

Disillusionment of a Failed Revolution: A Critical Study of Mother of 1084

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Abstract

This paper examines Mahasweta Devi's novel *Mother of 1084* through the complex lenses of parliamentary democracy, communism, and the Naxalbari movement, which emerged in West Bengal in the late 1960s. The work of Mahasweta Devi serves as a critical commentary on the socio-political landscape of India at that time, particularly highlighting the tension between legitimate dissent and the radical impulses that can arise within a volatile democratic framework.

In this exploration, the paper argues that dissent is fundamental to a healthy democracy. Dissent serves as a vital safety valve, allowing citizens to voice grievances and challenge government authority without resorting to violence. Furthermore, the paper unpacks the novel's critique of widespread disillusionment among citizens with both parliamentary democracy and radical Naxalism. Each system is portrayed as grappling with entrenched ideological inconsistencies and operational shortcomings that hinder genuine progress and social justice. Through a careful analysis of the themes and character dynamics in *Mother of 1084*, the paper clarifies the dilemmas faced by individuals caught between two failing paradigms, ultimately highlighting the urgent need for a more effective and principled approach to political activism and reform in contemporary society.

Keywords: Democracy, Communism, Naxalism, Revolution, violence, politics, state oppression

Introduction

Mahasweta Devi's novel *Mother of 1084* intricately explores the limitations and shortcomings of parliamentary democracy, particularly in the context of India. Through her narrative, she sheds light on how the existing political system failed to meet the expectations of its citizens, highlighting the pervasive disconnect between the political elite and the common populace. Additionally, the novel critiques the revolutionary Maoist politics, presenting it not merely as an alternative but as another layer of complexity that struggles to offer tangible solutions. Devi illustrates the disillusionment that arises when ideals of revolution do not translate into real-world change, ultimately questioning both the efficacy of established political structures and the challenges faced by those who aspire to radical transformation. The layered storytelling invites readers to reflect on the broader implications of these political realities and the human cost involved. However, the narrative also reveals the ethical quandary faced by civil society when dissent transitions from a form of protest within a democratic system to an outright effort to dismantle that system in favour of radical communist ideologies. This raises pressing questions about solidarity, ethical responsibility, and the complex allegiances that individuals must navigate during periods of political upheaval.

Brati Chatterjee is a prominent character in the novel, portrayed as a passionate activist deeply involved in the Naxalite movement, a socio-political uprising aimed at overthrowing parliamentary democracy and establishing the dictatorship of the proletariat. Brati and his fellow comrades are brutally murdered by a violent mob in a planned attack by their political rivals, aided by the state police of West Bengal, who lend their support to the attackers.

Brati's character is vividly brought to life through the eyes of his mother, Sujatha, who provides an intimate perspective on his life, ideals, and struggles. Through her reflections, we see Brati not only as a young man filled with fervour and dedication but also as someone who embodies high ideals and strong moral values. He stands firmly against the entrenched traditional patriarchal values and the middle-class bourgeois lifestyle that his family upholds, often clashing with their beliefs and expectations.

His commitment to social justice and equality sets him apart, marking him as a figure of hope for some and a source of conflict within his family, highlighting the generational and ideological divides that shape their relationships. Sujatha's portrayal of Brati sheds light on the personal costs of activism, the complexities of familial bonds, and the harsh realities of political struggle in a society rife with oppression and inequality.

Importance of Dissent in Democracy

In the novel, Mahasweta Devi portrays how a democratic system resorts to despotic and violent measures against its dissenters, eliminating them. She questions the legitimacy of their extrajudicial killings. Dissent is one of the principal traits of a healthy democracy. "Dissent is a cornerstone of democracy, safeguarding pluralism, fostering dialogue, and catalyzing progress. It is through dissent that societies confront injustices, challenge power dynamics, and evolve toward a more equitable future" (Goede 12).

Democracy plays a crucial role in providing a platform for protest and dissent, which are essential components of a vibrant political system. It is vital that a nation, having fought hard for its liberation from foreign rule through persistent and widespread acts of resistance and civil disobedience, honours and upholds the rights of its citizens to express their disagreements and grievances following independence. This commitment to protecting the voices of dissent not only reinforces the core principles of democracy but also acknowledges the struggles and sacrifices of those who fought for freedom. In doing so, it fosters a political environment where diverse perspectives can be shared, ultimately contributing to the growth and development of a more just and equitable society. Emphasising the importance of dissent, in one of his speeches, former Chief Justice Chandrachud stated: "The destruction of spaces for questioning and dissent destroys the basis of all growth—political, economic, cultural and social. In this sense, dissent is a safety valve of democracy". He implied that denying the right to protest is like blocking the safety valve of a pressure cooker, which might result in a violent outburst and cause the system to break down.

Naxalism and Violent Revolution

But often, Dissent becomes problematic when it does not fit within the framework of democracy or seeks to break away from it. In the novel, Brati Chatterjee and his comrades are staunch followers of the Naxalite ideology, which believes that power comes from the barrel of a gun. After the death of Brati, when the police opened his room, they found slogans written by Brati in his own handwriting, which reflect his ideology. Some of the slogans were— "Hate the moderate. Mark him. Destroy him" (Devi 18), "The Decade will be the Decade of Liberation" (Devi 18). These slogans show his inclination towards revolution and his hatred of moderate communists who operate within the framework of parliamentary democracy.

In West Bengal, during the peak period of the Naxalbari movement in the late 60s, along with the class enemies, moderate communists were also considered enemies by the Naxalites. This led to widespread violence across the state, involving different factions of communist parties resorting to violence against each other. “The CPI(ML), especially after 1969, adopted revolutionary terror as a key strategy of the Naxalbari Movement and emphasized the policy of *khotom* or the annihilation of landlords, reactionary political opponents and the police as class enemies” (Sengupta and Maitra 290).

The novel is set during the Naxalbari movement, when the Naxal violence reached the urban spaces of West Bengal. “The state responded with equal ferocity – indiscriminately killing, maiming and torturing young people picked up randomly as potential Naxals. Entire neighbourhoods in Kolkata, especially with their complex geographies of serpentine lanes, like Dum Dum, Baranagar or Tollygunge, became virtual war zones where Naxalite cadres with their crude bombs, improvised guns (famously called “pipe-guns”) and switch-blades waged an unequal but bloody fight with the sophisticated arsenal of the police forces” (Sengupta and Maitra 290).

Brati and his comrades were in a mob violence in the lanes of suburban Calcutta. Mahasweta Devi, through the voice of Brati’s mother, Sujatha, expresses her anger at the artists, activists, poets, and intellectuals of Bengal who did not condemn the state’s violence against its own citizens. The same people vehemently condemned the atrocities of the government of East Pakistan against its citizens. Her accusation is not without merit, but, “When nonviolent resistance is employed in non-democratic regimes that abuse human rights outside observers will widely praise its ability to break down those authority relations. When it is employed against stable democratic regimes that protect human rights the same outside observers will widely condemn it” (Pinckney 10). Hence, most of the activists and intellectuals who perceived the Naxalite movement as a threat to the existing structure of parliamentary democracy did not condemn the violent actions of the police against the Naxalites and the Naxalite sympathisers. The young people who believed in establishing a dictatorship of the proletariat by overthrowing the existing democratic regime became public enemies. “People of all creeds have the unlimited, democratic right to kill these young men who had rejected the parties of the establishment. To kill them, one did not need any special sanction from the law or the courts of justice” (Devi 19). At the grassroots level, the cadres of various communist parties became increasingly antagonistic toward one another, leading to episodes of brutal violence that marred their relationships. This intra-party conflict was not merely physical; it stemmed from a profound ideological divide. On the one hand, some factions of the left favoured continuing their participation in parliamentary democracy, advocating reforms and negotiations within the existing political framework. In stark contrast, more radical elements within the left believed in the necessity of a violent uprising as a means to overthrow the current system and establish a communist regime. This clash of visions created a rift that not only fuelled hostilities at ground level but also complicated the broader leftist movement’s objectives and unity.

Communism within Democratic Framework

The parliamentary left has always had the same complaint against the Maoists. “They are accused of suffering from what Lenin called an ‘infantile disorder’, of substituting mass politics with militarism and of not having worked at building a genuinely revolutionary proletariat. They are seen as having contempt for the urban working class, of being an ideologically ossified force that can only function as a frog-on-the-back of ‘innocent’ (read ‘primitive’) jungle-dwelling tribal people who, according to orthodox Marxists, have no real revolutionary potential” (Roy 130). The Naxalites, also known as Maoists, have

struggled to establish a widespread movement across India that could effectively rally widespread support for their revolutionary agenda and pose a significant challenge to the established democratic regime. Their influence has largely been confined to specific regions, often rural and remote areas, where they have garnered some level of local support. However, this localised strength has contributed to their alienation from the broader mainstream society. The lack of a unified national presence has hindered their ability to challenge the political status quo and build a robust coalition capable of inciting a nationwide revolution. As a result, their efforts have often been viewed with suspicion or outright hostility by the general populace, limiting their potential for widespread mobilisation and impact.

The architect of the Indian Constitution was also very critical of communist politics. He said, “The Communists say that there are the only two means of establishing communism. The first is violence. Nothing short of it will suffice to break up the existing system. The other is dictatorship of the proletariat. Nothing short of it will suffice to continue the new system” (Ambedkar 450). Dr B.R. Ambedkar highlights the shortcomings of communist factions in India, particularly their struggle to adapt to the democratic system of governance. He points out that their rigid ideological framework often hinders their ability to thrive in a democratic environment, where flexibility and pragmatism are essential for success. This critique becomes particularly relevant in the context of the Naxalbari movement in West Bengal, which emerged in the late 1960s but ultimately faltered in its revolutionary goals.

Learning from the setbacks experienced during that tumultuous period, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI (M)] recognised the necessity of engaging with democratic processes rather than adhering strictly to their original radical ideologies. As a result, they strategically recalibrated their approach to politics, choosing to participate in electoral politics rather than relying solely on revolutionary methods. This shift proved a turning point for the party, as they successfully adapted their platform to align with popular sentiments among the electorate.

Beginning in 1977, the CPI (M) demonstrated newfound adaptability by winning a series of elections and maintaining a stronghold in West Bengal for over three decades. Their ability to resonate with voters and implement policies that addressed local needs enabled them to secure a dominant position in the state's political landscape. Thus, despite the initial criticisms of communism's inflexibility, the CPI (M)'s evolution illustrates how political parties can learn from their experiences and adapt to the dynamic realities of a democratic society.

The novel shows how those who accuse the Naxalites of being anti-democratic apply the same undemocratic methods to combat it. Saroj Pal, a police officer emblematic of the repressive policing framework in West Bengal during the tumultuous Naxal movement, articulates his perspective on the insurgency by referring to it as a “cancerous growth on the body of democracy” (Devi 29). This metaphor underscores his belief that the movement poses a significant threat to democratic values and stability. However, it is noteworthy that despite his vocal condemnation of the Naxalite uprising, Pal resorts to tactics that disregard democratic principles and procedures and resorts to extra-judicial violence in his efforts to combat Naxalism. This contradiction highlights the complexities and ethical dilemmas faced by law enforcement officials working within such a fraught political landscape.

Conclusion

In her novel, Mahasweta Devi expresses profound sorrow over the shortcomings of the democratic system, which rampant political and administrative corruption has significantly undermined. This corruption has betrayed the promises made to the nation, leaving many citizens disillusioned and disenfranchised. Devi

explores the consequences of a hastily executed revolution that, despite its noble intentions, failed to gain the momentum needed to effect real change because of needless violence. The aftermath of this failed uprising resulted in the tragic loss of thousands of young lives—individuals who passionately believed in the revolutionary cause and the hope of transforming the existing socio-political landscape. Through her narrative, Devi captures society's deep sense of loss and disillusionment after the Naxalites' failed revolution and the failure to fulfil democratic assurances.

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