

Novelists' Psychology in Novels Written in the Context of the Naxalbari Movement

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Abstract:

This article examines the psychological stances and ideological perspectives of Bengali novelists writing in the context of the Naxalbari movement between the mid-1960s and 1980s. Grounded in post-independence political instability and communist ideology, Bengali fiction captured the turmoil experienced by middle-class youth and rural agrarian communities during this revolutionary period. Analyzing key works by prominent authors—including Mahasweta Devi, Samresh Basu, Swarna Mitra, and Nabarun Bhattacharya—the study categorizes novelists into four psychological orientations: negative depiction, empathetic experience, ideological mission, and analytical balance. Through their thematic choices and characterizations, these writers either endorsed the revolution, critiqued its methods, or maintained artistic neutrality. Ultimately, the study demonstrates how political upheaval reshaped Bengali literature and how creative fiction critically evaluated the movement's enduring legacy.

Keywords: Naxalbari Movement, Bengali Political Novels, Novelists' Psychology, Ideological Conflict, Class Consciousness, Post-Independence Literature, Revolutionary Fiction.

1. Introduction

In post-independence India, particularly between 1966 and 1987, an unstable atmosphere emerged in the country's political environment. Rapid and dramatic political transformations took place. On one hand, the National Congress was displaced from power, giving way to the formation of the United Front by left-wing parties to assume governance; on the other hand, the Naxalbari movement arose and expanded. Within this timeframe, significant events occurred in swift succession: the fall of the United Front ministry, the return of Congress to power, the declaration of a nationwide Emergency, and finally, the country's sigh of relief as it emerged from that period of turmoil.

Politics is not an isolated subject existing outside human life; it is an entity born from and energized by life itself. Since human life and its underlying society form core elements of literature, politics inevitably becomes a prominent theme within literary works. This was particularly true in the 20th century—a era shaped by two World Wars, numerous violent and non-violent anti-colonial liberation movements in India, and anti-fascist and anti-imperialist uprisings. As the tide of newly emerging communist thought from Russia intensified and reached Indian shores, politics naturally established itself as a foundational component of Indian, and specifically Bengali, literature.

Roughly nineteen to twenty years after independence, Bengali novels shifted their direction in response to changing times. During this period, several political novels were authored, centred around social problems and crises. The intensity of the human liberation struggle affected every sphere of life. Consequently,

during the colonial era, activities against foreign oppression were not confined to a single political clique or restricted to politically astute individuals; they resonated across individuals, families, and society at large—embodying a healthy, rational political awakening. Literature was actively utilized as a vital instrument for articulating political demands. Like writers in other literary genres, Bengali fiction writers deeply embraced the anti-British liberation movement. A creative storyteller can seamlessly implant complex political dynamics into the minds of conscious readers and at the core of national life.¹

2. Background and Political Landscape

It is worth recalling that before independence, political consciousness was actively expressed across the country through direct movements. Post-independence, its form naturally evolved. Prior to independence, all political actions were directed against imperialism and colonialism, coming to an end when freedom was achieved. However, when economic and social responsibilities fell upon native political leaders, their capitalist habits inherited from British rule gradually morphed into another form of domestic oppression. Marxism emerged as a voice of protest against this. Political parties and intellectuals aligned with communist ideology grew increasingly vocal in demanding social, economic, political, and cultural freedom. Against this backdrop, the political movements of the era found vivid reflection in contemporary political novels.

These rapidly changing and severe political realities were portrayed to varying degrees in Bengali literature. In fact, from the mid-1960s through the 1970s, educated middle-class youth were the primary victims of such political turmoil, party clashes, and mass killings. Middle-class individuals became deeply entangled in rebellions marked by intense ideological conflicts among political factions. A central question facing writers—both consciously and subconsciously—was how to represent this middle-class political participation within literature when bourgeois economic and social structures deeply permeated every layer of society.²

The answers to these questions can be discerned through the themes, character designs, authorial perspectives, and progressive concepts presented in the novels of that period. Evaluating these elements reveals the overarching design and context of the novels written during this era.

3. Evolving Perspective in Political Novels

Thus, in the novels of the 1960s and 1970s, politics was consciously integrated to craft cohesive, engaging narratives for readers. During this timeframe, writers acutely aware of both politics and art—such as Samarendra Basu, Mahasweta Devi, and Debesh Roy—brought about a noticeable transformation in the genre of the Bengali political novel.

My discussion focuses on the psychologist/mind set of novelists writing against the backdrop of the Naxalbari movement: how political turmoil and socio-economic dynamics influenced Bengali novel writing, how the complexities of the era affected Bengali novelists, and how national political movements were reflected in their works. Numerous timeless novels were created around this movement.

The central slogan of the Naxal movement was 'Turn the decade of the seventies into the decade of liberation.' Although this call did not achieve its ultimate goal and the wall writings have long faded, the memory of the Naxal movement has not been forgotten by politics or history. At the core of the Naxal

¹ Banerjee, Sumanta, *In the Wake of Naxalbari: A History of the Naxalite Movement in India*, Subarnarekha, 1980, pp. 21

² Singh, Prakash, *The Naxal Movement in India*, Rupa & Co., 2016, pp. 118

movement lay the rise of political thought as a reaction against social injustice and inequality. The origins of this 20th-century political movement run deep within Bengali heritage.³

Regarding the history of the Naxal movement in Bengal, it must be viewed within the general context of the broader left-wing movement. Following the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, the communist movement captured global attention, and India was no exception. The core premise of the Russian socialist revolution was societal transformation to eliminate social inequality, replacing capitalist and exploitative structures with an egalitarian society. It was believed that such a change could only be achieved through violent means—a process termed revolution.

While Marx focused his analysis primarily on the working class, leaving the peasantry largely unaddressed, his theories were extensible to agrarian communities. The Communist Party of India (CPI) originally emerged with this orientation.

The peasants of Naxalbari who joined anti-feudal (anti-jotedar) and anti-state uprisings belonged predominantly to tribal communities. Consequently, the movement possessed strong ideological intensity and quickly assumed an all-India character at the intersection of agrarian issues and left-wing ideology. The synthesis of community consciousness and class consciousness opened the pathway for a broader movement and revolution.

No single movement achieves universal acceptance. For instance, Gandhiji's boycott of foreign goods was not supported in Rabindranath Tagore's novel 'Ghare Baire' (The Home and the World), nor was the terrorist movement endorsed in Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay's 'Dhatri Debata'. Similarly, among novelists who wrote during or after the Naxal movement, some expressed support, others criticized it, some artistic works opposed it, while certain authors maintained an intellectually deliberate silence.

4. Categorisation of Novelists by Literary Approach

(a). **Negative Depiction:** One group of novelists highlighted aspects of the Naxal movement that generated a negative impression among readers.

(b). **Empathetic Experience:** A second group felt the movement from within, valuing the helplessness, agony, and dedicated struggle of the insurgents. Key figures in this group include Swarna Mitra and Mahasweta Devi.

(c). **Ideological Mission:** A third category of novelists took up the pen with a mission to present accurate facts and spread the passion and dreams of the revolutionaries throughout society.

(d). **Analytical Balance:** A fourth category presented a nuanced portrait of the situation through debate and dialogue, capturing both the positive and negative facets of the movement. Prominent authors in this category include Asim Ray and Saibal Mitra.

(e). When reading any novel, readers naturally seek to uncover the author's underlying stance and understand where their emotional or ideological support lies within the narrative flow. Analyzing how, in what context, and with what objective or perspective an author incorporates the Naxal Movement brings clarity to their psychological orientation.

³ Dasgupta, Biplab, *The Naxalite Movement*, Allied Publishers, 1974, pp. 17

5. Key Works and Psychological Analysis

- **Swarna Mitra's 'Grame Chalo' (Go to the Villages)⁴:** Set against the backdrop of 1969–70, when the movement of agricultural laborers, small farmers, and sharecroppers in Naxalbari expanded across West Bengal and India. Rural commoners united to protect themselves from the oppression of landlords, moneylenders, and middlemen. Inspired by Mao Zedong's ideology, resisting exploitation was the core philosophy. Swarna Mitra theoretically supports the Naxal movement through the narrative. The main character, Raghu, abandons his studies to dedicate himself to nation-building, facing constant hurdles. By depicting Raghu overcoming mental conflict to reorganize the masses, the novelist endorses the leadership philosophy of the Naxal movement. Creating a character like Raghu would not be possible without underlying sympathy for the movement.
- **Samaresh Basu's 'Mahakaler Rother Ghora' (The Horses of Mahakal's Chariot, 1977)⁵:** Set in a village adjacent to Naxalbari in the Terai region of North Bengal, this novel tells the tragic story of shattered dreams experienced by Ruhitan Kurmi, a landless agricultural laborer. Ruhitan joins the movement to help establish a 'liberated zone,' aiming to eliminate class enemies and encircle cities from villages. However, his dreams are crushed. Through Ruhitan's fate, Samaresh Basu highlights the futility of Naxalbari politics and the inhumanity among political cadres, exposing internal petty rivalries, meanness, and selfishness. Basu masterfully portrays a political ideology that gradually becomes isolated from the masses.
- **'Manush Shaktir Utsa' (Humanity is the Source of Power)⁶:** This novel refrains from depicting core Naxal activities such as going to villages, encircling towns, guerrilla warfare, or liquidating landlords and moneylenders. Instead, it exclusively highlights the negative aspects of the movement.
- **Mahasweta Devi's 'Hajar Churashir Maa' (Mother of 1084)⁷:** Set against the backdrop of the failure of the Naxalbari movement. The protagonist Brati represents the martyred youth, while his mother, Sujata, represents countless helpless, grieving mothers of the 1970s. Following Brati's death, Sujata undergoes a profound psychological transformation, breaking away from the complacent, self-absorbed middle-class environment of her husband and daughter because Brati's ideal survives within her.
- **'Komunis'⁸:** Functions as a social mirror of the period. Youth from the Belegkata area respond to the call of the Naxal movement, which began with seizing property from landlords and moneylenders to redistribute among the public and instilling class consciousness among poor villagers and daily wage workers. The novel displays the author's support and empathy for the movement. Even as the revolution encounters violent conflict, it actively seeks new pathways forward.
- **Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay's 'Shyaola' (Moss)⁹:** A popular novel where the author characterizes a revolutionary movement like Naxalbari primarily as factional strife. The author neither explicitly supports nor criticizes the movement, adopting the stance of an objective, neutral artist.

⁴ Mitra, Swarna, *Grame Chalo*, Dhaka: Lamppost, 2017, Original edition, 1972, pp. 11

⁵ Basu, S. (1977), *Mahakaler Rother Ghora*, Ananda Publishers (For the English translation): Basu, S. (2012). *Fever: Mahakaler Rather Ghora* (A. Sinha, Trans.). Penguin Random House India, pp. 77

⁶ Basu, Samaresh, *Manush Shaktir Utsa*, 1974, pp. 79

⁷ Devi, Mahasweta. *Mother of 1084*. Translated by Samik Bandyopadhyay, Seagull Books, 1997, pp. 121

⁸ Massardi, Y. A. N. M. (1996). *Mencoba Tidak Menyerah* [Originally written as *Aku Bukan Komunis*, 1977], Yayasan Bentang Budaya, pp.85

⁹ Mukhopadhyay, S. (1989), *Shyaola*, Ananda Publishers, pp. 111

- **Samaresh Basu's 'Gantabya' (Destination, 1977)¹⁰:** Depicts the protagonist turning away from the movement, his hesitations regarding armed struggle, and the failure to reach the movement's destination. Set in a period of severe internal conflict among Naxalites, intense police suppression, and collusion between political henchmen and police, the novel reflects the author's negative outlook toward the movement.
- **Gunamoy Manna's 'Shalbani'¹¹:** Contains detailed ideological or operational descriptions of the Naxal movement, lacking direct depiction of its immediate impact. However, the author exhibits sympathy for the Naxal leader. Endorsement is expressed by portraying the leader's descendant as the carrier of future revolutionary ideals.
- **Saibal Mitra's 'Agyatabas' (Living Incognito)¹²:** Focuses on the core tenets of the Naxal movement. With remarkable skill, the author portrays the ideology, sacrifices, and principles of the insurgents, expressing affection, empathy, and solidarity toward the protagonist.
- **Samaresh Majumdar's 'Kalbela (The Dark Hour)¹³:** Centers on a student from North Bengal who moves to Kolkata for university, gets drawn into politics, and becomes involved in the Naxal movement. Basu realistically portrays the outcome of the movement, internal strife, police atrocities, and the social reality of the era.
- **Jayanta Joardar's 'Ebhabei Egoy' (This is How It Moves Forward)¹⁴:** Features characters Jahar and Ashok, who travel to villages to stand alongside impoverished, hungry people and alleviate their suffering through collective action. The novel reflects the vision of transforming the nation and captures Charu Majumdar's call to the youth. Simultaneously, through other characters, the author critiques the methods and behavior of Naxal activists and neutrally analyzes internal party leadership conflicts, reflecting the authentic political reality of the 1970s.
- **Dibyendu Palit's 'Sahayoddha' (Comrade-in-Arms, 1984)¹⁵:** Offers an objective narrative detailing how the state deployed police forces to suppress the Naxal movement. It depicts how state terrorism or a single murder brings dark clouds over the life of an honest, dedicated, high-ranking officer. Palit maintains an unbiased view without emotional bias, combining neutrality with human empathy.
- **Sunil Gangopadhyay's 'Payer Talar Mati' (The Ground Beneath One's Feet, 1992)¹⁶:** Presents a neutral perspective on how police subjected Naxalites to physical and psychological torture during the 1970s, presenting balanced portraits of both insurgents and state authorities.
- **Nabarun Bhattacharya's 'Herbert' (1992)¹⁷:** Depicts how youth inspired by Maoist ideology threw themselves into the movement to eradicate class inequality. The author displays deep respect and empathy for Binu, the protagonist, portraying the era with reverence. As a believer in Marxist thought, Bhattacharya honors those who sacrificed their lives for a classless, exploitation-free society.

¹⁰ Basu, S. (1977), *Gantabya [Destination]*, Ananda Publishers, pp. 112

¹¹ Manna, G. (1977), *Shalbani*, Aruna Prakashani, pp. 91

¹² Mitra, S. (1978), *Agyatabas*, Dey's Publishing, pp.11

¹³ Majumdar, S. (1983), *Kalbela*, Ananda Publishers, pp. 65

¹⁴ Joardar, J. (2015), *Ebhabei Egoy*, PBS, pp. 54

¹⁵ Palit, D. (1984), *Sahayoddha*, Ananda Publishers, pp. 76

¹⁶ Gangopadhyay, S. (1992), *Payer Talar Mati*, Ananda Publishers, pp. 93

¹⁷ Bhattacharya, N. (1993), *Herbert*, Proma Prokashani, pp. 96

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, numerous novels were composed against the backdrop of the Naxalbari movement, adding a distinct dimension to Bengali literature. This literature illustrates both how a political movement influences creative writing and how literature critically evaluates a movement. Authors either sought to establish the movement by highlighting its ideological basis or attempted to critique its methods and principles through debate.

In any revolution, contemporary intellectuals play a crucial role—inspiring, guiding, and accelerating the movement through writing, music, art, and theater. Just as Bankim Chandra's 'Anandamath' influenced the armed struggle of the independence movement, negative portrayals in works by writers like Samaresh Basu created adverse public perceptions as the Naxal movement waned. Conversely, works like Swarna Mitra's 'Grame Chalo' helped rebuild connection and momentum. Deep analysis demonstrates that no revolutionary movement is an absolute failure; one revolution paves the path for another, and subsequent peasant movements remain deeply rooted in the legacy of Naxalbari.

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