sexually but most of them chose not to complain. Some were indoctrinated into thinking that they were doing this for their country while the others felt that given their poor economic situation, this is by far the best job they were capable of doing. Njama discusses his first meeting with a *kabutani* or "small platoon". The imagery of the woman as a platoon and the man in command speaks volumes about the "control" of sexuality which has been mentioned earlier.

This is your "small platoon" that you will have to command. She must be with you in the room all the time, she will take care of you. make your bed. take care of your beddings… it is her duty to entertain you in any way that please you." (Barnett and Njama 1966:242)

The fact that women were abused sexually is a known fact but such is the power of the Nationalist discourse, it has not been spoken of or discussed even in literary texts. The *kabutani* sees this as her duty as she says:

Each girl and woman has her own different view. Some girls are annoyed at being parted with their lovers and forced to seek new ones. Generally I would see sleeping with a man as an individual concern. Here it seems to me that the leaders consider this as part of the woman's duty to the society. Since I cannot do anything I accept it as my duty towards my country." (Barnett and Njama 1966: 243)

Female Circumcision

The politics of female circumcision popularly referred to as the FGM represents a clear example of the ways in which Kenyan women's bodies have been used as strategic deployment of power relations which has very little to do with the women's sexuality and self-autonomy. Kenyan and other Africanist male theorists who historically dominated the African political discourse have also discursively employed the female body to elaborate, their otherwise, male centred narratives on current politics. It had more to do with enforcing colonial rule than support for Kenyan women's bodily integrity and self-autonomy. It has been seen that during the 1920s, and 1930s in Kenya, enforcing ban on female circumcision came to mean loyalty to the British colonial rule. It can be argued that the 1956 ban on female circumcision, and the ensuing resistance of the ban by the young girls of Meru registers a clear instance where the female body became a potent site where class, gender and race relations in the colonial context converge. Young women, in defiance of their parents and elders, circumcised each other as a sign of their rejection of the colonial imposition, but also as a way of protecting their bargaining power within their community. Again here was a dou-

ble bind -the Mau Mau insisted that only circumcised women can join. This was seen as the first step in defying the colonial laws. The girls defied the colonial law to get more leverage within their village community and in the hills, and also to protect their parents from being harassed by the police. It was no accident that in Meru and elsewhere in Kenya, the ban on female circumcision was supported by mainly Kenyan men who directly or indirectly stood to gain politically and financially for supporting the ban. The women of Kenya as the direct target of both the practice and the ban were not consulted by the enthusiasts of the ban on female circumcision. This clearly demonstrates that the Protestant missionaries' interests in the practice of female circumcision in Kenya had more to do with re - enforcing colonial rule than endorsement of Kenyan women's rights to bodily integrity and self-autonomy.

The Mau Mau Oathing

In their bid to resort to everything traditional, the Mau Mau leadership emphasised the importance of oath giving and taking which formed an integral part of being initiated as a Mau Mau loyalist. The Mau Mau rebels were bound to each other by a complex form of oath taking. The oath taking gained a nationalist fervour as earth mixed with blood of animals was eaten by the Mau Mau fighters to prove their loyalty to their motherland. Women were not part of the oath taking but as they joined in huge numbers, new oaths were created for them. Women were both revered and used during the oathing ceremonies. The higher oaths were administered only to men and women were used while they were being administered. Ritual oathing was a crucial component of Mau Mau participation, as they called on the God - Ngai - to witness the oath that people would swear to be united in their fight against the colonial enemy, and would take back the land that the white man had stolen. Women were initially not part of this initiation process but were used for giving complex oaths to forest fighters. Here, too, the emphasis on the body is unmistakable. While menstrual blood was used as a form of giving an oath to an initiate, a menstruating woman was not allowed to take the oath as she was considered unclean. Wambui Otieno (1198) in her autobiographical rendering *Mau Mau's Daughter* relates her experience as a sixteen year old taking her first oath.

I was told very little. I was asked if I was menstruating. (I later learnt that a menstruating woman was disqualified from taking the oath as it was considered dirty and a harbinger of misfortune.) I answered "No", and in turn received a hard slap, the purpose of which was not clear to me. I was then ordered to shed all my clothes except my bra and knickers. I was led into a poorly lit room where a group of people were casually sitting. An old man brought a calabash from which we had to drink a concoction of blood and soil. I nearly threw up but went ahead with all this as I knew that freedom would only come through a lot of struggle. (34)

Wambui Otieno was one of those very few women who took five oaths. To pursue her clandestine Mau Mau sojourns, she was forced to quit her home. Her mother shed copious tears thinking that her daughter had eloped as that was the only reason she could attribute to her daughter's being away from home. Otieno also describes her life as an urban guerrilla.

After I took my fourth and fifth oaths at Ruiru, I went back to scouting and smuggling firearms and information with renewed zeal. A typical Mau Mau scout was a young, smartly dressed woman. rarely were they men. Because she was required to disguise herself every now and then. Her working tools were paraphernalia such as wigs, various uniforms, buibui (the kaftan like dress and head cover worn by Muslim women) and make -up.(38)

The urban guerrilla woman was also expected to flirt with the soldiers in order to steal their arms. The girls posed as prostitutes, drank and smoked with the soldiers and at opportune moments, made away with the booty. Sadly, though the leadership, too, treated them as prostitutes. Very often women submitted to these overtures seeing it as a small sacrifice for the freedom of the land. Talking about her days as a Mau Mau scout, Otieno (1998) writes:

Scouting was not an easy job. It was an occupation full of unpredictable pitfalls…. The penalty for possessing an unlicensed arm was a mandatory death sentence. My wits saved me. Luckily I had perfected the art of assuming a very innocent expression. This coupled with my light complexion helped me. Who would suspect a woman who looked like a Goan of all people to be a Mau Mau activist. (43)

The Mau Mau Warriors

Mau Mau women warriors of the forest are said to have risen to the rank of Colonel and yet save for Wanjiru's name most of them are not remembered. As the women's role was seen as subordinate to that of the men, there has been no documentation and celebration of individual female warriors. No less was the contribution of women who helped the movement from the plains. They participated in the "welfare" scheme started by the British but continued to supply food to the fighters on the hills. Talking of those times Likimani (1985) paints a picture of a unique sisterhood which sustained the women in the times of crisis. Talking about the times, Muthoni Likimani (1985) comments: "During the so-called communal labour, which was in fact forced state labour, everyone would go to work. Usually they would work from seven in the morning and finish at five p.m., with only one hour before the curfew time. Understand, there was no tap with running water, no gas to cook with. Someone had to collect water from the river. Someone had to go for firewood. Someone had to gather food from the garden. It was a matter of communal survival. "You go for firewood. I'll go for water." "I didn't have time to get to my garden today." "Here have some beans, have some flour." It was not a time for gossiping and selfishness. It was a time for uniting, for working, for being very close, for caring for each other and surviving." Thus the Mau Mau Movement is characterised by unique tales of sacrifice and togetherness as the women exert their presence trying to free themselves from the stereotyping they have been reduced to by the British and their Kenyan male counterparts. The Mau Mau Movement did not begin as a nationalist movement but as the Colonial atrocities increased, the movement took on a nationalistic fervour under the guidance of Dedan Kimathy, Tom Mboya and Kenyatta. For the women it meant an immense sacrifice as they had the task of keeping their homesteads running while actively supporting the freedom of their land. The fact that history has subsumed the women's voices under the larger rubric of a freedom struggle needs revisiting and questioning as the women were not merely aiding from the margins. They were active participants and stakeholders in the Movement.

From the battle fields of the Aberdares forest as the Kenyans negotiated for their land and freedom, we examine yet another peasant movement located in a different geographic locale. Unlike the Kenyan struggle, the Naxalbari Movement was aimed against the unjust socio political structure of the independent Indian Republic. The rhetoric of this movement, therefore, is fraught with anti-nationalist sentiments. The goal remains the same – to reclaim one's land, to free oneself from oppression and to have a just, class less and egalitarian society for all.

THE NAXALBARI MOVEMENT

In May 1967 a peasant rebellion in Naxalbari police station of Siliguri sub-division in Darjeeling district sparked off one of the most violent socio-political upheavals in independent India. Various dimensions of this movement- which was chiefly centred in West Bengal – include a major shift in the Communist Movement in India, a vast peasant and youth/student movement with a vision of people's revolution, an armed struggle in many districts of the province, and a stern retaliation by the state in its response. The Chinese Revolution of 1949 and the Maoist interpretation of Marxism provided the principal inspiration for this Movement. The Naxalbari manifested a crisis in the socio-political, economic and cultural life in West Bengal. The complicated background of the crisis can be traced from various angles. Industrial recession, severe food shortage and government policy failures in alleviating poverty immediately after decolonisation exposed the inefficiency of the nationalist government in power. An ideological crisis became imminent in Indian Left politics during this period with debates over the stratagem of the Communist revolution in India. Disillusionment with the Nationalist rhetoric of the dominant Congress party was translated into its massive electoral defeat in 1967 and revived youth/student interest in radical left politics. As a response, a radical breakaway faction of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) chose people's war as the form of mobilisation against the Nationalist state and the ruling political parties in the central and provincial governments. The call for an armed agrarian revolution inspired many youths/students and young intelligentsia to go to the villages and spread the message of Naxalbari. The districts of Medinipur, Birbhum, Jalpaiguri, Nadia and Purulia became the bases of the Naxal agitation. The

spring thunder of Naxalbari was brief but it changed the social and political context of West Bengal in particular and the country as a whole. First, the movement produced greater awareness of different localised forms of social structures and specific ways of domination among political activists as well as academics. The importance of caste, religion and region in constructing the power matrix of the Indian society became starkly visible. Though the radical Left's conviction that a mere spark would be enough to dismantle the liberal bourgeois state was misplaced, it also unmasked the most violent form of state terror in areas sharply questioning the so called democratic nature of the Indian state. Thirdly, the employment of political violence as a strategy set the tone for many later struggles against the state. After the main movement ended in the early years of the 70s, different Naxalite organisations and groups started consolidating and scattered activities of violence or otherwise continued when the emergency was lifted in 1977. In several places in the country the groups are still operational and political violence still continues to be their mantra. The Naxal phase examined here is from 1967 to 1975 in West Bengal where the "spring thunder" struck in the form of the radically Left Movement. Though technically the spring thunder was short lived, its repercussion can be heard even today as the movement changes faces and names but continues as the rebel mouthpiece against the oppressive governmental regimes.

Though both the Mau Mau and *Naxalbari* Movements have been studied extensively, the gender angle has been completely ignored. In the case of Naxalbari, it has been perceived to be an urban educated movement as the dominant picture of the struggle is that of brilliant students from prestigious colleges in Kolkata who gave up their studies to "give politics" to the peasants. It is difficult to believe that peasants, who fought for their rights in the Tebhaga andolon, were completely without any direction or agency. Studies barely mention the peasant discourse and the peasant woman is shown to be devoid of a voice of her own. The educated women's voices are heard through their autobiographical writings. These writings are few but enough to challenge the male hegemony over this movement. By attempting to resurrect the latent voices of the peasant womenThe researcher, here, is undertaking a path hitherto untrodden and fraught with the difficulties of not having adequate amount of source material and therefore having to take recourse to literature which forms the mouthpiece of reality.

The Naxalite leadership under Charu Mazumdar declared that peasants would constitute the mainstay of the Naxal movement and that the ultimate goal of the movement would be an agrarian revolution. At the same time while Mazumdar and others emphasised the active part played by peasants in the Naxalite movement, there was an almost tacit understanding that the peasants could become a revolutionary force only after it was acted upon by the revolutionary youth and students and by the working class. The revolutionary youth and working classes were supposed to help raise the revolutionary consciousness of the peasantry. In the vision of the party, the "new man" as it related to the peasant would be a person who would be free from economic self-interests and would fight for the seizure of political power rather than for land or economic gains. Thus, for the Naxals, peasants presented a revolutionary potential that could be realised by the intermediation of the Naxal youth and intellectuals who would enlighten the peasants about the Maoist ideology of revolution. In this world-view, the peasantry was seen as the recipient of knowledge that was passed down to them by the intelligentsia. Along with the intelligentsia, the working classes were also supposed to shoulder the responsibility of carrying out armed struggle in the countryside. In *Tribal Guerrillas: The Santals of West Bengal and the Naxalite Movement,* Duyker (1987) provides a fascinating glimpse into the participation of the tribal and peasantry in the Naxal movement. Duyker is able to show that the Santals were not simply passive followers of the Naxal directives but actively negotiated the terms of Naxalism in order to further their own interests. Thus Duyker comments: *"From the Santals' vantage point, the critical issue was whether an alliance with the Naxalites and the ideological expression of tribal goals would further tribal self-determination and security, or whether it would reduce them to being pawns of 'diku' (outsider) radicals."(47)* An instance of how local concerns rather than larger ideological questions propagated by the Naxal leadership shaped peasant struggle can be seen in areas of Birbhum and Midnapore. Duyker goes on to show how kinship bonds among the tribal

and peasantry in the area proved to be the key factor that determined alliances in the area and not directives issued by the Naxal leadership that urged the peasantry to organise on ideological and class bases. According to Duyker, kinship ties also determined the hierarchy of power and leadership in the Naxal movement in the tribal areas. Duyker writes: "*There is evidence to suggest that as whole families of Santals joined the movement. kinship organisation began to parallel guerrilla organisation. On a number of occasions, the natural authority of the elders, that is, fathers, uncles and husbands, appears to have become a political and military authority over sons, nephews and wives, who also joined the movement". (49)* All this is significant in helping us gauge the amount of control that the tribals enjoyed in determining the course of peasant struggle in their localities. The Naxal ideology demanded that its followers would be primarily loyal to the party and the movement and their own families would feature much after that. Thus, young people were exhorted to sacrifice their careers, education and middle class comforts to integrate themselves with the masses. In the case of the Santals, however, the primary loyalty was to the kinship group. Alliance with the Naxals was contingent on how such an alliance would benefit the tribal community. This should give us a glimpse into the agency of tribal peasantry in determining the course of Naxalism in their localities. Indeed, the Naxal cadres in the area had to refine their strategies because of local considerations that often went against the established directives. The complex negotiation between the Naxals and the Santals over the terms of Naxalism can be seen from the fact that the Naxals consciously tried to propagate its politics among the Santals by drawing connections between the legendary tales of Birsa Munda, and the heroes of the Santal insurrection, Sidhu and Kanu.

For the Santals, their leaders such as Jangal Santal and Gunadhar Murmu were not simply peasant heroes but were also divine, messianic figures. Thus, the meaning and significance of the Naxal movement was qualitatively different for the Santal participants. The Santals experienced and made sense of the Naxal movement based on their traditions and practices, both worldly and spiritual in a way that was distinct from the Naxalism propagated by the leadership or the CPI (ML). It is this that helps us understand how the Santals maintained an autonomous world-view that was wholly their own and which was not determined by the Naxal cadres or leadership. Apart from these, the agency of peasantry in the Naxal movement can also be gauged by looking at instances in which they rejected the Naxal leadership or the direction provided by the students and intelligentsia. Thus, writing about Srikakulam, Biplab Dasgupta comments that, "*It was reported in July 1970 that the tribals resented the leadership of the students and others from the plains and claimed leadership for themselves both in Srikakulam and in Debra- Gopiballavpore. Tribals and students clashed, the tribals complaining that the students were trying to dominate them". (53)*

In his 'Report on the Peasant Movement in the Terai Region' published in October 1968, Kanu Sanyal admitted: *We now admit frankly that we had no faith in the heroic peasant masses...we, the petty bourgeois leadership, imposed ourselves on the people. Whenever the heroic peasant masses took the initiative and wanted to do something, we of the petty bourgeois origin opposed them. (56)*

In almost all documents produced by the Naxal leadership, the question of women's role remains conspicuous by its almost complete absence. Indeed, even in secondary literature on the movement, the authors almost invariably spend little or no time discussing the question of women in the movement. A close reading of Naxal literature seems to suggest that the question of women's tasks or role within the movement was marked by ambivalence. Thus, while female participants in the movement often themselves tried to project a militant personality, their male colleagues continued to expect women to fulfil a mainly nurturing role within the movement. A conscious desire to express irreverence towards the established social mores certainly played a part in determining how women attempted to forge a new personality for themselves. Thus, challenging the image of women as docile and passive, women Naxals often consciously attempted to engage in direct confrontation with policemen or suspected informers. Like their male counterparts, they too endured hardships and practiced self-abnegation. In Jaya Mitra's *Hanyaman* (1989), she describes how she refused to partake of better food or living conditions than the other inmates during incarceration. She also desires to be taken out of the hospital and made

to stay with other inmates. Krishna Bandopadhyay (2002) writes about how women flocked to the villages to integrate themselves with the peasantry. She points out how the party leadership saw them as "helpers and nurturers". Thus the tasks assigned to women were to provide shelter and food to their male comrades, deliver letters and act as nurses to wounded male compatriots. She says *"Schools and colleges were set on fire, statues in parks were decapitated...in this path of resolution chosen by the party, no role for women remained. As cadres in the movement we (that is, the women) cannot avoid the responsibility for the movement, but was there really any role for us (in it)?" (62)* While the urban educated woman was consciously articulating her feeling of being marginalised, the peasant women for the best part were perceived in terms of a group and had to be spoken for.

Apart from physically resisting police and landlords, peasant women also assisted urban youth who tried to spread the Naxal ideology in the rural areas. Thus, according to Maya Chattopadhyay, peasant girls would stay up all night and guard the urban youth while they slept. (68) The few notable names among the peasant women are that of Shanti Munda, Krishnamaya and Leela Kisan. Shanti Munda is a woman from the Munda tribe in Darjeeling district. Her family had a small portion of cultivable land in Sabdullajote village in Naxalbari police station area. Her father was continuously in debt to the local landlord. At a very young age she came under the influence of the Communist Party, working among the poor peasants, landless labourers and tea-garden workers. She began to go to their meetings and processions, and in her own words: '*I learnt about politics by walking in those processions and attending meetings, and gradually I began to speak in meetings'. (6)* She became quite a well-known local leader and worked alongside Kanu Sanyal and Charu Mazumdar, the two important architects of Naxalbari, and eventually married a Hindu male colleague – Keshab Sarkar – from the neighbouring district of Coochbihar. In her own words:

"*As I became more involved into politics, I realized that men from my own tribe could not teach me about the revolutionary ideals, and then this Hindu man fell in love with me. My father was enraged when he came to know about my relationship, and threatened to kill me for intending to marry outside my tribe. So, we eloped and carried on with our political activism" (Sen 1985:76).*

Shanti Munda's challenge to patriarchal authority was extended towards her Party as well, when she refused to abide by the Party directive of following the political line of 'annihilation of class enemies'. She organised openly and followed the 'mass line'.

Krishnamaya, 'a Nepali girl, who ran a wine shop, was drawn in the movement by Kanu Sanyal. When her husband became a full time activist, she sold the shop and joined the movement and gave shelter to absconding activists' (Sen 1985: 65). Apart from this single sentence in the academic history of the movement, her involvement is remembered only by her local comrades and her husband Punjab Rao, another Naxal. Punjab Rao said that Krishnamaya was politically conscious, (8) from the beginning and he was greatly influenced by her participation in the local communist movement. She played a leading role during the 1967 uprising and organised local women to prevent the police from entering.

Leela Kisan, a Nagesia tribal woman talks about her involvement with the movement in the 70s. "*We were about four girls – Puni Kisan, Rangi Kisan, Pokli Kisan and myself – the rest were boys. We did not have any weapons. We carried lathis and stones. We knocked at the door of Jotedar Gobind Singh's house, and as we pushed it open, the little fear I had disappeared. Then we started seizing the grain and loading it onto carts we had brought. After removing as much as we could, we started to leave. I was carrying some of the grain on my back. It was very heavy…. When I reached home my mother asked me where I had been. I didn't tell her anything as she would have been terrified. The next morning police gheraoed our village. As some of the boys admitted to the police that I was with them, I was arrested." (IJGS 6:1)*

Body, Sexuality and Motherhood

Both the Mau Mau rule book and the Naxal ideology remain silent on the intrusion into the gendered space when it comes to women's sexuality and motherhood. It was seen as the woman's fault if she fell pregnant. It would mean the loss of rifle and fatigue and an inglorious return home which was often not possible in the tu-

multuous political situation. These women, then, remained at the mercy of the party bosses who often relegated them to performing menial tasks. Reporting from the Aberdare forest, Njama (1966) expresses his displeasure for such women. *"They (the women) forget that we are fighting. Is this the time to make babies?" (98)* However, he feels extremely concerned for a young man who feels sorry to see his beloved chastised by Kimathy. *"Young Muri, I feel sorry for him. It is his age to be with girls but he is wedded to guns. Freedom can only come from sacrifice." (99)*

While childbirth under such circumstances were frowned upon, but women who used their children while performing courier duties were encouraged to do so. It worked as the perfect camouflage for such activities. Heroic motherhood was eulogised. Leena, a Naxal activist of the 70s describes her brush with the police where she managed to escape because her daughter was with her. The Mau Mau women pledged their children to the struggle. As Gakonyo remembered, "*If you saw my young son Hinga on the road with his toy-wheel - mubara - you would think he was playing. But he was really on duty... (children) knew what to do" (Ndungi 1984).*

CONCLUSION

The Mau Mau and the Naxalbari represent guerrilla movements in different parts of the globe and yet the similarities in the stories of the women are startling. The leadership being male, both movements lacked gender sensitivity. Though the women are supposed to hold half the sky (Mao), in reality their services were needed but not important enough to have been recorded. The scholarship on the two movements has been remarkably gender insensitive. In fact there has been no study devoted to gender. The fact that women participated can be seen in the police files, jail records or the oral narratives of the women. Both Mau Mau and Naxalbari were also traumatic times for the women. While the men fled to the forest or went underground, it fell upon the women to keep the home and the hearth functioning. They did all this while aiding the activists or becoming activists themselves. In spite of the trauma, most women remember the days of the movement as "Magic moments" or "*aschorjo somoy"*. These were times that women hoped for change – not merely an overturning of the Government but also a change in the gender equations. Whether in the blazing fields of Naxalbari or the thick forests of Aberdare, women were fighting to establish themselves as coequal partners not merely in times of struggle but also in their domestic front. There was a hope that not only will the class enemies or the colonial machinery collapse, there would also be a greater integration of the sexes where women would get their due are about four girls

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