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Naxalite Discourse as Counter- memory: A Study of Kerala's *Naxal Bari: Ajitha: Memoirs of a Young Revolutionary* as a Counter-narrative

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Counter-memory, as an act of resistance against socially constructed public memory, allows for a rethinking of hegemonic discourses about social, political, and cultural events throughout history. As a subject governed by power structures, memory frequently devolves into a one-sided affair, frequently in the absence of a counter-narrative. At that moment, memory is reduced to a selective form rather than a complete one, owing to its subjective rather than objective nature. Since memory narratives began to garner widespread attention from diverse fields such as literary studies, history, linguistics, psychology, and communication, the term 'memory' has been a point of research, rather than the term 'remembering.' While 'remembering' is merely an act and 'memory' is a repository of previous occurrences, memory studies mature when they overcome the dominance of the present over the absent. Individual memory narratives are not merely echoes, but precise recreations of reality from unique vantage points. Individual Naxalite memory narratives penetrate the popular imagination by disrupting the silences of the official versions. In this regard, Kerala's Naxal Bari: Ajitha: Memoirs of a Young Revolutionary (2008), the English translation by Sanju Ramachandran of Ormakkurippukal, emerges as a potent counter-narrative from the perspective of the 'missing' in Kerala's public memory of the

Naxalite struggle. Ajitha's memoir also serves as a chronicle of Kerala's first wave of Naxalites. Influenced by the 1967 Naxal Bari rebellion in the village of Naxal Bari in West Bengal, K. Ajitha became the only female member of A. Varghese's militant activist organization, founded in response to the atrocities committed against the tribals and villages of Wayanad by feudal lords and police. Kunnikkal Ajitha was the group's face during the initial wave of Naxalitism in Kerala, India. In her memoir, she retells history from the perspective of someone who is the 'other.' As Ajitha reveals the elite's cruelty toward the disadvantaged in terms of class, financial status, and gender, Kerala's Naxal Bari: Ajitha: Memoirs of a Young Revolutionary is regarded as one of the finest political counter-mnemonic discourses in history. So, the goal of this paper is to look at K. Ajitha's memoir from a human rights point of view as a revisionist story of individual resistance that is based on gender.

Keywords: memory narrative, counter-memory, Naxalism, resistance, gender performativity, identity politics, human rights

Introduction

The Naxalite movement has been divided into various offshoot factions since it initially rattled Kerala more than half a century ago. While some Naxalites retain their revolutionary goals, the movement has mostly vanished from public consciousness. It is only found in both the collective and individual psyches today. The records of Kerala's fiery Naxalite movement from the late 1960s may be discovered in police files, old newspaper pages, and individual memoirs. In India, both the national and state governments used to label Naxalite organisations as terrorist organisations and proclaim them banned. The lookout notices of the Naxalites were once things of fear for the public. The police and security services used to respond to the Naxalites with a series of raids and military actions aimed at countering the rebels' guerilla strikes and pushing them out of their hideouts. The administration rented out the public mind, convincing people that Naxalites were insane for murdering innocent people, thus creating fear. While the lookout alerts, media coverage, police and military activities, subsequent arrests, and court proceedings remain vivid in the

public mind, the other half has been utterly muted and ignored. Conscious ignorance was elevated to the point that the public was led to believe there was no other side to the story. However, years later, a few Naxalites penned and published their versions of the Naxalite story. K. Ajitha's memoir is one of the most accomplished Naxalite memoirs to date. Ajitha's memoir is not simply a personal account; it also becomes the chronicle of Kerala's first Naxalite movement. Along with being a Naxalite memoir, it also speaks of Kerala's sole female Naxalite experience, since K. Ajitha was the only female member of the group headed by A. Varghese. Ajitha's book, *Kerala's Naxal Bari: Ajitha: Memoirs of a Young Revolutionary* (2008), runs counter to the memories implanted into the public consciousness by the official narratives and acts. While police narratives are concerned with the aspects of what, when, and how, Naxalite narratives are concerned with the whys. Memory here serves as a substitute, proxy, or consolation for what has been absent, and it counters the collective memory scripted by the authorities. Local memories thus serve as materials for creating the local histories that dynastic monarchies and nation-state historians overlook in the contemporary era. Much of the recent 'new' social history written about marginalised and otherwise forgotten individuals is predicated on the return to (and creation of) such counter-memories. One of the most interesting things about these productive meetings is how different methods are used to look at memory in this issue. For example, experience, ideas, pictures, literary texts, and philosophical inquiry are all used to look at memory.

Apart from the requirement for a first-hand story from a Naxalite, there is also a requirement for the Naxalite movement to be gender represented. Since its inception, the Naxalite movement's history has been gender agnostic. While several tribal, peasant, and urban middle-class women participated in postcolonial India's Naxalite movement throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the movement's narrative remained mute on their participation and gender problems. Women's memoirs and autobiographies were crucial in giving light to the movement's experiences with women. Recent years have seen the emergence of comprehensive assessments of women's involvement and agency in the movement. These works emphasise the gender lens

to investigate not just women's participation in the movement, but also gender relations, patriarchy, violence, love, and sexuality. So, Ajitha's memoir is important because it is written from the point of view of a Naxal who was also the only woman in the group.

Thus, this paper analyses the memoir as a counter-discourse to official memory, while also taking into account the gender issues inside and surrounding the movement. The hegemonic discourses of the jail episodes are also seen as an attempt to discipline the bodies of dissension. The deliberate silence of the feminine voice in the movement's decision-making processes, thus relegating them to their normal act of obedience to the patriarchy, becomes a shock hard to take. The memoir's epilogue becomes crucial in permitting a gendered re-reading of the forced silence of feminine representations throughout the ferocious revolution that rocked a state, if not a nation. *Kerala's Naxal Bari: Ajitha: Memoirs of a Young Revolutionary* also becomes a gendered revisionist text with a needed focus on human rights.

Contextualising Kerala's Naxalite Movement

The word 'Naxalism' may be traced back to a 1967 rebellion in the West Bengal hamlet of Naxalbari in Siliguri, in the district of Darjeeling, West Bengal. This act laid the groundwork for a revolution in which the political and socioeconomic agricultural situation of the nation was converted into an armed conflict. The terms Naxalism and Maoism are sometimes used interchangeably to refer to a larger worldwide phenomenon connected to the Maoist strategy, which favoured the rural class over the working class as the fundamental revolutionary force capable of converting capitalism into socialism. This movement has existed in India for four decades under the slogan 'Lal Salam' (Red Salute), and the age of the Naxals has been marked by periods of both silence and violence. Silence is frequently seen as a sign of defeat or stability. History has seen similarly armed uprisings that occurred before the Naxalbari incident, during British rule, and even before it, implying that, in the past, whenever and wherever such revolts occurred, the government was successful in suppressing them to a tolerable level. The administration has not successfully exploited the period between revolutions to address the core causes of the current crisis. It is not the physical might of the nation that is being tested here,

as it has one of the largest armies. Nonetheless, it must be recalled that conflicts may now be waged without the use of traditional security forces. Certainly, morale and logic are important factors in a government's legitimacy, and both are under question here.

The Naxalites work at the grassroots level since that is where the government apparatus is either non-existent or severely dysfunctional. They may easily gain legitimacy from the inhabitants of these areas by delivering services such as justice and security that the government has failed to offer. Additionally, there is a psychological marketing campaign for Naxalism directed at youth who are perceived to be disturbed by official oppression, at women who are forcibly silenced in their homes despite their desire for resistance, and at the lower strata of society who are perpetual prey to feudal torture. By pledging to solve the societal issues that they confront, they have been able to gain support and compassion from men and women of all ages. Their reasons may be labelled 'populist,' but democracy is built to allow for populism. The beauty of democracy is that there will always be organisations with opposing viewpoints to the views of the government. Sub-nationalist organisations may exist in opposition to the national authorities. However, the difficulty emerges when these protests become violent and evolve into armed conflicts, as the country has witnessed multiple times before, both during colonial control and after independence. For the same motives of welfare and development, the Maoists have succeeded in convincing the same tribals who have opposed the government. The rate at which the Maoists have gained influence and credibility in these 'conservative' regions is even more fascinating. Much of it might be due to their pre-existing emotions of injustice and retribution, which have been sparked by the newfound power they have as a result of the rebels' backing. Understanding the local reasons may help come up with a more effective multidimensional strategy that is not necessarily the same for the whole country as an alternative way to fight that does not involve weapons.

Kerala saw the first episode of left-wing extremist violence on November 21, 1968, when a raid on the Thalassery police station in North Malabar's Kannur district was inspired by the Naxalbari protests in West Bengal. All the Naxalite movements that India witnessed

then could be summarised as armed uprisings of the peasants and the people under the leadership of communists against the prevalent oppressive social system. Ajitha, born to Kunnikkal Narayanan, a Marxist-Leninist, and Mandakini, a Gujarati schoolteacher, was also a member of the group. Ajitha was a person who was involved in activism in an early period of her life. Her first march was against the lowering of ration rice to six ounces per person, which she spearheaded in high school in upstate Kozhikode. She dropped out of school in 1967 to help her father print pamphlets and participate in conversations. Ajitha, enthralled by Mao's literature and a regular listener to Radio Peking, was determined to gradually liberate herself from worldly ideals. Her family realised they would have to go the Naxalbari route. They protested against P. Sundarayya, the Marxist party's general secretary, when he visited Kozhikode because of their indignation over the Marxist leadership's betrayal of the Naxalbari campaign. When the leaders of the Naxalbari movement learned of this, Narayanan was removed from the Communist Party for challenging Marxist leadership, while others were asked to join the All India Co-ordination Committee. All of this was simply rhetoric, but a letter from a peasant in Pulpally served as a call to action. The police hounded the peasants of Pulpally for expanding into the forest regions, so the MSP camp was created to expel them. Another motivation for visiting Wayanad was the feudal system of low salaries practised by the estate employers. They shared the belief that a heroic revolution might mobilise people across the state into a powerful force capable of uprooting feudal society's underpinnings. Mandakini quickly quit as the headmistress of the Gujarati school in Kozhikode and moved to Manathavady in the mountainous Wayanad with her daughter to meet with Comrade Varghese to plot their next step. Narayanan remained in Thalassery to plot an attack on the local police station. Mandakini, on the other hand, was sick and couldn't take part in the attacks. She was then sent to prison. But the attack was a flop. Only 315 of the 1000 Naxals and sympathisers expected to attend the attack showed up. The group retreated when a single grenade thrown at the police station failed to detonate, and the sentinel at the police station raised the alarm. However, two days later, on November 24, 1968, a group of armed peasants, workers, and students, including Thettamala Krishnankutty,

Kurichiyan Kunjiraman, Kisan Thomman, Philip M. Prasad, and Ajitha, attacked the Malabar Special Police camp in Pulpally, which had been set up to deal with the 7000 farmers protesting the eviction by the Pulpally Devaswom authorities. Two police officers, a wireless operator, and a sub-inspector were killed in the armed attack. Later, the mob assaulted two nearby landowners' farms and gave the food grains that were stored there to the tribals. The group carried out raids on landowners' properties in the Wayanad woods on the same day. The estate's grain was taken and handed to the destitute. Following the attacks, the militants fled to the deep forests of Wayanad, where they took refuge. However, after a few days of vigorous searching, the majority of the attackers, including Arikkad Varghese and Philip M. Prasad, were apprehended. Varghese was assassinated in a faked encounter. Kisan Thomman, one of the group's commanders, was also killed in the bombing. Ajitha, the only female member of the group, was also arrested. In an attempt to depict Ajitha as a 'whore,' the cops paraded her in slacks and a top. Ajitha was allegedly tortured at the police station after her arrest; she was paraded in front of the public and subjected to third-degree abuse. After the trial, Ajitha was sentenced to 9 years in solitary confinement in jail. She spent the first part of her sentence at Trivandrum's Central Jail and the second half in Cannanore, where her parents were also detained. Ajitha used her time in prison to learn about the issues that Kerala women, particularly sex workers, confront. She was released in 1977 at the age of 27.

Following the raids, Naxal supreme commander Charu Majumdar issued a congratulatory letter, praising the poor people of Kerala for their heroism and courage, which had sparked a new wave of revolutionary enthusiasm across India. Apart from the fact that arrests weakened the Naxal movement in Kerala, Majumdar's insistence on targeting unarmed landlords and zamindars further split the state's Naxals. Leaders like Kunnikal Narayanan sought to keep their attention on the police stations. In the years that followed, there were just a few additional raids. In 1969, Naxal commander Velayudhan was slain in an attack on a police station in Kuttiyadi. In 1970, Naxals killed a landowner in Thirunelly and stole grains from the home of

another landowner.

The rise in extremist violence prompted the state administration, led by the Congress party, to initiate an operation that resulted in the arrest of numerous Naxal leaders. Arikkad Verghese, a prominent leader, was assassinated under questionable circumstances. By 1976, the Naxalite movement in Kerala had been destroyed by such means. The 'heroic peasant revolutionaries of Kerala will lead the tens of millions of revolutionary people of India,' as Charu Majumdar hoped, did not materialise. However, the Thalassery-Pulpally incident was Kerala's first lightning strike, spreading the message of an armed struggle inspired by Naxalbari and guided by the Chinese Communist Party.

Memory, Counter-memory, and Counternarrative

Although the terms 'memory' and 'remembering' appear to be interchangeable, they are not. Remembering is just the process of recalling prior events, whereas memory has a wide range of meanings. Memory recalls the relevant information by selecting it from the spatial-temporal context and storing it. Remembering is reduced to a basic act, but memory is a skill. Memory is an important literary issue, and it has been a contested phrase in recent literary studies. Memory studies look at how social, cultural, political, cognitive, and technological changes affect human memory's presences and absences, and they think that memory is subjective rather than objective. Literature is a mnemonic art and "writing is both an act of memory and a new interpretation, by which every new text is etched into memory space" (Lachmann 301).

Memory is a narrative construct, and our recollections are always "textualized" because remembrance and narration occur 'after' the event. With specific ideological foundations and social frameworks, verbal and visual heterogeneous narratives represent, mediate, or narrate the event.

It may be added that it was Halbwachs who introduced the crucial concept 'collective memory.' He clearly distinguishes between history and memory, as pointed out by Astrid Erll:

> History and memory are irreconcilable: Halbwachs sees history as universal; it is characterised by a neutral coordination of all past events. Central to history are contradictions and ruptures. Collective memory, in contrast, is particular; its carriers are groups which restricted …central functioning of remembering the past within the framework of collective memory is identity- formation. (Memory 17)

In his essay "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity"(1995), Assmann defines Cultural Memory as " … a collective concept for all knowledge that directs behaviour and experience in the interactive framework of a society and one that obtains through generations in repeated societal practice and initiation" (126). Literature/life narratives are texts of memory; they are "interpretations of the ways in which memory was produced, constructed, written and circulated" (Saunders 323). Memory studies is intertwined with a slew of modern political challenges, notably the political ramifications of past wrongdoings persisting in the present. Since the 1980s, scholarly interest in memory has returned. Sociological theorists emphasise the social and cultural origins of shared memories, whereas psychologists are more interested in memory from an individual perspective.

As historiography has widened its focus from the official to the social and cultural, memory has become more crucial as historiography frequently relies on history. Halbwachs distinguished between autobiographical memory—memory of events that we personally experience; historical memory—memory that reaches us only through historical records; history—memory of a past that is no longer relevant to our lives; and collective memory—memory of a past that shapes our identities. Also, Halbwachs said that shared memories were good ways to tell people apart, but some critics didn't like the idea of community awareness that was separate from the individual and preferred to use other words.

Michel Foucault described the phenomenon as a "counter-memory"(140). In his essay "Nietzsche, Genealogy, and History," Foucault argued for a separation between history and memory, suggesting that counter-memory is a technique for supplanting what he perceived as prevailing recall processes. Memory from the periphery, from the

oppressed, can be viewed as a counter-discourse to mainstream memory, yet it also exists inside the dominant world. Later studies expanded on Foucault's definition of counter-memory by using the term in a broader sense. A counter-memory is the role that a single memory plays within a larger recall construct, rather than the content of the memory. A counter-memory might be made up, or it can be a case of exaggerating one incident at the expense of others. It might be a memory created with the intent of undermining the dominant memory, or it could be a memory that disrupts the permanence of the mainstream or evident memory. On the other hand, counter-memory may be a way to remember the past through a lens that makes you think about your history in light of what's going on now.

Ajitha's testimony develops into a story of individual opposition to official historical continuity. On two levels, the memoir challenges the official memory: state ideology and patriarchal ideology. Ajitha speaks from the suppressed gaps left within the narratives concerning the Naxalite events, making her counter-memory an identifier of the politics underpinning authoritative memory. Ajitha explores the whys of the story, giving us a wider frame to understand the context better. In the first section of her book, she discusses the reasons for her revolutionary attitude, which was partly passed down to her through her genes. She was a schoolgirl when she protested against the government's decision to reduce the ration to six ounces per person. She dropped out of college after seeing the authorities' class prejudice, which favoured the studies of the rich while obstructing the education of the poor. She decided to work for the public because she was appalled by authoritarian bias against the lowest classes of society. When the authorities portray the Naxals as radicals while remaining silent about the reasons, K. Ajitha explains the background of the Pulpally attack. It wasn't until Ajitha's father, Kunnikkal Narayanan, got a letter from a peasant that they learned about the thousands of people who had been evicted from Meenachil, Kottayam, owing to new industries, with a false promise of good farmland as compensation. They hacked down the trees to build their farmlands after arriving at the new village and discovering it was only a dense forest. Threats came one by one, and the farmers there had to endure inhu-

mane police treatment. The letter ended on a challenging note: "You go on and on about Naxalbari, peasant revolt, and armed revolution. Are you prepared to put an end to your verbosity and practise what you preach? Here is a field of action for you. This is a challenge that will put you to test. Accept it if you have the guts!" (Ajitha ch. 6).

The call to action has been heeded. Another issue at Thalassery became entangled in this. The 'Ganesh-Bharat Beedi Crisis' began affecting Kannur district's beedi workers on the verge of extinction. After gaining power, the E.M.S. administration implemented the beedi-cigar rules in compliance with the Minimum Wage Act. Mangalore-based entrepreneurs, on the other hand, controlled the Ganesh and Bharat Beedi enterprises, which employed around 20,000 contract employees. As a result, they terminated operations in Kannur shortly after the Act became effective and migrated to Mangalore, which was exempt from the Act. As a result, about 20,000 workers lost their sole source of income, while at least one lakh dependents were hungry. They began working as agricultural labourers, resulting in a decline in agricultural labourer wages. The administration proved unable to resolve the issue. The Naxalite doctrine was extremely popular in this region, and hence the Naxalite leaders decided to take up the cause. They made their announcement in the language of the oppressed.

> Worker comrades, peasant comrades, students, revolutionary intellectuals, small traders, toiling women, pick up a stick, an axe, sickle, hammer or whatever else, in your hands that you have for years used only to vote; march on for the last battle with the oppressive government; lie low and snatch the enemy's guns and all his other weapons. We have become an armed force now; a force that belongs to you, join up in thousands and ten thousands with this "people's army"! Let the flames of revolution spread all over! These flames will burn down the enemy to ashes. Victory is only ours! (Ajitha chap. 14)

However, the revolts in Kerala were not a 'great storm of revolutionary armed warfare,' as some expected, but rather isolated episodes that transpired over time. Attacks on police stations were a recurring theme throughout the uprisings. The Naxalites' attack on police stations is a manifestation of their opposition to governmental

institutions. Immediately following the Pulpally disaster, the government issued land rights to migrant farmers and launched the 'Dinesh' beedi industry to attract unemployed workers. In 1975, the state government, supported by the Communist Party, passed the Kerala Scheduled Tribes (Restriction on Land Transfer and Restoration of Alienated Lands) Act in an attempt to pacify and wean adivasis from the Naxalites. While the government attempted a conciliatory programme with farmers and adivasis, the naxalites faced severe persecution. Authorities detained nearly all of the movement's leaders. The police offensive was critical in bringing the Naxalite movement to an end in Kerala. The rapid expansion of revolutionaries' rural bases and combat soldiers is an essential condition for the success of Naxalite-inspired armed rebellions. Additionally, the administration leased out public memory, deleting other facets of the story.

The second section of Ajitha's narrative has several examples of genuine first-hand experiences that contradict the official stories up to that point. The memoir talks about the story of Ajitha's palm, which was made famous by the police.

> What the police did to comrade Gopalan was unimaginable. They squashed with their boots what remained of the comrade's blown off hand. Dipping his good palm in the blood that gushed out of his wound, the police stamped the mark of his palm on the wall of Pulpally wireless station. Later they publicized the blood soaked hand on the wall as 'Ajitha's palm'. They did this to tell the world that I was a bloodthirsty witch. Comrade Gopalan's arm had to be amputated later. (Ajitha chap. 12)

She was one of the few members of the party who refused to forsake the route they had selected to liberate the peasants from enslavement and misery, hiking through the bitter cold of Wayanad's deep forests in pants, a shirt, and a thin jersey. Several of her friends had pulled out of the operation as the cops closed in on them. Additionally, this teenage Naxal group invaded landowners' houses, distributing confiscated food and money among tribe members and agricultural labourers. Ajitha and her accomplices were captured in Adakkathodu a few days after the Pulpally incident and were brutally abused while detained by police. The officers displayed Ajitha in trou-

sers and a shirt. Kerala's Naxalbari—the poster lady named Kunnikkal Ajitha—emerged.

> I was in a sari. I was asked to take it off. Under it, I was wearing trousers. The officer allowed me to keep it on. I didn't understand his intent. They made me remove the woollen jacket too that I was wearing over the blouse. Then, I was asked to walk out of the station in trousers and blouse. Even as I walked they were hitting me on the back and stomach. They made me stand on the platform of the flagstaff in the police station courtyard and paraded me to thousands of people who had thronged around. I trembled with humiliation and helplessness. The police proclaimed to the people that I had moved around the forests in this attire with my comrades. Their zeal to portray me as a whore was blatant. Journalists without wasting a moment began clicking away. (Ajitha chap. 12)

Despite the authorities' promises that the Naxalites would not be abused while in custody, the book is filled with descriptions of horrifying tortures performed on fellow comrades, including Varghese. The comrades were regularly half-dead as a result of the violent attacks by the police. The authorities did everything they could to extinguish the spirits of the Naxalites they were holding. By subverting the official narrative, Ajitha's book becomes more than simply her personal memories. It also becomes an alternative history. We may also talk about how her memoir becomes a mirror of her resistive personality because memory can be considered as a post-past narrative, a kind of archive of memory. Ajitha's prowess as a Naxalite and hers as a writer are complementary. Her spirits have been high since she decided to join the revolutionary group and work for the cause of the underprivileged and against the government's social oppression. Her bold stories in response to widely spread lies remind me of the resistance she faced when she was a Naxalite.

> Didn't the then Chief Minister, the great Marxist teacher, come to know of any of these incidents? They still claim that the police didn't torture anyone associated with the Thalassery- Pulpally revolts, proving again that they lie through their teeth to cling on to positions of power. These same people shed buckets of crocodile tears during the 1975 emergency, when Rajan, the Kozhikode Re-

> gional Engineering College student, was killed in police custody. While one group of politicians made a smoke screen out of the Shah Commission that was set up to enquire into the emergency era atrocities, another group made money out of a series of sob stories termed 'Kakkayam tells its tale.' Their ability to change all tales of tragedies to votes is beyond comparison. They would argue openly that force should not be used against Naxalites and that we should be confronted and defeated politically and ideologically. Yet, away from the public gaze, they betray us to the police. (Ajitha chap. 12)

The prison here becomes a surveillance space where the bodies of dissension are disciplined in different ways of torture. When confronted with harsh truths, powerful authorities always hold the fear of being displaced from their safe-havens. Here, the existing social and political power structures feel threatened and respond forcefully in response to every kind of dissension. Information and misinformation are used to manipulate the emotions of the general public through propaganda. The dissenters are apprehended by emotionally winning the people's allegiance through skillful manipulations of the truth. The jail, therefore, becomes a place of power. To put it another way, the prison is a hegemonic centre that speaks the language of power in every possible way. Due to the denial of public access, it is a safe refuge for punishing dissenters who come their way. Torture, both physical and mental, becomes a weapon of hegemonic discourse. There are class struggles in this prison between the authorities and the 'other' who becomes the oppressed. The Naxalites are transported into this surveillance space of power. Their bodies of dissent go through a harsh process of unmaking dissension from within and the making of obedience from within. Ajitha also claims to have gone through this discipline procedure, but says that it did not work. Ajitha emerges as a winner in every aspect due to her strong opposition to all forms of authority, torture, and power. In her story of resistance, she follows the same pattern as in her life.

Her narrative also maintains the forthright language of a female Naxalite without compromising it. She acts as a revolutionary against the government on one level and as a writer on the other,

giving voice to the hitherto unheard portion of the tale. By capturing her voice from the perspective of a first-hand experience, she reconstructs public memory about the Naxalites. The political comments framed by the authorities during her incarceration were therefore subverted to the truth through her narrative, which becomes a counter-memoir. Ajitha's narrative speaks for those she helped, just as she sacrificed her comforts to help others. Hers is a narrative about oppression presented from the perspective of the oppressed, in which the "I" becomes more than just an individual; it becomes a collective to which she has chosen to lend her voice. So, the memoir can also be seen as a piece of human rights literature from the point of view of someone who has been abused.

Women, Writing, and Agency

Though Ajitha's memoir is mostly about societal power systems, there are traces of gender discourses throughout the story. It is worth noting that while her book is rather mute on gender issues inside the Naxalite movement, the epilogue emerges as a debate on the subject. After her strong comment about gender in the epilogue, we have to read the whole book again, even though the story of her time as a Naxalite does not talk about gender discrimination or gender performativity.

> I knew very well how the movement regarded its women. Those days I couldn't have related with feminist ideas, though in my memoirs I had pointed out many instances when I felt discriminated against for being a woman. The male comrades considered women as slaves and sex objects. Women were never involved in the decision making process. Usually, their opinions were scoffed at and rejected. Yet, those days I considered feminist movements as a means for sexual promiscuity for vain women. (Ajitha chap. 35)

The strong pronouncement in the epilogue paves the way for a gendered reconstruction of the narrative. We never see Ajitha participate in any decision-making processes throughout the Naxalite stories she recounts. Though the Naxalite movement is frequently portrayed as gender-neutral, this is not the reality. We never see Ajitha speak during their sessions, but she is compelled to do whatever the male authority dictates. There is not a single instance of a Naxalite

operation being headed or decided by this strong female revolutionary who had dared enough to decide in her life that she would give up her studies to join the Naxalite movement. When Ajitha is detained alone, she portrays herself as a strong woman, as opposed to when she was part of the gang. Her feminine strength is more apparent before her joining the revolutionary organisation, as well as following her imprisonment by the police. The significant events she quotes and tells are heavily skewed toward male supremacy, not because she is the only female member, but due to unconscious patriarchal deafness to her feminine opinions. It is difficult to swallow someone with strong revolutionary bloodlines, someone who lived a life of protest, someone who skilfully narrated the stories before becoming a woman of quiet mouth throughout the Naxalite activities. Additionally, in the epilogue itself, we see Ajitha talk candidly about Kerala's gendered Naxalite movement while she narrates about participating in the second national conference of feminist organisations that was held in Mumbai in December 1985. She says that meeting fiery feminist leaders like Vibhuti Patel and Veena Shatrugna changed the way she thought about feminism.

> The oppression of women in families and society, the hierarchical power equations in man-woman relationships, the male dominated system and the attacks against women were points of discussion there. The need for autonomous women's liberation movements that could handle gender discrimination, exploitation and oppression without vested interests of any political factions or groups was reiterated. Therefore even while generally accepting class struggles, there was a need to move away from left movements that totally ignored gender paradoxes. (Ajitha chap. 35)

This seems to be a self- sympathetic confession of a lady who wishes that the Naxalite movement was sincerely gender-neutral. The gaps and silences of the memoir are fairly gendered, whether intentionally or unintentionally. The male presence in the revolutionary group is associated with power and domination, but the lone female presence is not adequately recognised for its strength. The settings of admiration for Thalassery- Pulpally assaults are significantly slanted toward the male members, rather than emphasising the female mem-

ber who dared to be. Had it not been for Ajitha's memoir, there is little doubt that her presence would have been ignored or marginalised in the story of Kerala's Naxalite movement. Though Ajitha's book describes the Thalassery-Pulpally occurrences as glorious, Kerala is hardly addressed in the majority of Indian Naxalite tales. And if it was discussed, it morphed into a narrative about a group of men with revolutionary spirit.

Gender discourse is also reflected during the period of police detention. Not only were the tortures carried out on a body of dissension, but they also happened to be on a female body of dissension. The patriarchal mentality of the authorities is evident in several instances throughout the narrative.

> They came to me several times in the night in obvious attempts to rape me. Somehow, they did not want to open the lock-up, get inside and rape me. So they kept calling me to the door, but I did not go near the iron bars of the lock up. My heart was filled with aversion. I could gather from the way they treated us that the police were a depraved lot. There was no end to their stock of abuses. I could not even understand some of them. It taught me how gross their views on women were. Years later, I was told that I was saved from rape in custody by Gauriamma, the then revenue minister, who called up the station officers to insist that it should not happen. (Ajitha chap. 12)

The freedom the women felt as a result of taking part in the movement and the way they romanticised it is both good things. Ultimately, what emerges is a significant critique of the movement's gender and sexual politics, which are as inextricably linked to the 'declassification' of urban, middle-class male participants as they are to the movement's ignoring of the unique needs of women. While the Naxalites fight for exceptional political causes, including the oppression of dalit and adivasi women, and many middle-class women join the movement in search of liberation from bourgeois family life, the movement's everyday life reproduces the patriarchal morality of upper caste and middle class India. Not only did the movement have caste and class inequalities, but it also meant that women were often used as mothers, spouses, and widows, and that sexual assault and

other forms of oppression of women were often not talked about in the movement. There is not even a glimmer of resentment towards Ajitha's being partially stripped and exposed publicly. When she is referred to as a whore, there is no evidence of a revolutionary spirit in opposition to it. It might be a completely unintentional utterance in the final phrase of her book, emphasising the term 'gender' in the societal issues for which she intends to work. She appears to sigh recalling in her mind the hushed experiences of gender discrimination that she had experienced. "I had the opportunity to participate in all these people's agitations, contributing in my small way to usher in a new better world without gender, social or economic exploitation and discrimination" (Ajitha chap. 35).

In written form, a woman's experience cannot be interpreted just like that of an autonomous individual. Subjects are generated when many layers of discourse and power structures collide. As a result, the subject's agency must constantly evolve inside the power structures that create her and can never exist autonomously. Women's subjectivities as agents must be viewed through the lens of their everyday encounters with their existential conditions as varied ways of subject-making. The women who join rebel organisations may engage in acts of resistance as their subjectivities are shaped by patriarchal, class, ethnic, and/or armed group dynamics. As a result, their agency must be characterised as 'non-autonomous.' This is different from the liberal view of agency, which says that it only applies to autonomous entities and the actions of sovereign, intelligent people. Non-sovereign agency as a concept enables the identification of some acts as agentive even when they are not conducted by an autonomous consciousness and are influenced by power systems and discourse. It helps us move beyond dichotomies like agent vs. system, resistance vs. dominance, and agency vs. being a victim.

The earliest stories of ex-women insurgents provide information on the movement's gendered role for women. Women cadre members are continually exposed to hazardous situations, since they must always be vigilant for threats to their bodies. Even fighting fatigues and weaponry are unable to protect the feminine body from the inquisitive gaze of assailants ranging from close Naxalite colleagues to

government officials. Women being inducted into revolutionary movements was a new trend, since women were previously employed as sex slaves to conduct household tasks and tend to the ill. The need for a gendered analysis of the movement comes from the many stories of sexual and gendered exploitation of women Maoists told by ex-insurgent women in interviews for news stories or memoirs like Krishna Bandyopadhyay's *Naxalbari Politics: A Feminist Narrative* or Shobha Mandi's *Ek Maowadi ki Diary.*

The feminist revisionist counter-discourses are critical papers for understanding the movement from the inside. While the personal accounts do not have to be taken as historical facts, they do provide an alternative retelling of the mainstream discourse. By examining such life histories, one acquires an understanding of how hidden spaces and institutions work. There are just a few of these accounts available due to a lack of appropriate recording, since some are murdered before having the opportunity to relate their experience, while others who can are insufficiently educated and do not take literary activities seriously. For example, Bandyopadhyay's book notes how, even though a considerable number of women joined the movement in the 1970s, no substantial position for women was defined. Women were instructed to help by disseminating information, caring for the ill, and providing shelter and food. She continues by stating that, despite the women's dedication, the party leadership was comprised entirely of male members, which resulted in its policies being inevitably patriarchal. Ajitha too recalls such a frank statement in an interview: "My initial task was to prepare materials for educating the rank and file. I used to translate and distribute almost all the materials we used to get from China. We also formed a study group called 'Nangal'(We), which was very popular in the Fifties" ("Rediff On The NeT?: The Rediff Interview: Ajitha").

However, Ajitha leaves the element out of her narrative till the epilogue, except for the gap that becomes self-explored. While she remains silent on the movement's gender discrimination, she philosophically speaks out against the women's harassment she witnesses in jails. She turns into a biased writer who fearlessly speaks out against gender inequalities in society while obligingly remaining silent about the same issue within the movement to which she has devoted her all.

> There is a striking difference in society's approach towards men and women over sex. A man, even if he sleeps with innumerable women, remains respectable. He is never looked down upon. On the contrary, it is dismissed as something very normal to a man. But, if a hapless young girl is betrayed by somebody and gets pregnant, her family simply disowns her. She will be forced to walk the streets or commit suicide. Society never gives her a second chance or helps her to put behind her a mistake she had committed either knowingly or unknowingly. I came to know from observing these women from close quarters that prostitution is the most venomous and naked form of crime against women. (Ajitha chap. 13)

Ajitha also talks about how she had thrown away the things that made her a woman, like her dresses and jewellery.

> I used to love jewellery earlier and all kinds of adornments like silk saris and bright clothes. But as the influence of the new world perception grew within me I began to feel that all these embellishments were meaningless. I understood that women projected themselves as commodities by showing off their beauty this way. (Ajitha chap. 2)

Women were first recruited as cooks or domestic helpers in Orissa's Naxal revolt. It was not until after 1999 that these women began to assume confrontational positions. Women were inspired to participate in field operations by women Naxalite cadres in Andhra Pradesh, where they had been active participants since the movement's start. Another way for Naxalite party members to exercise patriarchal dominance is to exert control over these women's sexuality. Marriage is viewed as a barrier to the rebels' mission, which contributes to their exploitative conduct toward female members. Ajitha reminisces how her Naxalite father, Kunnikkal Narayanan was dead against her falling in love with Varghese. The sole reason for his opposition was this patriarchal ideology that the Naxalites held.

> Father had discouraged all talks and thoughts of marriage while I was involved in the movement. His attitude was: If my marriage meant harm to the movement, it was better that I remained unmarried. I was in love with comrade Varghese and wanted to marry him…

> …There was no opportunity to exchange any sentiments other than our revolutionary ardour. Twice he had come to meet me when I was out on bail; that was the time when he was underground, hiding from the police. Ma was with me on those two occasions. I had let Ma know of what I thought of comrade Varghese and she in turn had sounded it out with father. He was dead against the idea. "You'll not only ruin yourself, but also comrade Varghese, who is very important for the cause", were his exact words. For me, those words had the ring of finality. (Ajitha chap. 35)

The female combatants in their battle dress defy conventional wisdom in several ways, yet they have yet to triumph over patriarchy. For women, it is almost as if they are fighting a double battle, as they must demonstrate their dedication to their party while also carving out a role for themselves. Female fighters ultimately endure the brunt of violence perpetrated by both their male opponents and state troops, as sexual assault is the ultimate weapon used by both. Thus, with several atrocity perpetrators, these ladies face daily struggles. The sexual division of labour has remained constant, despite significant changes in the duties assigned to women and the right to bear guns. Instances of sexual exploitation of ex-Naxalite women have not ceased. Surprisingly, another way the party exerts control over its female comrades is by ensuring that they live up to the status and image of a martyr's widow if and when their lover is assassinated. Despite its claim to be a classless and casteless organisation, the Naxalite structure is a carbon copy of the prevailing power structures against which they took up arms in the first place. So, it is not wrong to say that it is like a parallel power system where women have to prove themselves over and over again to get the position they deserve.

Conclusion

Kerala's Naxalbari: Ajitha: Memoirs of a Young Revolutionary is a Naxalite discourse that challenges state and patriarchal ideologies from a female Naxalite's perspective. The memoir focuses on writing as a form of resistance, echoing Ajitha's own Naxalite existence. The book discusses her resistance in several layers. Her existence signals resistance. Secondly, she defies official narratives. Ajitha's memoir develops a counter-cultural history, an alternative his-

tory, making space for a counter-cultural narrative. The study presents Ajitha's narrative as a feminist revisionist counter-memory on social injustice, gender oppression, and the prevailing social system. The memoir challenges the official truth-making monopoly with facts regarding the Naxalite attacks, her descriptions of custodial tortures and rape attempts, and the politics set for her by the state. Her epilogue points out her purposeful or inadvertent silence on gender performativity in the movement. In the past, and in some cases today, the Maoist system treated women like a patriarchal society. The study thus explores major themes and locations through the prism of Ajitha's counter-narrative. The goal was to see how individual memoirs contradict official historiography by telling the 'othered' side of the narrative.

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