

Naxalism : Theory and Practice

by Pratap Mitra

I. NAXALITE THEORY OF GUERILLA WARFARE

The creed to which Naxalbari gave its name is now a force in West Bengal and a challenge to the traditional left. It appeals on the whole to spirited young people reacting to the present power structure with a violence that feeds on itself. Such a phenomenon is not easily understood or handled, least of all by the "forces of order" applying counter-terror. Not surprisingly, the movement has won a large number of sympathisers ready to suppress their qualms for the sake of what looks like a radical cure for a sick society. The personal heroism and suffering of many of these youthful rebels seem almost to transcend the terror they inflict on others.

All this is making the so-called Naxalite movement look just a little larger than life-size. Its inconsistencies are overlooked, as much as the fact that popular opinion is hardening against it in the current phase. To an outsider, these tensions appear to be built into a movement which is watching its strategic goals recede. Even a sketchy discussion of the Naxalite programme of action will reveal it as a series of reflexes to growingly unfavourable circumstances, and a discussion can hardly be postponed. Too much is at stake for the Indian revolution

as a whole; far too many precious lives already thrown at the feet of false gods who preside over Naxalite destinies.

THE URBAN GUERRILLAS

For any such discussion, the most natural starting point is the current programme of "guerilla" action in the cities. This has been the main form of movement for the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) in West Bengal for a year. The mood and general pattern is indicated by this excerpt from an editorial in the party weekly:

"News flow in of bonfires made by revolutionaries of Gandhi (sic), the arch-enemy of the Indian revolution, and Gandhian literature. The fire of revolution burns in the city of Calcutta. The red flag flies over Presidency College, home of the lackeys of imperialism; *the flame of revolution has been lit at Jadavpur, Sibpur, Kharagpur...* guerilla war has begun in support of the agrarian revolution..." (Translated from *Desabrati*, 30 April 1970).

The CPI (ML) opened proceedings in the cities with a series of violent raids aimed at a wide range of targets: schools and colleges, public transport and family planning clinics, office furniture, books, and, with a touch of prudery, "obscene" films from socialist countries. Not all of this may be the work of genuine Naxalites, though an analysis of *Desabrati* during the first six months of 1970 indicates approval of most such acts. The range of explanatory comments has to be wide as well, to cover all the forms of action for which the CPI (ML) is inclined to claim the credit.

Symbols of comparative affluence were attacked, like the Calcutta-Digha luxury tourist bus, set on fire at Kharagpur because it presented "the intolerable spectacle of the rich setting off across this exploited soil on their pleasure-trips to the coast..." (*Desabrati*, 30 April 1970). Reducing college offices and principals' rooms to shambles in protest against specific grievances or simply "the system" is by now an established pattern. Some other acts merely expressed a high degree of intolerance, as when Siliguri students "broke up meetings arranged

by revisionist and neo-revisionist agents of imperialism in the schools to commemorate the birth centenary of the great Lenin... In one school they even smashed up a meeting to celebrate the birth anniversary of Rabindranath, favourite poet of imperialism and the feudal gentry" (*Desabrati*, 14-21 May 1970).

That the student "guerillas" are not always sure of what they must do and why is made amply clear by the explanations that have to be invented. A single issue of *Desabrati* (23 April 1970) reported student "action" at three centres from three different angles. At Kharagpur "the revolutionary students tore up answer scripts and question papers and ransacked the laboratory" in protest against "this reactionary system of education" and "this laughable, unscientific examination system". At the Bengal Engineering College (Sibpur), however, the academic "system" was spared but a bonfire of science textbooks ascribed to "provocateurs" was made. Students carried out one of their typical raids to express contempt for "Yankee culture" and also the "revisionist bait" of student participation in college management. The other affected centre of learning was the University of Calcutta which is, in Naxalite eyes, a base of war preparations against China and "a rubbish-heap for US-Soviet dogs".

This last theme is a popular one, serving to explain not only a day of simultaneous raids on the cinema houses showing *Prem Pujari*, but also the heckling of a member of the science faculty of Presidency College by his students. These incidents were linked editorially thus:

"These are small incidents, but of tremendous political import... the anti-Maoism of this garrulous blackleg in teacher's garb is no more garrulity but a vital aspect of imperialist war plans against China" (*Desabrati*, 12 March 1970).

The organisation of the CPI (ML) is seemingly highly decentralised, and one job of the party is perhaps to provide ideological support for both planned and spontaneous outbursts. The general tactical line is obviously to create a focus of violence wherever possible, in preference to more common forms of political action. One such sensational move was the desecra-

tion of Gandhi symbols, followed by the beheading of busts of the nation's great men, educators and political leaders.

For this again, different explanations are given, sometimes by the same writer. A feature-writer defended the sacred right to burn counter-revolutionary literature on the alleged ground that "lakhs of copies" of Mao's works are constantly burnt in India and that all books in the National Library showing Sino-Indian border maps were burnt in 1962!

"They want to popularise the busts and books of Mao and smash and burn those of Gandhi. In other words they have started to carry forward the process, already set in motion, of the overthrow of the bourgeois dictatorship and establishment of that of the proletariat" (Sasanka in *Desabrati*, 14-21 May 1970).

The same person took a somewhat different view in the very next issue:

"Today Dange's party and Sundarayya's party are at each other's throat for power, but both call Gandhi their father... A strange riddle, which is being answered by the revolutionary students smashing Gandhi's busts and burning his books" (*Desabrati*, 28 May-4 June 1970).

In a more recent article, Sasanka explains that the statues of reformists and traitors like Vidyasagar, whose 150th birth anniversary is being celebrated, ought to be smashed up and replaced by those of peasant leaders. The young men doing the smashing are unconscious revolutionaries who have not really thought about these leaders and their misdeeds, but are spontaneously "doing the right thing". The reactionaries are anxious to preserve the old statues because "...their replacement by others would be a calamity; a new statue means a new kind of politics, the revolutionary politics of armed struggle, the politics of Naxalbari, of the CPI (ML), of Chairman Mao" (*Desabrati*, 5 September 1970).

To this might be added Charu Majumdar's thesis: "the festival of smashed statues" represents the beginning of a cultural revolution without which "a new revolutionary system of education and culture cannot be created...a truly patriotic revolutionary India cannot emerge". This campaign, again, is

"part of the armed agrarian revolution" (*Desabrati*, 15 August 1970).

An earlier article in the party weekly had also congratulated the students for "uprooting the poison weeds of the rotten Gandhism, that is imperialism, as a means of support to the armed peasant revolution that has broken out everywhere" (*Desabrati*, 19 March 1970).

What emerges from all this is the idea that an essentially simple if not particularly pleasant act like defacing a statue can be an acceptable substitute for real revolutionary action. A few such bloodless adventures can destroy the Indian communists' assessment of Gandhiji, supplement the agrarian revolution, start a cultural revolution, establish the political line of Naxalbari, and instal the proletariat in power, and that, too, unconsciously and spontaneously as often as not! Not even the most seasoned "revisionist" could visualise so peaceful a transition to a new social order.

It should be noted that no flesh and blood enemy was involved in most of these urban encounters. The party which had already taken to killing individual exploiters in the villages did not as a rule touch their urban counterparts. Taking the period as a whole, attack was concentrated against inanimate objects, symbols of what the CPI (ML) regards as power, wealth, or simply wrong ideas on all possible subjects, including birth control. The genuine anger and social discontent moving teenagers to large-scale destruction of property is not to be lightly dismissed; yet the substitution-effect is here as well, in the essentially demonstrative and symbolic nature of the destruction. The shift from the rural areas to the cities thus represented a watering down of the programme of action. That this shift was a matter of adjustment to circumstances was made clear in Charu Majumdar's article re-stating the ideal of a rural revolution, for which it was necessary to "explain the significance of the struggle to develop liberated areas in the countryside and send enthusiastic workers, youth and students to the villages to take part in the peasants' armed revolutionary struggle" (*Desabrati*, 15 August 1970).

Recently, however, human targets have been on the increase:

a measure of the party's desperation, bringing fear into the lives of ordinary men and women. In their clashes with the CPI (M) the Naxalites show and are shown no mercy. The murder of businessmen, officials, teachers and a large number of policemen outside duty hours has brought forth reprisals which include cold-blooded shooting to kill. Posters threatening certain professions have been put up in Calcutta and district towns. The random nature of the killing, so different from the planned and selective violence of other terrorist movements in history, seems to have neutralised public opinion to a point where police repression on a much larger scale might be tolerated, if things were to get worse.

Only dogmatists will fail to note the absence of public sympathy which is in its own way telling on Naxalite nerves. The CPI (ML) believes that it is unleashing "the active resistance of the revolutionary masses" (*Desabrati*, 12 March 1970), and declares, "the people are with us; red terror can be established" (*Desabrati*, 30 March 1970). However, the facts are so different that they can be explained only by turning them upside down, and depicting passivity as a form of activity:

"Even those who want to stimulate and arouse the 'inert' masses know that the masses are already stimulated and awake, but are passive because that is the rule in guerilla warfare. The people want to be like the water, for if they become fish like the guerillas, and thus the people and the guerillas both turn into fish, then how will the fish survive without water?"

If this treatment of Mao's famous image of the guerilla war conveys anything at all, it is the admission that the people are "passive" towards the CPI (ML). As if to underline this, the article goes on to describe the hit-and-run raids as:

"Raids in which the masses do not take part, applaud or come forward with help and cooperation; but silently, with sealed lips, and absorbed in their own affairs, they help tremendously, participate splendidly and give their best in activity and cooperation behind a mask of inaction and noncooperation" (Sasanka in *Desabrati*, 11-18 June 1970).

All this is truly revealing and leaves one in no doubt as to the kind of popular support the CPI (ML) is likely to mobi-

lise if and when its efforts succeed in bringing real "white terror" on the masses.

But this is the situation in which the CPI (ML) ranks actually find themselves. Does an organisation of knife-wielding volunteers in the cities, working secretly in isolation from the broad masses, correspond to their original scheme? Quite the contrary.

GUIDELINES FOR STUDENTS

Students have always been important to the Naxalite leadership. Even before Naxalbari, and the coming of the first united front ministry in West Bengal, political differentiation in the student wing of the CPI (M) led to the emergence of a new type of student cadre, in some colleges at least. Very aggressive but very obviously interested in revolutionary politics, they were able to create a new image of the leftwing student movement which, according to them, was bogged down in the morass of small benefits and union posts. It was symptomatic of the new turn to radical politics in the mid-sixties in West Bengal, and it coincided with the in-fighting in the CPI (M) on a number of political questions.

In the summer of 1968, Charu Majumdar was saying that revolutionary students could be organised only as red guards who must pass the test of successful propagation of the *Red Book* to workers and peasants (*Desabrati*, 2 May 1968). About the middle of 1969, he sent out his famous call to students to "integrate" themselves with the basic masses. They must boycott college unions, which destroy the revolutionary spirit, and go to the villages to build rural bases. This line of going to the people in the Narodnik way took concrete shape as many young enthusiasts did leave home; and it may be said that nothing has done more to enhance the romantic appeal of the Naxalites and win them friends than this particular programme.

Factors far stronger than subjective idealism brought their rural programme to a halt, while the organisation in the colleges was paralysed by the self-denying ordinance which kept them out of union activities. With many Naxalite student lea-

ders away in the villages, other parties gained ground. As a rival Naxalite group observed:

"All that it meant was that some honest and sincere young men went to the villages to integrate themselves with workers and peasants, while the vast mass of students remained in the clutch of the revisionist scabs. Is this the line of integration with workers and peasants?... Integration means the unification of the student masses to bring them over to the workers and peasants. This can never be done by leaving them alone while one wanders around trying to be a revolutionary" (*Mazdoor*, 30 July 1970).

Evidently this experience went home to the leadership. Last year the line was quietly revised. A new set of instructions came from Chairman Charu Majumdar, a new clarion call to students to leave their schools and colleges "instead of wasting your energy in passing examinations", but with a distinct underlying note of caution (*Liberation*, March 1970, p. 13). Now it seems "integration" may be achieved by sending small red guard squads to live and work in villages or working class areas even for a few days at a time. Here is an obvious shifting of the ground, a tacit admission of the difficulties involved in forming permanent "base areas".

The net effect of these tactics was to eliminate the CPI (ML) from the college unions, the students' ready-made base of struggle and work, without, however, affecting the normal functioning of the colleges. Nor can the CPI (ML) cadre as a whole be said to be staying away from examinations, though it is now their policy to attack schools and disrupt examinations wherever possible.

The failure of doctrinaire radicalism up in arms against "the bourgeois educational system" was pointed out by the author of the abovementioned article in *Mazdoor*:

"While walls are plastered with the slogan of leaving schools and colleges, students are lining up for admission into these places."

The article goes on to a scathing criticism of the CPI (ML) line of action in the next phase: attacking Gandhi symbols, raising red flags over school and college buildings and throw-

ing bombs to disrupt normal academic work. "What is the idea? To force the closure of schools and colleges? Can a system be smashed simply by throwing bombs? In that case a few bombs in factories could end the system of exploitation."

In fairness to the CPI (ML) it must be said that on some points the *Mazdoor* group's thinking touches the same level. It is surely eccentric to suggest that "burning Gandhi" (sic) should be stopped, only to replace stories of his "knavery" in school textbooks with Mao's story about a foolish old man, and write-ups on the Sholapur "commune".

The current spate of "guerilla" raids on educational institutions is largely explained by the collapse of the original line for CPI (ML) students. Militant students, debarred by their leadership from normal student activities, and unable to "integrate" themselves through flying visits to "the masses", must be given something to do. Sensational raids on not very dangerous targets can provide compensation until the demand grows for more positive "action" like the cowardly attacks which have already killed a vice-chancellor, another teacher and college librarian, and grievously injured others, including a woman teacher.

PLAN FOR THE WORKING CLASS

The urban orientation of the CPI (ML) takes in the working class as well as the students, but not from any conviction about the former's revolutionary role. As other Naxalites frequently point out, the CPI (ML) does not really accept the classical Marxist idea of the leading role of the proletariat and its party, resembling some of the new left trends in this respect. In its literature, the working class is definitely depicted as following the students into battle.

"Our youth and students have unfurled the flag of revolution... Now it is for the working class to come out of the maze of its fight over small coins and take the banner of revolution from the hands of the youth and students..." (*Desabрати*, 11-18 June 1970).

Two months later the party chairman stated that "the struggle

of the students and youth has not been in vain. It has influenced the working class, inspired the militant peasants in the countryside. The workers are coming forward to defend their honour." This is being achieved by "celebrating the festival of raising red flags in factory after factory" (*Desabrati*, 15 August 1970).

This firm relegation of the proletariat to a henchman's role when it has been not merely raising flags over buildings but fighting glorious, militant battles for over half a century can be understood only when one recalls their dictum that the trade union movement is useless in an era of revolution. This again follows from the equation of any economic struggle with "militant economism". The conclusion is that revolutionaries must stay out of trade unions and build only secret party units. In the words of Charu Majumdar:

"Trade unions act as schools for the working class when there is no revolutionary situation... But when there is a revolutionary situation, with every battle turning into a confrontation, trade unions are inadequate. In such a revolutionary situation the party alone can be the class organisation of the proletariat." It is therefore necessary that "the politics of the agrarian revolution is brought to it from outside the trade unions" (*Comrader Prati*, p. 39).

A slight shift can be noted in the more recent article, "Our Party's Tasks among the Workers". Conceding the probable coexistence of "revisionist" and "revolutionary" lines in the working class movement for a long time to come, Charu Majumdar says here that the revolutionary workers must not desert their class brothers still under "revisionist" influence, and the students must come closer to the workers and stand by them. The essential position, however, has not changed. The article makes it very clear that the revolutionaries must not participate in union activities and struggles, or contest elections. If anyone thinks the workers will lose faith in them for this, "then it must be said that the person who thinks like this has no experience whatsoever of the nature of the workers" (*Liberation*, March 1970, p. 6).

Since it is difficult to stay at the side of the workers while

refusing to enter their class organisations or take any interest in their immediate problems, the CPI (ML) is forced to ride its fancies higher as the days go on. It believes that the days of peaceful forms of action like strikes are over, and the workers must engage themselves in "gherao, clash with the police and the capitalists, barricade fights, annihilating the class enemies and their agents etc." (*Ibid*, p. 7). Gherao, involving a small number of workers as a rule, is considered a more militant form of action than the peaceful general strike; and workers admittedly under "revisionist" influence are seen as setting off on street fights and murder campaigns! This is a measure of the party's confusion over the whole question, as the basic realities of the workers' movement continue to elude it. It even hopes to recruit volunteers for the agrarian revolution from workers who are to be egged on to commit acts of defiance so that they may get the sack. For, as the leader admits in a moment of truth, they are unlikely to follow the CPI (ML) under more normal circumstances:

"Very few among them are coming forward to join the peasant armed struggle in the rural areas" (*Ibid.*, p. 9).

Here again, as with the students, the absence of a credible mass line is making itself felt. Mere paper criticism of "economism" will not help the CPI (ML), however justified such criticism seems at times, as long as the party itself goes on fighting "a guerilla war against the effects of the existing system, instead of simultaneously trying to change it", as Marx said trade unions generally did. The CPI (ML) leaders' boycott of trade unions is not quite as remote from the vice of "economism" as they imagine, since the same "subservience to spontaneity", as Lenin put it, underlies both. The failure to link up the daily struggle with a revolutionary perspective, so that the working class is unable to move beyond the limits of its immediate economic horizon, may take the form of a rejection of the necessary partial and local struggles, instead of obsession with them. The trade union movement is in that case left to its own devices, while a conspiratorial organisation is developed somewhere "from outside".

This idea of guiding the workers "from outside" is almost a

parody of Lenin's famous passage in *What Is To Be Done?* where he explains the duty of intellectuals to educate the workers in the politics of socialism which cannot be spontaneously generated "by the masses themselves in the process of their movement". He did not however suggest that communists should stay out of the trade unions, guiding them, like gurus, "from outside". Lenin, in fact, insisted that they must join even "yellow" trade unions if necessary. In another celebrated work, "*Left-Wing*" *Communism*, he said that while trade unions display some reactionary features, including "a certain tendency to be non-political", in the era of building the revolutionary party, they certainly do not become obsolete even when the revolution reaches its peak, the seizure of power:

"...the development of the proletariat did not, and could not, proceed anywhere in the world otherwise than through the trade unions, through reciprocal action between them and the party of the working class" (*Collected Works*, Vol. 31, p. 50).

It is because the CPI (ML) leadership ignores this fact of "reciprocal action" that the party, which was to Lenin "the highest form of proletarian class organisation", becomes for it the *only* form. And what a form! We have seen already that this party's revolutionary plans amount to little more than revolutionary fantasies, involving barricades, murders, and even the dismissal of workers who may then be induced to take part in the agrarian movement.

Until such time as this revolutionary conspiracy makes headway, the party is satisfied with the raising of red flags, and that too at dead of night, over some factory buildings or a tram depot in Calcutta. The Government of India is described as trembling at this presage of a "terrible future". It is like Mao Tse-tung's description of official reports of the Chinese party during the phase of "the first left-opportunist line", when the class enemy was frequently described as "extremely shaky" and "exceedingly panicky".

The entire urban programme seems to have turned into a kind of desperate routine for the CPI (ML). Each act of violence is self-contained, leading at best to "more of the same", never to a higher plane of action. Divided as never before, and

driven underground, the party is facing the worst crisis of its career, even as it is able to terrorise people in cities and isolated villages. The red flags raised surreptitiously, and then left to be hauled down by policemen at their leisure, symbolise the helplessness of revolutionaries without roots.

NAXALBARI AND AFTER

The fact is that these roots were to be struck in village soil. Action in the cities represents a retreat; less an example of Mao's precept of "making a noise in the east while attacking in the west" than an attempt to regroup the scattered forces after the failure to create rural bases.

How differently the Naxalites began can be seen in the earlier statements and editorials, asserting that "the uselessness of trade unionism has been made clear as daylight" (*Desabрати*, 2 November 1967). On 21 December 1967 the weekly stated that class struggle in the cities should be orientated towards the peasant movement and creation of rural base areas. This was accompanied by a sharp attack on the CPI (M) line:

"Who are the people", *Desabрати* thundered, "who, saying China's path is not ours, lure our youth into clashes in the cities with the dream of seizing power there?... So you condemn the anti-feudal struggle of the revolutionary peasants of Naxalbari, and want to drag the youth into an insurrection to capture the cities..." (11 January 1968).

To understand how this forthright rejection of the city-based movement turned into its opposite, we must trace the evolution of the Naxalite blueprint for the rural revolution that never was.

Many false notions have been spread about Naxalbari which was, fundamentally, an armed agrarian struggle against eviction from vested land, and for its redistribution. The "Naxalites" were at that time members of the CPI (M) which held the portfolio of land revenue in the first united front ministry, and encouraged its ranks with militant talk, without meaning half of it, as usual. The movement might have been launched partly to test the bona fides of the ministry, particularly the

CPI (M) which had shocked its extremist followers by joining hands with "revisionists" and "reactionaries" to form a government. But it reflected also a genuine urge to implement "from below" the promises made at top level, and push the leftist government more to the left by using the lever of the agrarian revolution. Naxalbari was to be an independent base of action for the Indian Maoists: not Yenai, but Hunan.

It was in the spirit of Mao's "Hunan Report" and other articles that the earlier Naxalite writings stressed "class analysis" and "investigation", the concrete study of concrete conditions. Charu Majumdar outlined a scheme in 1968 for assigning a definite area to each party committee for the purposes of analysis, investigation and practice, as the wishes of different sections of the people must be studied. Some rural surveys were carried out and published in the party organ. The Debra unit formulated five principles, which they called Pancha Pradhan, to link theory and practice.

At that stage the extremist leadership did not deny the importance of mass struggles for economic and partial demands, or mass organisations. Susital Raychaudhuri, the editor of *Desabrati*, wrote an important article in 1967 on the need to organise poor peasants, sharecroppers and landless labour, and described the struggle for land as the key to the revolution ("Comrade Ranadive's Duplicity", *Desabrati*, 10 August 1967). A week later, the party organ editorially charged the UF government with neglect of the vital issues of land and food.

As late as November 1969, an article in *Liberation* noted that guerilla war could be conducted "only by arousing the broad peasant masses" while the Che Guevara type of war "is waged by a few inspired petty-bourgeois youths in isolation from the masses..." (p. 70). Ironic indeed, to read this article now. Though the writer's political confusion is revealed in his prejudice against peasant associations and legal activities, he does at least recognise the agrarian mass movement.

The crux of the change that came over the Naxalite movement, not all at once but in degrees, is found in their changing assessment of Naxalbari. Differences which had always

existed in the extremist camp came to a head when the CPI (ML) organised itself as a separate party in mid-1969.

For a long time after their separation from the CPI (M), the extremist communists considered Naxalbari a basically agrarian movement. The very first number of *Desabrati* described it as "the legitimate struggle of the Terai peasants for land; the peasants' class struggle against landlords" (6 July 1967).

Jangal Santhal's statement of 24 May 1967 underlined the same point: Naxalbari was a focus of resistance to the illegal occupation by jotdars of vested land tilled by the peasantry for years. "Except where jotdars attacked first, the peasants nowhere used physical force" (*Kalpurush*, 4 November 1967).

Later the same year, when Jangal Santhal was in prison, his views were reported by a fellow-prisoner out on bail. Once again he described the struggle in Naxalbari as purely agrarian in nature, against "the age-old domination and exploitation by the feudal gentry" (*Desabrati*, 2 November 1967).

But on May Day, 1969, the other hero of Naxalbari spoke in very different accents.

Addressing a mass rally in Calcutta to mark the foundation of the CPI (ML), Kanu Sanyal hailed Naxalbari as the "Ching-kang Mountain of India" and an armed uprising against imperialism, feudalism, comprador capital, and old and new revisionism (*Liberation*, May 1969, p. 118).

Charu Majumdar, chairman of the newly-formed party, had been looking on Naxalbari for some time as "not only a national but an international struggle" (*Desabrati*, 23 May 1968). Now he definitively dubbed it as a fight "not for land or crops but for political power" (*Liberation*, December 1969, p. 9). "The Debra thana organising committee called it "a heroic attempt to seize political power" (*Ibid.*, p. 66).

Obviously, Naxalbari underwent a transformation in the imagination of the group which had gathered round its banner. The moment of transition from the old to the new understanding is caught in Kanu Sanyal's *Terai Report* of October 1968, for an essential feature of any transition, the coexistence of conflicting ideas, is most pronounced there.

Here Kanu Sanyal enumerates "ten great deeds" carried out in Naxalbari—of course, a conscious echo of the "fourteen great deeds" of the Hunan Report—including cancellation of debts, burning title deeds, confiscation and redistribution of grain, oil, flour, cattle and agricultural tools. These are obviously "deeds" of an agrarian character. However, he goes on:

"The struggle of the Terai peasants was an armed struggle not for land but for political power...we all know that every class conflict is a political conflict, and the aim of the political struggle is to capture state power" (*Terai Report*, p. 12).

The source of this strange observation is no doubt an uneasy feeling, imparted by the party chairman, that the struggle for land amounts to "economism". What snares await a hero of the people when he allows such leaders to think for him is sadly evident in Kanu Sanyal's confusion over the question of leadership in Naxalbari. The movement is described as being led by "the landless peasants forming 70 per cent of the total" (p. 9); by the tea-plantation labour "leading a real worker-peasant alliance" (p. 16); and by "the petty-bourgeois leadership, virtually riding on the back of the people" (p. 19), all at the same time.

Whatever sectarian errors had been committed during the Naxalbari struggle were compounded by this peculiar evaluation afterwards when the movement collapsed and could not be revived. Charu Majumdar's pre-Naxalbari thesis—that possession of land merely converts the poor into the rich peasantry, and "the agrarian revolution must await the smashing of state power"—was published in 1969 (*Liberation*, November 1969, p. 80). Fundamentally, this understanding was developed step by step, though the CPI (ML) continued to believe in the "principal contradiction" between feudalism and the peasantry as a whole. The entire movement at last made the turn from the concept of the agrarian struggle, "investigation" and mass action to what is officially known as the "guerilla war".

THE RURAL GUERRILLAS

The main points of what the CPI (ML) means by guerilla action have been summarised by Charu Majumdar thus:

(a) Guerilla warfare can be started "wherever there are peasants" (*Liberation*, November 1969, p. 10). The nature of the terrain is unimportant. Whenever guerilla action starts, "the class enemy will be forced to flee" and the village automatically "liberated" (p. 74).

(b) "Neither mass movement nor mass organisation is indispensable for waging guerilla warfare", rather, it obstructs it (p. 10).

(c) Poor and landless peasants must perform the actual tasks as the intellectual leadership has failed.

(d) "Annihilation of the class enemy is the highest form of class struggle" (p. 13).

It was over such ideas that the Nagi Reddy group in Andhra, more orthodox Maoists, joined issue with the CPI (ML). In this analysis the emphasis is clearly on spontaneity and automatism, with a distinct tendency to replace the usual forms of class struggle with "annihilation" or individual assassination. After this, it is no surprise to come across the methods outlined by Charu Majumdar in *A Few Words about Guerilla Actions*. Surely the most original few words ever spoken on this subject!

According to this, the operational methods of the guerillas consist mainly of whispers and conspiracy on "a person-to-person basis" (*Liberation*, February 1970, p. 17). Guerillas must be recruited by intellectuals whispering in the ears of poor peasants. Carefully hiding during actual operations, the intellectual must afterwards emerge, only to pose as a neutral and start a whispering campaign in defence of the murder already committed. Finally, broad economic slogans must be raised, through a whisper campaign, needless to say.

It is no accident, that precisely when this plan, which is more like a script for a farce, is outlined, prosaic tasks such as fact-finding and political preparation should be devalued by the leadership.

"Let us not indulge in aimless political propaganda", says Charu Majumdar (*Ibid.*, p. 7), who, in 1968, had insisted on "ceaseless" propagation of political ideals among the peasantry.

In another article, he repeats that it is wrong to overstress "intensive propaganda before starting the guerilla attacks" (p. 17), which will, in any case, lead to the local seizure of power.

Another curious change has been on the subject of firearms. In an article written in 1967, Charu Majumdar linked "the politics of armed struggle and the campaign to collect guns" as "the *only* way, the way of the working class to liberation..." (*Liberation*, November 1969, pp. 82-83). In his comments on the Political-Organisational Report of the CPI (ML) in May this year, the same leader branded the tendency to use firearms as a "centrist" deviation.

"Why am I against taking up firearms now?... If guerilla fighters start their battle of annihilation with their conventional weapons, common landless and poor peasants will come forward with bare hands to join the battle of annihilation" (*Liberation*, May-July 1970, p. 29).

The firearms versus primitive weapons controversy developed some time ago and features in some important party documents. The Debra Report spoke of traditional weapons as "the principal aspect in the contradiction between the primitive and modern weapons" (*Liberation*, December 1969, p. 80). Now it seems bows and arrows, not to speak of "bare hands", have won. Why this antipathy for the guns from which power is supposed to spring? Charu Majumdar himself reveals the reason:

"Even if we manage to get hold of a few guns at this stage... these will almost inevitably fall into the hands of the police" (*Liberation*, February 1970, p. 19).

This is making a virtue of necessity and, as things have turned out, an explanation for the failure in areas where guns were used, as in Srikakulam. It exposes the real limitations of the movement which, bravely enough, raises the cry:

"So no guns, no forests or hills, not the mechanical slogan of correct investigation; our only task is to inspire the poor and landless peasants with the Chairman's thought" ("Border Report", *Desabрати*, 30 April 1970).

Thus the movement leaves the hard ground of reality and takes off into the airy blue of fantasy: no guns, no facts, no

mass base, but "guerilla action" nonetheless, with the murder of individuals as "the highest form of class struggle". This was the line followed by the CPI (ML) after the failure at Naxalbari, a failure which could not be redeemed by a second attempt, or wiped out by success in some other strategic area.

THE LINE OF RETREAT

The fact that the new line evolved out of failure on the mass front, accompanied by acute internal differences and splits, is brought out dramatically in three basic documents of the CPI (ML) in this period.

Writing in October 1968, Kanu Sanyal was more candid than most of his party colleagues when he admitted that the party organisation in Naxalbari "was actually inactive in every area...whatever small part was played by party members spontaneously at the outbreak of the struggle was wiped out in the face of repression" (*Terai Report*, p. 18).

In a similar vein, he noted the failure to "build up a strong mass base" (p. 20); the fact that "the masses scattered before widespread terror, the struggle lost its edge, and the escapist mood deepened" (p. 22); and the passage from "strategic retreat" to "retreat into inaction" (p. 22). Most damaging of all is his bald statement on the blurring of the line between fact and fancy in the party's use of guerilla terminology. "We assumed that, with the arming of the people, and with the jotdars, vested interests and other bad elements leaving the villages, a liberated area had come into being. We looked on the armed people as an actual army...hoped that guerilla units would emerge from the spontaneous uprisings of the broad masses. Often we would recruit vagabond elements with some revolutionary leanings as captains who would organise the armed bands" (p. 22).

In the winter of 1969, the Debra Thana Organising Committee explained how "guerilla action" came on the agenda after the mass movement failed and "the organisation became helpless" before police repression ("Debra Report", *Liberation*, December 1969, p. 66). At this point, according to the authors

of the report, it was essential to preach the politics of seizure of power to the masses. However, they add immediately, and not surprisingly, that "the issue of seizure of power never became the main thing" (p. 67), and "soon the movement got stuck as if trapped in quicksand" (p. 68). The deflection of the movement to individual terrorism was the direct outcome of its failure to mobilise the masses.

The third important document is the report of the Bengal-Bihar-Orissa Border Area Committee (April 1970). This Border Report blamed the party's initial failure on the spirit of "militant economism" and the mass movement (*Desabrati*, 23 April 1970). Much the same point was made in a report from Mushahari (Bihar), published in *Liberation* in October 1969, expressing contempt for "the economic carrot" held out to the people. What emerges from the Border Report is the bitter truth that no mass support was forthcoming to sustain the CPI (ML) when the engine of repression moved in upon it. The report brings out vividly the sense of failure and mutual bitterness which held sway, dividing the party into factions, until the leadership seized on the inspiration provided by Srikakulam to give the group in West Bengal:

"...the great line we had been groping after for one and a half years—the line given us by our beloved leader and respected comrade, Charu Majumdar, of launching guerilla war by annihilating the class enemy."

The turn towards individual terrorism was made in September 1969, and definitely established within a short time. Significantly, the first murders were committed in an area which was "a clean page" as far as any record of mass action was concerned. The groups in Debra and Baharagora, with some tradition of mass work, dragged their feet longer; the Debra unit promising to "spread the prairie fire" if only Gopiballavpur undertook to light the spark! The Border Report sharply criticises the Debra unit's spirit of legalism and open mass activity, and shrinking from the tactics of *khatam*. Theory catches up with practice as the latter is transformed under the pressure of circumstances.

Inevitably, the new line invited reprisals and "white terror" which the organisation was not strong enough to withstand.

"The police encirclement was responsible for our guerilla squads' absolute loss of initiative. Our aggressive tactics of launching offensives steadily degenerated into an escapist mood of passive defence" (*Desabrati*, 23 April 1970).

Such passages have the ring of truth. They are more convincing than the highly exaggerated figures of villages liberated and exploiters murdered—figures manufactured in the *Desabrati* factory, as the leader of a rival Naxalite group derisively put it—presented by the CPI (ML) to rally its ranks. Even lately, it has spoken of "the rising tide of the armed peasant struggle conducted by our party in rural West Bengal since the party congress", dismissing as enemy propaganda the notion that CPI (ML) activities are now more or less confined to cities (*Desabrati*, 5 September 1970). Earlier, however, the party chairman himself made an oblique admission of the retreat: "The inexorable laws of history cover temporary setbacks, which will make it seem as if the tide of struggle is running out" (*Desabrati*, 15 August 1970).

The pattern of Naxalite development since Naxalbari now becomes clear for us. The attempt to build up an agrarian revolution and rural bases, leading to "liberation", failed to win popular support. This must have been partly because of mistakes committed by the inexperienced cadre, who carried some unreal picture of the revolution in their minds and did not know how to discard the wrong notions; and in part because the Naxalites could never compete with the bigger communist and leftist parties of the united front in leading the peasant movement. The movement was thrown back on itself, while its call to violence attracted police repression. At this stage "guerilla action" or terror tactics seemed to be the only way out, and this, of course, meant greater repression. A time came when the villages became too hot for the young volunteers who returned in large numbers to the cities and started terrorist operations there—mostly symbolic destruction, as we have seen, but with a growing tendency to apply the tactics of *khatam* or murder in the cities as well. It is perfectly clear that the leadership

still hopes for a return to the villages, in the manner of the Narodnik "second call-up", but there is no reason to suppose that the CPI (ML) is, or will be, strong enough to achieve this.

Meanwhile Charu Majumdar had indicated the only possible way out of the morass of frustration: intensification of terrorism to stiffen the morale and greater mobility—"leaving a place quickly" as the Border Report puts it—to escape the consequences. A decentralised organisation was also called for in this phase of purely conspiratorial activities. The mass line of the CPI (ML) became literally a line of retreat from the masses. It was a retreat to the sound of phrases that glorified isolated acts of terrorism, and enhanced the moral value of murder for the bewildered young men who had to practise it.

MYSTIQUE OF MURDER

Members of the CPI (ML) were taught to seek inspiration in the act of murder as the "highest form" of struggle, and a means to establish the "reign of terror" in which the leadership appears to believe. It is considered almost an act of self-purification, bringing to the assassin a heightened revolutionary consciousness and a new humanism:

"As the annihilation campaign proceeds, the peasant's political consciousness steadily rises. We learn to see the programme of annihilating the class enemy as a struggle to develop the new man..." (*Desabrati*, 23 April 1970).

This is from the Border Report which continues:

"Finishing off the class enemy in a guerilla attack brings about a qualitative change in the peasant's consciousness: the new man is created" (*Desabrati*, 30 April 1970).

There is so much talk about the new man, presumably to soothe the troubled minds of activists, that it seems ironic to recall the many passages which glorify the shedding of blood in a peculiarly brutal manner. Descriptions of the use of primitive weapons, hacking persons to death, playing football with severed heads and drenching oneself in the blood of exploiters are quite common in the CPI (ML) literature of the period.

Even if some of these descriptions are highly coloured or even imaginary—since, according to police sources, the CPI (ML) has a habit of claiming other people's murders as its own—they may be taken to indicate the degree of brutalisation achieved in the past year or so by the self-styled humanists of the CPI (ML).

No wonder such gory orgies sickened a large number of student volunteers who had hoped to take part in a movement of liberation, not assassination. Besides, the practical difficulties attending such a course of action are enormous. Very revealing is the serio-comic experience of the Presidency College "red guards" who went to a village and talked to a group of people about seizure of power, only to find them still "somewhat influenced by revisionist politics of parliamentarism" (*Liberation*, April 1970, p. 38). Then they asked a perfect stranger to kill a jotdar whom he appeared to hate; but "owing to his insufficient clarity about class analysis" the man simply brought along some "rich peasants and bad elements" to harass the revolutionaries who promptly "left for the nearest railway station" (p. 39).

In fact, the revolutionaries make a habit of "leaving a place quickly" as soon as a murder is committed. Full of admiration for their own "mobility", the heroes are casual about the "white terror" the people have to face afterwards. The Debra Report proudly claimed that "only one guerilla comrade has been arrested and that is our only loss" (*Liberation*, December 1969, p. 73), at a time when a hundred innocent peasants were being put to "inhuman torture" (p. 72). Or take the story of the "comrades" who stumbled across a police party in a village in 24-Parganas, "chased" them for a time, and then "returned safely, feeling that the risks were too great, in this unequal struggle. About 150-200 armed police and jotdars' gangsters then ran riot all over the village, let loose unspeakable repression on the innocent villagers..." (*Desabrati*, 23 April 1970). From Murshidabad comes the description of how seven "guerillas" escaped after a murder, and an innocent villager was caught by the police (*Desabrati*, 25 June-2 July 1970). While the general staff of any movement needs to evade arrest, such

experiences can bring a terrible reaction in the village once the links of mass contact and confidence are snapped.

The real limitations of the movement are reflected as much in stories of disillusioned villagers handing Naxalites over to the police as in their own semi-mystical faith in automatic progress, scorning political preparation and organisation. Apart from the politically significant Congress victory, in 1969, in the constituency which includes Naxalbari, the internal evidence of the CPI (ML) organs is important in this respect. A definite sense of strain can be noted, a new emotionalism and stress on martyrdom. As Charu Majumdar said:

“To go close to the enemy, it is necessary to conquer all thought of self, and this can be achieved by the blood of the martyrs. That inspires and creates new men out of the fighters, fills them with class hatred...” (*Liberation*, May-July 1970, p. 28).

Even more explicit was the Border Report:

“Quite often personal interests triumph over class interests. This is bound to happen if one goes into explanations... So we say there is no need to explain again and again to the peasant what he or his class may gain from the agrarian revolution, as no one comes forward to sacrifice his life by adding up probable gains.”

Away with explanations which explain nothing. The psychological difficulties involved in annihilating others can be resolved only on an emotional plane, through the message of self-annihilation. The murder plan can operate only by converting itself into a death-wish:

“The ideal of death must be held up before the people. Death, weighty as a mountain in its significance, light as a feather in its triviality. All must die, but to emphasise death that is in some way significant...” (*Desabrati*, 30 April 1970).

The vocabulary is that of *Serve the People*, Mao's speech on the death of a comrade in 1944, but the spirit is the spirit of Charu Majumdar, or rather, his band of teenage romantics. It has little in common with Mao's matter-of-fact acceptance of death in action as a worthwhile risk in a revolutionary cause,

and, in fact, his warning against “unnecessary sacrifices” (*Selected Works (SW)*, Vol. 4, Bombay, 1956, p. 219). But it is surely no accident that two of the three “constantly read” articles prescribed by the CPI (ML) leadership for its ranks—*Serve the People* and *In Memory of Dr Norman Bethune*—should be in the nature of funeral orations.

Recently, annihilation or *khatam* has become also a means to solve all social problems and fulfil all political tasks. Liquidation of individuals is going to be the first step in the liquidation of feudalism, leading to the local seizure of power. The Political-Organisational Report of the CPI (ML) congress, published in *Desabrati* under the appropriate title *We Will Solve All Our Problems through Class Struggle, that is Annihilation*, makes the point that “annihilation” is the key to the social revolution.

It says: “the battle of annihilation... removes from the minds of the people poisonous weeds of self-interest, clan interest, localism, casteism, religious superstitions, etc. Thus the battle of annihilation can bring the East Wind of the splendour and glory of Man... The battle of annihilation has linked together our two sacred tasks—the task of liberating our country and the people, and the internationalist task of ending imperialism and imperialist war” (*Liberation*, May-July 1970, p. 24).

THE FINAL PROBLEM

Problems, however, are not so easily solved; nor, one hopes, will *khatam* be applied to dispose of what remains. For the final problem before the CPI (ML) is that of convincing its own rank and file.

In-fighting and doubts which arose at the very inception of the new line remained to dog every further step of the movement. The Debra Report admitted that questions were raised and party workers dropped out of the movement wherever political education was neglected. Charu Majumdar, summing up the experience of the “guerilla action”, remarks significantly: “Lack of faith in the authority of the party leaders breaks the backbone of the struggle” (*Liberation*, December 1969, p. 88).

Very important in this connection is an article entitled

"Establish Revolutionary Authority". The authority in question is not that of a parallel "red political power" as in China, but that of the infallible leader inside his party:

"Our task today is to establish firmly the authority of the leadership of Comrade Charu Majumdar at all levels of the party and revolution" (*Liberation*, February 1970, p. 48).

Fire is concentrated against "new-type revisionists" undermining authority in the party with "arbitrary quotations" from Mao. Quoting Mao on the need for independent thinking, these heretics have raised the cry: "Doubt everything!"

No wonder Charu Majumdar found it essential, in his message to the students and youth, to hit out at "doubtism" or the tendency to ask questions. It is described as a bourgeois anarchist and fascist vice breeding "polycentrism" in a party in which the central leadership claims a kind of papal infallibility: "None else understands or can possibly understand even the ABC of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Tse-tung Thought" (*Ibid.*, p. 85).

The duty of the revolutionary student is thus quite clear—to express the leaders' ideas in the leaders' words:

"Train yourselves in learning by heart and in propagating in toto and in identical language whatever the central leadership of the party says" (p. 13).

Any party worker with average intelligence can be a source of danger for such a leadership. The easiest way to stop them thinking freely is to stop them thinking at all. And so the infallible leadership supervises the reading matter of the faithful—and concludes that Mao's "three constantly-read articles", *Eight Points* and *Three Rules of Discipline* are "the only things for the revolutionaries to read" (*Liberation*, December 1969, p. 12). No longer is theory a guide to action, or education a process that flows "from the people, to the people". "Chairman Mao has said that the more you read, the more foolish you become" (*Liberation*, February 1970, p. 13).

Of course Chairman Mao never said any such thing in his earlier writings, not even in the context of the bourgeois academic system. In December 1940 he wrote the inner-party document which invited bourgeois educators and experts to start

schools and newspapers in the base areas to improve the people's "knowledge and tactics for resisting Japan" ("Our Policy". Mao Tse-tung, *SW*, Vol. 3, p. 223). Again in 1944 he stressed the need for uniting with bourgeois intellectuals in the struggle against "illiteracy, superstitions and unhygienic habits", through opening new and old-style schools, theatres, and medical centres in the Shensi-Kansu-Ningsia border region ("The United Front in Cultural Works", *SW*, Vol. 4, p. 225).

None of this, however, is important for the CPI (ML) leaders who must erect ideological dykes against the sea of "doubtism" before the worst overtakes them. Charu Majumdar has called on his followers to smash "centrism" which is "a brand of revisionism" and in fact "its worst form" (*Liberation*, May-July 1970, p. 27). Centrism has been manifesting itself recently in forms which may seem curious to those brought up exclusively in the school of Charu Majumdar, but must surely strike a chord in political workers with some field experience. Centrists are those who opposed the boycott of elections, or advocated the building of trade unions and a working class party, or simply doubted the "imperialist" character of the Soviet Union. All these deviationists have been "thrown out of the party", and still new questions are being raised, challenging the party line on firearms, on the role of intellectuals, questioning the sacred principle of *khatam* itself!

Such documents of the CPI (ML) as are available to outsiders cannot have done more than raise a corner of the curtain behind which this desperate drama of inner-party life is taking place. However, it is clear enough that the movement as a whole, and the CPI (ML) itself, is divided into a fairly large number of sub-groups which dislike and suspect each other, work independently and indulge in mutual attacks, mainly ideological, but also physical. The challenge from within has been shaping for quite a long time. The Border Report gave a serious warning against all such "sly foxes of revisionism" and "Nagi-Asit-Parimal-Utpal-Dakshin-desh". The only possible way to meet the political and factional challenge was "to follow Comrade Charu Majumdar to the letter" and establish his thought as the Maoism of India today. As the report said,

revisionism tries hard "to frustrate the programme of annihilation of the class enemy" so that "the struggle cannot advance" (*Desabrati*, 23 April 1970).

That at least is a frank admission. The "struggle", far from advancing, experiences a failure of popular support which forces it to retreat, and is bedevilled in its retreat by serious doubts and self-questioning. That has been the general pattern for the Naxalite movement in West Bengal. The line of individual assassination, conceived as a last attempt to inspire the people and revive the spirit of self-sacrifice in the activists, has led to the most serious differences and demoralisation. How to rescue the party from this situation is the dilemma facing the CPI (ML) leadership today. Nor are other Naxalite groups, which reject individual terrorism, in a better position. They lack the passion and the qualities which drew a younger generation of political workers to the CPI (ML) in the first place; and they are unable to demarcate themselves ideologically from the parent body—the CPI (M)—in the way the CPI (ML) did.

The conclusion seems to present itself that the urban bias of the CPI (ML) in its current phase is unlikely to be replaced by a new turn towards the villages. Whatever the truth about their projected Long March from one West Bengal district to another, the CPI (ML) cadres are unlikely to build up the rural base areas and the People's Liberation Army which are to "make the seventies the decade of liberation". The pattern of the Chinese Revolution is not going to be repeated here. But was there ever any reason for supposing that it could be repeated? To answer this question one must go a little into the actual Chinese communist experience and theory, and see how the Thought of Mao Tse-tung compares with that of Charu Majumdar.