# From the Vantage Point of Insiders: Analysing Counter-Memorial Narratives of the Naxalite Movement

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The Naxalite movement, which emerged in the 1960s in the heartland of rural Bengal, was an armed peasant uprising that later defined the course of political resistance in India. This paper attempts to explore the concept of counter-narratives and counter-memory and their significance in forming an alternative discourse that often disrupts the sanctity of master narratives. N. Venugopal's collection of essays, *Understanding Maoists: Notes of a Participant Observer from Andhra Pradesh (2013)*, is a comprehensive history of the Naxalite movement in Andhra Pradesh from the perspective of an insider who had firsthand experiences of the movement. Mundoor Ravunni's Biography *Mundoor Ravunni: Thadavarayum Porattavum* (Prison and Protest 2015) by Madhulamani narrates the lived experiences of a former Naxalite. By examining alternative perspectives and challenging established viewpoints, both narratives seek to uncover hidden layers of truth and provide a more nuanced understanding of the movement's evolution, ideologies, and impact on society. This paper attempts to study how their recollections of the movement and their past become a counter-memory that challenges the popular or collective memory of the Naxalite movement. The works document unrecorded and unreported police atrocities, violence, and severe human rights violations. The books shed light on hidden layers

of history, enriching our perception of this transformative period in India's political resistance.

**Keywords:** naxalism, counter-narratives, violence, police repression, alternative history, counter-memory, public memory

## Introduction

Discourse refers to a structured body of knowledge or ideas that influences how we perceive and understand the world. It is a product of the specific social and historical context in which it arises, generating both knowledge and meaning. Foucault describes discourse as "ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity, and power relations that inhere in such knowledge and relations between them" (Weedon,1997, p. 108). Discourses are shaped and disseminated through the exertion of power within a given social structure, and they hold significant importance in establishing the legitimacy of knowledge and truth within that discourse. The constant repetition of certain discourses leads to their standardisation and acceptance while simultaneously marginalising alternative interpretations and perspectives. This paper delves into the covert engagement of the State in constructing and sustaining a discourse and ideological framework that label the Naxalite movement as a violent terrorist organisation, thereby justifying the ruthless killing of Naxalites by the State. The paper analyses a collection of essays by N. Venugopal, a participant observer of the movement in Andhra Pradesh and the biography of Mundoor Ravunni, a former Naxalite in Kerala in order to examine how insiders' memory challenges or questions the legitimacy of the public/popular memory surrounding the Naxalite/Maoist movement.

The State and mainstream media play a crucial role in shaping a narrative that becomes deeply ingrained in the collective consciousness. Started as a peasant uprising against the exploitative nature of feudalism in the 1960s in West Bengal, it became a movement that shook the political imagination of an entire nation. Due to its anti-state nature, the State and its law enforcement agencies have consistently tried to suppress the Naxalite movement from its very beginning. Naxalism has been portrayed as a significant menace to

the nation's security, progress, and advancement. In 2006, the then Prime Minister of India, Manmohan Singh, remarked that Maoism was "the single biggest internal security challenge ever faced by India" (Ministry of Home Affairs, Govt. of India).

Individual and Collective memory are two intricate concepts studied under the field of memory studies. Individual memory deals with the private recollections of an individual whereas collective memory refers to the shared pool of knowledge and information in the memories of members of a given community. Collective memory can be shared, passed on, and constructed by small and large groups (Whitehead, 2008, p.158). To quote Tanja Bosch (2016), "The concept of collective memory rests upon the assumption that every social group develops memory of its past which allows it to preserve and pass along its self-image" (p.3). Pierre Nora (1996) noted that the representations of collective memory are those that have been selected by those in power. It is both a tool and an object of power (p.181). No collective memory is pure or innocent in its essence. Official agencies shape memory in such a way to suit their purposes and they select only those which best serve a national interest. The state as an engineer of public memory constructs memory through its various agencies and policies and such memories are kept alive through certain practices like commemorations, erecting statues, memorials, etc. whereas radical and counter memories are sidelined. In this regard, the public memory of the Naxalite movement too cannot be perceived as unbiased and sacrosanct. Private memories of individuals who had first-hand experiences of the movement may have a different version of the story to tell, which often stands contradictory to the official narrative and popular memory. Such Counter-narratives problematize the authenticity of official or dominant narratives by offering alternative perspectives. The dominant narratives "serve as a blueprint for all stories…through which we comprehend not only the stories of others but crucially of ourselves as well" (Bamberg and Andrews, 2004, p. 1). Counter-narrative discourses "offer resistance to, either implicitly or explicitly, dominant cultural narratives" (Bamberg and Andrews, 2004, p. 1). In this regard, the recollections of people associated with the Naxalite movement provide a counter-narrative reading of the

movement that challenges the official narratives in many aspects. Stories from within the movement are, as Alpha Shah puts it, "…in the long run, historical artefacts that document the continuities and changes and experiences and thoughts of the people within the movement" (2018, p. 286).

Published in 2013, N. Venugopal's book *Understanding Maoists: Notes of a Participant Observer from Andhra Pradesh* is a compilation of his published and unpublished essays on the history of the Naxalite movement in Andhra Pradesh during his time. Mundoor Ravunni's biography, *Mundoor Ravunni: Thadavarayum Porattavum* (2015) by Madhulamani is an account of his life as one of the early members of the Naxalite movement in Kerala. M.L.Ravunni was born on 10th April in a village called Mundoor in Palakkad district in Kerala. He started his political career as a devoted member of the Communist Party of India (CPI). Then he joined CPIM, after the party split into two factions. After the Naxalbari uprising, he became a member of CPI (ML) and followed the path of Naxalbari. Both texts include personal recollections of the authors' past as members of the movement. The act of remembrance allows them to relive the moments of revolution as close witnesses of historically important events. In the preface to his book, Venugopal explains his role as a chronicler of events, "My role as a chronicler might have added, subtracted, ignored, suppressed, distorted, threw a new light on the various obtaining aspects of the times, but nevertheless, those were the 'times' a changing,' and I was a minuscule part of that cauldron" (2013, p.8). The author describes himself as a participant and observer of the Naxalite movement. His narrative serves as a counter-memory to the State's dominant narrative that often portrays the movement as a violent terrorist outfit. State narrative is always silent about police violence and several state-sponsored murders.

At the beginning of his work, Venugopal explicitly expresses his purpose, emphasizing that narrating the story of the Naxalite movement is a pressing necessity at the present moment:

Thus, there is always a felt need to understand the events and processes that made this formidable and continuing revolutionary base in the region possible. Indeed, the story of the Naxalite/Maoist movement in Andhra Pradesh needs to be told in detail to understand its all-pervasive importance. Unfortunately, even though there is an immense need, there is also a dearth of commensurate literature on the subject, particularly in English. A comprehensive history of the four-decade-old Maoist movement in Andhra Pradesh is yet to be written. The literature available on the subject in English, besides the ill-informed journalistic quick cookies and occasional references in much larger accounts with a different focus, is restricted to one or two academic works and one police version. An activist's insider account or a sympathetic observer's narration from outside is conspicuously absent. (2013, p.8)

The State showed little interest in the revolutionary movement's socioeconomic motives and sought to suppress it using military force. The Ministry of Home Affairs, Govt. of India's official website (n.d) has listed The Communist Party of India (Maoist) and all its affiliated parties among the banned organisations. It reads, "The CPI (Maoist) party is the major left-wing extremist outfit responsible for a majority of incidents of violence and killing of civilians and security forces and has been included in the schedule of Terrorist Organisations under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967"(LWE Section). The Ministry has a specialised division called the Left-Wing Extremism Division, primarily responsible for addressing incidents related to Left Wing Extremism (LWE). According to official statistics from 2004 to 2020, LWE has caused the deaths of 8,380 individuals in India, with the majority being civilians, particularly tribal people who have been labeled as police informants (Ministry of Home Affairs, n.d, LWE section). The government asserts that this movement is a violent organisation with intentions to overthrow the democratically elected government and seize power. Official records tend to depict Naxals as outsiders who do not belong to the country and manipulate India's poor and uneducated masses to wage war against their own government. However, these narratives often overlook the fact that the movement originated within the nation as a response to address

the injustices and shortcomings present within its democratic governance system (Ministry of Home Affairs, n.d, LWE Section).

## Countering Naxalism as Anti-developmental

According to T J Demos (2012) counter-memory designates "a practice of memory formation that is social and political, one that counters to the official histories of governments, mainstream mass media, and the society of the spectacle" (Sites of Collective Memory Para.6). While analyzing Rudolfo Anaya's novel *Bless Me Ultima* from the perspective of ethnic American counter-memory, George Lipsitz states, (2001)"…Counter memory surpasses history and myth, that it transcends the false closures of linear history and the destructive ruptures and divisions of myth to create an active memory which draws upon the pluralities of the past and present to illuminate the opportunities of the future" (p.226). Venugopal's and Ravunni's mnemonic writings aim to provide a counter-memorial narrative that destabilises the erroneous journalistic and governmental narratives. The narratives undermine the state's attempt to present Naxalites as external forces inimical to India's economic growth and development. Venugopal's book chronicles a vivid picture of a post-independent Andhra Pradesh. While assessing the development process of fifty years in Andhra Pradesh, even the apparent development does not seem to have percolated down and spread evenly. Both the Nehruvian 'trickle-down model' and Chandrababu Naidu's 'increasing the cake model' have failed in reaching the fruits of development to the poor in the State. To elucidate his point, Venugopal cites the case of Hyderabad, a city that has earned an unenviable place as the corporate health capital of the country. At the same time, thousands of helpless adivasis had to die within a thousand miles of that capital with ordinary fever and malaria. He writes about this contradiction:

> Under the very nose of the hi-tech city where ultra-modern science and technology, including nanotechnology, prosper, primitive human sacrifices and witchcraft go unchecked. Solemn proclamations of the sophisticated rule of law on the one hand and a series of extrajudicial murders on the other go hand in hand. This contradiction symbolises the unevenness, ups, and downs, and

anarchy in Andhra Pradesh's social life, and all this gets cultural expression. (2013, p. 22)

Ravunni also in his biography contends that ill governance and social inequalities played a major role in the birth of the movement in Kerala. The social conditions that existed in the northern states of Kerala, particularly in Kannur and Wayanad were conducive to a revolution. The majority of the demography was comprised of weavers and beedi workers. These laborers were underpaid and poverty-stricken. Most of them suffered from deadly diseases like tuberculosis. People began to lose their faith in the communist leadership. Slave culture was another evil that existed in different parts of the Wayanad district. These slaves belonged to the Adivasi community and they used to work in the fields of the landed gentry for a meager share of rice. The slaves were bought and sold for five or ten rupees like cattle in slave markets during festival seasons in Wayanad. They were supposed to work for their master or landlord throughout the year. The Adivasi slaves used to live in small huts on the landlord's property and had no right of ownership over the land in which they lived. Tribals and tenant farmers were subjected to ruthless exploitation by the landlord class (Madhulamany, 2015, p.15). In the year 1967, the state experienced severe famine as landlords used to hoard food grains in large quantities and smuggled them in goods vehicles. Landlords, civil supplies officers, and police were part of this smuggling. The aforementioned social conditions and the discontent among the members of the communist party in Kerala against the party leadership and its revisionist policies prompted a group of revolutionaries like Kunnikkal Narayanan, Mundoor Ravunni, A.Varghese, and others to follow the path of Naxalbari. According to Anne Whitehead, "Memory is concerned with the personal and is inherently bound to identity. Through memory the past of the individual can be revived or made actual again, in the sense of being brought into consciousness" (p.7). In this regard, Ravunni's biography is a trip down memory lane in which he recollects the startling details of important Naxalite actions; the rationale, and consequences. According to both narratives, the impoverished social conditions that existed in Andhra Pradesh and

Kerala during the time had contributed to the birth of the movement in the respective states.

Venugopal recollects the evil influence of the caste system that existed in Andhra Pradesh during the 1970s and 80s. Despite the State's overall development and progress over the years, deep-rooted issues of caste discrimination and the marginalisation of the poor and underprivileged persist. Post-Andhra formation, the tribals were also subjected to untold suffering. Following this, the district plenum in October 1968 resolved to launch an armed struggle. Thus, the famous Srikakulam tribal armed struggle was officially launched on November 25, 1968. Naxalites were at the forefront of taking a stand for the tribals. "The Naxalites organised the tribals, gave them leadership and made them take up struggles against the traders, landlords, forest officials and police" (2013, p.34). Like in Naxalbari, Venugopal attributes the reason for which the Naxalite movement emerged in places like Srikakulam and Telangana to the heavy exploitation and oppression of the tribals.

Venugopal's and Ravunni's memories about the movement challenge the widely held misconception that the state and media perpetuate that the Naxalite movement is primarily focused on advocating and resorting to violence. Venugopal writes: "Though it is true that counter-violence has a major role in the ideology and practice of the Naxalite movement, reducing it to that single factor would tantamount to denying the radical questions it raises and the social transformation it envisages" (2013, p.37). His narrative contradicts the official report, portraying Naxalites as anti-development and impeding the region's economic progress. His account highlights that the movement began as an attempt to address social inequalities. It has sparked fresh inquiries, alternative thought processes, and innovative solutions for the betterment of the people.

The struggles for land led by the Naxalites began in the late 1960s and witnessed massive participation from 1977 to 1992. These struggles were so widespread that they covered the entire state. The government's actions that followed these struggles, including legislation in favour of the protection of tribals from land alienation (1970),

prescribing a land ceiling (1973), the distribution of government land to the landless, particularly Dalits (1977), and getting lands occupied by the landless poor registered (1990), were in direct response to the questions raised by the Naxalite movement (Venugopal, 2013, p.37). The steps taken by Naxalites in addressing the question of land and its equal distribution among the landless made a severe impact on society. The paper "Land Distribution- Development of Agriculture: Our Perspective" submitted by the Naxalites parties was radical. It argued to eliminate all the absentee landlords if they had any other source of income. The paper's recommendations to initiate land distribution with Dalits and to register the allocated land in women's names were given due consideration and subsequently incorporated into the government's land distribution programme.

Venugopal gives a long list of social issues where the interference of Naxalites enlarged the scope of the struggles for livelihood in Andhra Pradesh in terms of aspirations for a better life. Naxalites were radical in redefining the scope of their existence by actively involving themselves in issues like freedom from oppression, gender equality, and fighting against all forms of subjugation. Venugopal recounts many instances where Naxalites' involvement has taken the movement beyond its collectively constructed definition of a terrorist outfit:

> They are radical in redefining their scope and their spread across all sections of society. Whether it was the struggle against the rape of Raneeja Bee by police in Hyderabad or the rape of a servant maid by the son of a mining officer in Ballampalli, or a protest for raising the wages of tendu-leaf pickers in the forests of north Telangana, or a struggle for the self-respect of Dalits, or a struggle for better wages for agricultural labourers or a students' struggle against price rise or a struggle against price rise or a struggle against liquor or a struggle against the ill-effects of globalisation and privatisation or a struggle for remunerative prices for farmers- name any struggle, the influence of the Naxalite movement is there and similar movements in other states can be compared to identify the radical nature of these struggles in Andhra Pradesh. (2013, p.39)

While speaking about the Kongad annihilation action by the Naxalites in Kerala in which a landlord was beheaded by the revolutionaries, Ravunni talks about the changes that the action had brought into the society. He goes on recounting the changes that the annihilation strategy brought about in the socio-political realms of Kerala. As an ideological discourse, annihilation was an assault on the last vestiges of feudalism. There has been no slave labour in Valliyoorkavu in the Wayanad district since the Thirunnelli, Thrissileri actions. Tribal children started attending school and the landlords began to give payments in cash instead of grains. The government was forced to implement land reforms by any means. According to Ravunni, the impetus for this was CPI(ML)'s anti-feudal protests. As stated by Grow Vasu, a fellow comrade of Ravunni, "The question that they [Naxalites] put before the landlords was whether they wanted their heads or the land" (Madhulamany, 2015, p.66).

Whatever the professed ideologies and slogans of the various social movements, all of them were directly or indirectly influenced by the Naxalite movement. It is impossible to imagine the history of Andhra Pradesh without referring to the history of the Naxalite movement. The movement has influenced all walks of life in Andhra Pradesh. Evolved from the ongoing tribal-peasant movement in Srikakulam and inspired by the ideological path of Naxalbari, the Naxalite movement in Andhra Pradesh envisaged a thorough social transformation. It later spread to several small and large villages, blowing the wind of revolution until its suppression within four years. Like in any other state, the movement also attracted the attention of all sections of society, especially the middle-class intelligentsia. The first phase was suppressed with an unprecedented onslaught, leading to the extra-judicial killing of more than 400 comrades and legal proceedings against thousands of tribals, sympathisers, and activists. The movement resurfaced within no time as the governmental measures intended to wean tribals from the struggle path failed to address the fundamental issues.

**Countering Naxalism as a Violent - terrorist outfit**

To counter the general assertion that Naxalism is inherently inclined towards violence and hence poses the most significant security challenge, Venugopal presents a detailed account of the violence perpetrated by the state and its repressive apparatus on its citizens. His book delves into the historical backdrop of police brutality and unlawful killings in Andhra Pradesh. He challenges the state's claim by giving a comprehensive record of state-sponsored violence and countless extrajudicial executions orchestrated by the oppressive state machinery. In India, the police are granted authority for crime investigation and law enforcement but not for meting out punishment, as that falls under the jurisdiction of the law courts. Even during investigations, the police are not allowed to keep suspects in custody for more than 24 hours. It is crucial to understand that the police do not have the right to take a person's life in their custody. If an ordinary citizen commits a homicide, the culprit would be subjected to the legal procedures established by the law. This applies without any exceptions, even if the perpetrator is a public servant or part of the law enforcement authority.

According to Venugopal, there have been more than 2000 incidents over the past 38 years in which over 3000 alleged Naxalites, their sympathisers, and 1000 innocent individuals were killed in encounters. He claims that 90 percent of these were fake encounters. Venugopal proceeds to provide a detailed account of several instances of fake encounters carried out by the Andhra Pradesh police. He highlights the cases of K. Parsaiah and M. Ravindra Reddy, activists of the CPI (ML). They were shot dead a few minutes after the magistrate had signed their remand papers. Two of the CPI (ML)'s organising committee members, Pingili Reddy and Kaatam Saraiah, were taken into custody while sleeping at their lawyer's place. They were allegedly killed in an encounter about 60 kilometers away from Warangal. Numerous individuals were forcefully taken from their residences and workplaces and reportedly killed in what authorities labelled "encounters." These incidents raise serious concerns about the authenticity of these encounters and the circumstances under which these deaths occurred. Innocent civilians and social activists

considered by the state to be potential threats are being killed and unfairly labelled as Maoists. Once branded with this term, any attempt to raise their voice in defense of their democratic and constitutional rights is silenced and disregarded. The fake encounter killings of a few Naxalites, namely Nalla Adi Reddy, Arramreddy, and others, expose the police conspiracy. Venugopal writes:

> The case has all the ingredients of a covert operation: treachery, arrest, torture, cold-blooded murder, killing witnesses to tamper with evidence, false claims to receive gallantry awards, charges, and counter-charges by police officials themselves. The three central committee members of the CPI (ML) were arrested in the afternoon of December 1, 1999, in Bangalore and brought to Koyyur forest, where an encounter was stage-managed. In order to show the encounter as a local affair, a local youth was also killed, accorded the posthumous distinction of being a Naxalite, and given a *nom de guerre* as Arun…At least three senior police officials claimed credit for participating in the "encounter" of the top leaders and received *the Shourya Chakra* Gallantry award in 2003. (2013, pp.193-194)

An unrelenting wave of police repression swept through the Warangal district following a sub-inspector's death in an encounter. Many civilians were apprehended and subjected to severe mistreatment and torture. Venugopal writes about the dark times: "All the educational institutions and hostels were raided. Everybody who was suspected of having remote leanings toward revolutionary politics was arrested...Sujata, a final year postgraduate student of the REC College, Warangal, was arrested at her hometown Kakinada...they stripped her and made her parade in the streets" (2013, p.205). He recounts stories of police atrocities that have remained unreported by the mainstream media and undocumented in official records.

Ravunni's memoir also describes police atrocities in detail. Police employed third-degree torture methods to get information from the captured Naxalites. Ravunni was arrested by Kerala Police for his involvement in Thalassery-Pulppally police station attack. He

narrates in detail how he was tortured in police custody under the supervision of Jayaram Padikal:

> Then I was dragged and my legs and hands were tied. Police started to roll a roller over my legs. Kerala police were notorious for this mode of punishment. The victim was tied to a wooden bench with his hands and legs tied under the bench. A policeman would stand on the knees of the victim. A heavy iron roller would be rolled over his legs. One could not stand the pain when it is rolled down the knees. The sound of flesh being peeled off from the bones could be heard. (Madhulamani, 2015, p.86)

He recollects another incident where he was made to lie on the floor of the police van on the way from Karivaloor to Thiruvananthapuram. Throughout the journey, a policeman with ammunition boots stood on Ravunni's foot (p.86). Ravunni justifies violent forms of political resistance. He writes, "There have always been misconceptions about the use of force in general. The state has always used brutal force against popular resistance. What is the alternative when the state employs violence? ... Naturally people's resistance and violence become inevitable for survival" (Madhulamany, 2015, p.122).

**Conclusion**

Venugopal's and Ravunni's accounts portray Naxalites as Indian citizens who have become disillusioned with society's prevailing disparities and injustices. Both contend that the genesis of this movement can be attributed to the shortcomings of the system, serving as a manifestation of the people's reaction to the exploitation and suppression faced by India's impoverished and vulnerable masses. According to the authors, acquiring an insider's perspective has become crucial for an alternative narrative on the history of the Naxalite uprising. Personal recollections of the lives lived by these revolutionaries help the general public to understand hitherto untold versions of events that happened that no official record spoke about or no media reported. Venugopal's chronicle aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of the Naxalite movement by probing the motivations and lived experiences of those involved in Andhra Pradesh,

whereas Ravunni's account gives details regarding the inception, growth, and the demise of the movement in Kerala. Thus, their accounts become a counter-memorial narrative. Both narratives seek to illuminate the intricate interplay between social, economic, and political factors that led to the movement's birth in their respective states. Through these alternative discourses, the writers aim to challenge existing stereotypes and misconceptions surrounding the Naxalites, fostering a deeper appreciation for the underlying grievances that fueled their activism. The narratives emphasise the significance of recognising the discontent and grievances that underpin the Naxalite movement, as merely dismissing them as 'insurgents' or 'rebels' overlooks the genuine issues faced by large sections of Indian society. By portraying Naxalites as disenchanted citizens who try to address systemic injustices, the authors deconstruct the image of Naxalites in the collective consciousness as terrorists and anti-nationals.

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