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# *Self-Making through Self-Writing: Non-Sovereign Agency in Women's Memoirs from the Naxalite Movement*

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- 1 A large number of tribal, peasant and urban middle class women participated in the Naxalite movement of the 1960s and 1970s in postcolonial India. However, the academic historiography of the movement for the longest time, maintained a silence on these women participants as well as gender issues (Mohanty 1977, Banerjee 1984, Duyker 1987, Ray 1988). Memoirs and autobiographies of women participants were therefore important in throwing some light on women's experiences of the movement (see Tyler 1978, Mitra 2004, Ajitha 2008, Bandyopadhyaya 2008). Sophisticated studies of women's participation and agency in the movement have begun to emerge only recently (Sinha Roy 2011, Roy 2012). These works foreground the lens of gender to analyse not just women's participation, but also issues of gender relations, patriarchies, violence, love and sexuality within the movement.
- 2 In this paper, I try to address three questions. Firstly, are women's memoirs an important source of history, especially from a feminist point of view, in the context of the gender indifferent historiography of the Naxalite movement? Secondly, can these narratives be seen as a significant way in which revolutionary women construct their subjectivity and agency? Thirdly, how do we theorise this agency?
- 3 I address these questions through the memoirs of two women participants of the Naxalite movement. The first is that of K. Ajitha, a woman participant of the movement in Kerala. Her memoirs were published in 1979 in a serialized form in the Malayalam magazine, *Kala Kamudi*, later also being published as a book. The English translation of the book came out in 2008. The second memoir that I take up is that of Krishna Bandyopadhyay, who was active within the movement in West Bengal. Her memoir was first published in the Bangla magazine, *Khoj Akhon* in 2002. I use the translation of her memoir published in the *Economic and Political Weekly* in 2008. Both women come from two different regions within

India and participated in the movement in their regional contexts. Both women had very different political backgrounds. While Ajitha's parents were communist activists themselves and encouraged her participation in the armed revolution, Bandopadhyay had to leave behind her middle-class family home in order to participate. Both these women were from middle-class backgrounds and their position in society shapes their gendered experience within the movement. It needs to be remembered that their experiences might be very different from those women participants who belonged to peasant, tribal and lower caste groups. There is also a difference in terms of how life stories of middle class participants and subaltern participants come forth. More opportunities are available to urban middle class women to publish their memoirs, and as a result, a whole body of Naxal women's writings has emerged (Tyler 1978, Mitra 2004, Ajitha 2008, Bandyopadhyay 2008). As for rural, tribal and Dalit women, their stories have been brought forward by other scholars through oral histories (Kannabiran & Lalitha 1989, Stree Shakti Sangathan 1989, Sinha Roy 2009a, 2009b, 2011).

## Personal narratives, historiography and agency

- 4 Life histories have often been used to uncover life experiences that are obscured by dominant academic historiography. To challenge meta-narratives, marginal groups such as Dalits in India have found them helpful in breaking the silences imposed by society and history (Arnold & Blackburn 2004: 5-6). Feminist scholars have been drawn to women's life histories in building their theory and practice for the same reasons. Women's experiences are primary sources for feminists to analyse the role and meaning of gender in individual lives and society (Personal Narratives Group 1989: 4). Personal narratives in the form of oral histories and autobiographies serve as sources through which one can interpret gendered constructions of self-identity, self-perceptions and self-representations of women within the gendered structures of power in society (Personal Narratives Group 1989: 5, Sinha Roy 2011: 40). Additionally, oral histories and autobiographies draw attention to the gaps and silences of gender indifferent histories. For instance, in the context of radical movements like Telengana, Tebhaga and Naxalbari in postcolonial India, accounts of women's participation have been delineated through interviews with the participants (Custers 1987, Kannabiran & Lalitha 1989, Stree Shakti Sangathan 1989, Singha Roy 1992, Panjabi 2012, Roy 2007, 2012, Sinha Roy 2009b, 2011). These accounts were absent in the dominant histories of the movement. While oral narratives usually require the researcher to present the narratives in the public domain, autobiographical writings reach the audience directly. A strong feminist interest in the autobiographical form began with 'the attempt to connect the personal with the political' (Cosslett *et al.* 2000: 2).
- 5 I look at the autobiographical form of personal narrative in reading memoirs of two women from the Naxalite movement. Memoirs written by women reveal stories of everyday life and oppression (Lixl-Purcell 1994) that are unlikely to be a part of academic history. Therefore, I treat these texts as important sources of history, written against the history which successfully veils the role of gender on its subjects' lives, on the pretext of focusing on larger questions. Autobiographical writings and memoirs do not just tell us about individual lives and experiences, but also throw light on the context and social settings that those individuals are part of (Arnold & Blackburn 2004, Lanzona 2009).

- 6 Of course, autobiographical narratives cannot be treated as unproblematic texts, and are by no means self-evident statements or historical truth (Arnold & Blackburn 2004, Sinha Roy 2011: 40). The texts, therefore, need to be interpreted in such a way that we focus not just on the individual alone but also the network of identities, relationships and structures within which the narrator is embedded (Personal Narratives Group 1989: 5-7, Cosslett *et al.* 2000: 3, Arnold & Blackburn 2004: 21). Thus, women's experience in written form cannot be treated as a given (Cosslett *et al.* 2000: 2) or as representing an autonomous subject. Subjects are produced by the intersection of myriad discourses and structures of power (Foucault 1995 [1975]). Consequently, the agency of a subject must necessarily emerge *within* these structures of power that produce her and can never be independent of them (Abu-Lughod 1990, Haynes & Prakash 1991, O'Hanlon 2000). The subjectivities of women as agents need to be understood in terms of everyday negotiations with their existential situations, that is, different forms of subject-making (Sunder Rajan 1993, Sangari 1993, Mahmood 2005). For instance, women who participate in rebel movements may be engaged in acts of resistance even as their subjectivities are shaped by power-laden structures of patriarchy, class, ethnicity, and/or armed group dynamics. Their agency, therefore, needs to be theorized as 'non-sovereign' (Krause 2011) I argue for a non sovereign idea of agency. This differs from the liberal idea of agency that identifies agency only in autonomous terms and as resulting from sovereign and rational individuals. Non-sovereign agency as a concept gives us the framework through which we can identify certain acts as agentive even when they are not undertaken through an autonomous consciousness, and are shaped by structures and discourse of power. It helps us in doing away with the binaries of agent-structure, resistance-domination, and agency-victimhood.
- 7 The agency of an ex-revolutionary woman writing her memoir, I argue, is exhibited in the very act of self-making through self-writing. What constitutes an agentive act has often been a difficult question. The futility of looking for agency only in acts of resistance has been pointed out (Abu-Lughod 1990, Mahmood 2005). Agency is articulated in the very construction of the self (Butler 1990), and needs to be seen as tied up to the process of subject formation in relation to power (Foucault 1995 [1975]). The construction of self through writing occurs within discourses of power while attempting to subvert them, and is hence reflective of non-sovereign agency. Further, since the memoirs work to counter the silencing of women's voices in the gender indifferent historiography of the Naxalite movement, articulating insensitivities and discrimination, self-writing also becomes an act of resistance. Even this resisting agency is shaped by the very structures that it challenges, sometimes even reinforcing them, hence it is conceptualized as non-sovereign agency.

## Gender and left-wing movements

- 8 The Naxalbari movement promised women a chance to redefine gender relations in Indian society. Women from the middle class as well as peasant and tribal communities were drawn into this radical left movement, despite the lack of a formal space for women in the CPI(M-L) and the absence of gender in the Naxalite class analysis (Sinha Roy 2011: 53-9). As I will show later, while women Naxalites had understood their involvement in the movement as empowering, they soon realised the patriarchal workings of the party and its leaders (Ajitha 2008, Bandyopadhyay 2008, Sinha Roy 2011, Roy 2012). The

Naxalite 'revolution' produced its particular notion of masculinity and femininity, where an idealized 'male revolutionary subjectivity' was idealised, and women participants 'struggled to inhabit' this subjectivity (Roy 2012: 72-3). Middle-class women's participation was acceptable to men, but only a few of these women moved beyond doing secondary tasks (Bandyopadhyay 2008, Roy 2012: 77). This also ties up with the ways in which communist masculinity has been constructed within left parties in India. Rajarshi Dasgupta (2003) argues that the communist definition of masculinity in Bengal emphasized upon *bhadralok* ideals of modesty, humility, sober reasoning, genuine social concern and self-reflection. In the Naxalite movement, this masculinity was manifested through a tolerance of women in the movement but it nevertheless relegated them to supportive roles. There was an effort to romanticize women as mothers, wives and widows of revolutionary men. Further, sexual ascetism came to be recognised as one of the qualities of an ideal communist. Middle-class sexual mores on marriage and sexuality were not questioned by the Bengali Naxalites, and in fact, there was an effort to suppress one's sexual desires in order to be a virtuous revolutionary (Sinha Roy 2011: 69). The communist attitudes towards sexuality had a bearing on their perceptions of women within the movement. Henrike Donner (2009) talks about how certain kinds of relationships between men in a specific environment of patriarchy produced the subjectivities of male Naxal activists in the 1970s and shaped their participation in the movement. In fact, it could be argued that the *bhadralok* character of the Naxalite movement was one of the reasons for the Naxalite unwillingness to engage with questions of gender and sexuality.

- 9 In this regard, the Indian Naxalite movement differs from other, later, radical left-wing movements in Asia that have, over time, embraced the woman question and related questions of love, marriage, and sexuality. For instance the Huk rebellion of the Philippines addressed the 'sex problem' very early on (Goodwin 1997). However, they concerned themselves only with men's sexual needs, and often did nothing to challenge the gendered division of roles and women's place within the movement and society (Goodwin 1997, Lanzona 2009). The Maoist movement in Nepal made gender an important part of revolutionary life, and developed a 'scientific method' for the regulation of its activists' sexuality (Yami 2006) but that did not lead to a dismantling of patriarchal practices (Schneiderman & Pettigrew 2004). The Indian Maoist movement,<sup>1</sup> too, in its contemporary phase, engages much more with the woman question in its official ideology. Years of women's participation and the presence of women leaders made this change possible. For instance, in Bastar, a senior Maoist leader, Comrade Narmada (cited in Pandita 2011: 96), recalled how it took time to make the male comrades realise that women were not meant only to cook and perform other domestic chores in the squad. She also talks about how another senior woman comrade, called Nirmala, pushed for women guerrillas to wear a shirt and trousers like their male counterparts, instead of *saris*. These and similar critiques reveal that the party itself is not free from patriarchal biases—several leaders admit to the prevalent patriarchal biases within the party structure and are willing to address the problem (Pandita 2011). In the case of Andhra Pradesh, women cadres and feminist groups pressurised the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) People's War (PW) to discuss and address the patriarchal issues of the party and the movement (Vindhya 1990, Kannabiran *et al.* 2010). PW became one of the first Maoist groups to deeply engage with the gender question, and this is visible from its document, 'Our Approach to the Women's Question'. Anuradha Ghandy, a woman intellectual,<sup>2</sup> was

made a member of the Central Committee at the 9<sup>th</sup> Congress of the CPI (Maoist) in 2007. One can say that her presence as within the party (first within the CPI(M-L) PW and then the unified CPI(Maoist), and her writings (Ghandy 2012) were contributing factors to the way in which the party has framed and reframed its views on gender, patriarchy and women's role in the revolution.

- 10 As we see, the Maoist engagement with the woman question has evolved from the Naxalite period of the 1960s and 1970s to now, at least at the discursive level. Such detailed engagement was absent in the first phase, when Ajitha and Bandyopadhyay participated in the movement.

## The memoirs: K. Ajitha and Krishna Bandyopadhyay

- 11 Ajitha says that her motive behind writing her memoir was to reiterate her commitment to her ideology through an open declaration, and make known to the public many unknown facets of the movement (Ajitha 2008). It is obvious that she had no outwardly declared feminist aim. Bandyopadhyay, on the other hand, says that she is trying to explain why middle class women like her joined the movement (Bandyopadhyay 2008: 53). The title of the English translation of her memoir is *Naxalbari Politics: A Feminist Narrative*. So, they differ in the purpose of writing their memoirs and this comes across in the narratives too. Both Ajitha and Bandyopadhyay belonged to middle class backgrounds. However, both of Ajitha's parents had been involved in left-wing activism for years before and encouraged her participation. Bandyopadhyay, on the other hand, had to leave home to involve herself in radical politics. She describes how she was angered and saddened at the discrimination she faced at home while growing up. She writes:

Since my childhood I have seen several festivals being observed and celebrated in our house. And the center of attention during these festivals would always be my brothers, uncles and other prominent male 'human beings'. Even later in life I would cringe at the discrimination in every aspect of life—be it eating habits, education, freedom of movement. In my own way I protested once in a while, but not a brick on the wall of 'don'ts' was affected by it. I always thought that something needed to be done about this (Bandyopadhyay 2008: 53).

- 12 Ajitha too says that she never believed in 'our tradition' where women were 'playthings' for men. She expresses disapproval of Manu's views on women and quotes a sentence from him: 'A woman should obey her parents in her childhood, her husband in her youth, and her sons when old'. Other than this, Ajitha does not mention instances where she was discriminated as a girl.
- 13 Instead what Ajitha focuses on, while discussing her motivation to participate in the movement, are the texts she read and got influenced by. Most of these books were about Communist China, like Maria Roper's *China: The Surprising Country*, and Edgar Snow's *The Other Side of the River*. She also read Mao's writings and discussed them with other comrades. She had already started getting attracted to Mao's ideas and took to the radical struggles that started in Kozhikode against the Communist Party of India (Marxist), in the aftermath of the peasant uprising in Naxalbari in 1967. However, she does mention that she had been thinking for a long time whether she should get involved in radical politics or not. She started by participating in demonstrations and distributing pamphlets and books with Mao's ideas.

- 14 Unlike Ajitha, Bandyopadhyay does not develop so much on how her transformation occurred. But she describes how she and other middle class women were assigned small roles by the party. She writes:

'When it comes to revolution, no contribution is too negligible'; therefore, we were asked to offer shelter to revolutionaries, give them tea, and carry letters and documents from one place to another. And we had one more responsibility. This was to undergo training as nurses, so that we could tend to our injured male comrades and nurse them back to health (Bandyopadhyay 2008: 54).

- 15 As a result, they started feeling insignificant. Bandyopadhyay started to feel as marginalized and discriminated against as she had felt in her family home. This made her question her decision. It seemed to her that she had moved from one patriarchal set-up to another.

- 16 However, when a party leader, Dronacharya Ghosh, asked her and other women comrades to go to a village and work amongst women peasants, she says all her resentment towards the party vanished. Ajitha, too, had wanted to go and work in the villages like other male comrades, but had to initially face disappointment. She writes:

I was raring to go in the field of action. When would my time come to meet these comrades brimming with revolutionary fervour, to see those villagers and to urge them on about the truth that I believed in? But the comrades wanted me to wait for some more time. I felt depressed and disappointed that I was pulled back because I was a woman. I was fully aware of what tales people would tell about girls who freely moved around with men. I hated this inequity and was determined to fight it (Ajitha 2008: 43).

- 17 Ajitha does not pursue this point in great detail and moves on to describing the course of events. She later talks about how she went to the village Pulpally with her mother to be a part of the armed revolt that had been planned. They spent some days among 'forgotten people, inspiring them with the ideas of revolution' (Ajitha 2008: 62). Bandyopadhyay and other women from the party would also hold meeting and political discussions with women in the village. She 'read out the writings of Mao Ze Dong and Charu Majumdar, told them stories about Russia and China and sang them songs' (Bandyopadhyay 2008: 54).

- 18 Living with the peasants and tribals in the villages was considered an essential element in the process of becoming a revolutionary during the Naxalite movement. Following Mao, it had been advocated that bourgeois intellectuals from the middle-class should go and live in the villages in order to awaken the revolutionary consciousness of the peasantry. Through this, they would also integrate themselves with these people and de-class themselves. So, women obviously had a problem if they were left out of this very important component of the revolution. Since Ajitha and Bandyopadhyay were sent to the villages, they saw themselves as capable of making a significant contribution. Bandyopadhyay writes:

I was involved in the process of becoming 'one with the masses', of losing 'one's class identity' just as Mao Ze Dong had said to be 'like fishes in water'. I was noticing that the women also had begun to trust me. They were sharing their joys and sorrows with me. Internally, I felt extremely happy. Dron had gone away from the village on some party work. When he returned, I would say to him, 'Look, how I have progressed' (Bandyopadhyay 2008: 55).

- 19 However, there was a lack of serious discussion about problems and constraints faced by women activists working in villages, such as safety, threat of sexual violence, not being taken seriously, and being stereotyped as sacrificing wives and mothers.

- 20 Both Bandyopadhyay and Ajitha faced dilemmas regarding the strategies of violence and annihilation of class enemies advocated by the leadership. Bandyopadhyay says that she was always opposed to the idea of annihilation but could not voice it when she became a part of the movement. She writes:

I couldn't tell him (Dronacharya Ghosh), 'This idea of annihilation has been forcibly imposed on me as well'. A 19-year-old girl brimming with love received a massive jolt on that day. There was no option but to shed tears of shame and hurt. After so many years, I feel if I had courageously gone against this idea of 'annihilation', we would not have had to suffer the untimely loss of people such as Dron (Bandyopadhyay 2008: 54).

- 21 Later, even when she was in the village she couldn't strongly advocate the idea to the people whose political education she was responsible for.

I was never comfortable with the idea of such annihilation action. That's why it was not proving possible for me to set an example (Bandyopadhyay 2008: 55).

- 22 However, she does not attribute her opposition to violence to her being a woman. She does not conform to the idea that women are inherently peace loving. Ajitha, on the other hand, does that to some extent. She looks at violence as necessary for the revolution, but as a woman, it was hard for her to come to terms with this.

I don't mean to say that I am a spokesperson of violence. On the contrary, I despise violence. I love to lead a peaceful life. But the world around me, and my life experiences taught me that no one can distance oneself from violence. It prevails in every realm of human life, in one form or the other. Even as one tries to avoid it, it makes itself felt like an omnipresent power. I realized that it could only be dealt with in the same coin. I decided never to be part of today's inhuman social set up. Being a woman, it would not be easy for me. But I refuse to give up (Ajitha 2008: 49).

- 23 Through this, one can see how she wants to repress some of her 'womanly' feelings through ideology and participation in armed revolt. She says that all that mattered to her was the revolution, and there was no place 'for trivial gender differences' (Ajitha 2008: 74). Through instances like these, it is evident that while Ajitha resists traditional gender roles in general, her views sometimes also reinforce certain patriarchal stereotypes and norms.

- 24 Despite such introspection, Ajitha takes a largely uncritical view of the Maoist ideology that was being propagated and practiced at that point. She even cites from some books to convey the point that this ideology had done good things for women in China. Mallarika Sinha Roy (2011: 71) points out how the women Red Guards of China became a symbol of emancipation and women's solidarity for Naxalite women despite these Red Guards failing to actually attend to deeper women's issues. In her jail years, 'reading books of great masters of Marxism' and the writings of Mao gave her strength (Ajitha 2008: 225). Bandyopadhyay states that she does not want to examine the theory and practice of the movement and so does not celebrate the ideology, even though she accepts that her involvement in Naxalite politics shaped what she is today and she does not regret the past (Bandyopadhyay 2008: 52).

- 25 Here, I want to point out a key difference in the structure of resistance that Ajitha and Bandyopadhyay were located in. Bandyopadhyay joined the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) in 1970, a year after it was formed. Ajitha, on the other hand, participated in the armed revolt in Kerala in 1968, before the party had been formed. Although these activities were acknowledged and appreciated by both Charu Mazumdar and Kanu Sanyal, the founders of the CPI(ML), Ajitha and her comrades later started



having differences with the practices of those who were the representatives of CPI(M-L) in Kerala, criticizing their opportunism. Thus Bandyopadhyay's activities were largely within the party structure while Ajitha's were somewhat independent of the party.

- 26 Bandyopadhyay critiques the patriarchal leadership structure of the party and how she was told to put class before gender on some occasions. She says:

So if a woman, even while taking shelter with a peasant or a worker, was forced to keep awake night after night by his lecherous behaviour, one could not complain. We would be told, 'You are losing your capacity to view things from the class perspective, comrade'. This is from my personal experience. It will demonstrate very clearly what an extremely mechanical response there was from the comrades in the face of a heartrending experience (Bandyopadhyay 2008: 57).

- 27 But she also goes on to emphasize that most, if not all, male comrades were quite 'gender-sensitive' (Bandyopadhyay 2008: 58). Ajitha, too, writes about her comrades as supportive and helpful towards her (Ajitha 2008:81).

- 28 It might be interesting here to think about Naxalites' views on love and sexuality. Mallarika Sinha Roy (2012) suggests that there were two kinds of love that are said to have motivated women to participate in the movement. One was love for the person, whereby women joined the movement only because the man they loved was involved. The second kind of love is the love for people or humanity in general. One of the reasons why Ajitha and Bandyopadhyay joined the movement was this second kind of love, but in the course of the movement they fell in love with a person. Naxalites usually tried to sexually restrain themselves. It was felt that love, marriage and sexuality distract from the path of revolution. So one sees Bandyopadhyay asking herself, 'Does one really have to stifle one's natural sexual desires in order to effect a revolution?' when talking about the love between her and Dronacharya Ghosh. She adds, 'Dron had managed to control his desire; and I had thought of Dron as great and myself as 'petit bourgeois'—quite unworthy of the revolution' (Bandyopadhyay 2008: 56). Ajitha (2008: 281-2) says that her father discouraged her from getting married since that would have meant harm to the movement. She mentions how she was in love with another comrade, Varghese, but her father told her, 'You'll ruin not only yourself but also comrade Varghese, who is very important for the cause.' There were also cases where the party tried to look for partners for unmarried women comrades<sup>3</sup>. Varghese was captured and killed by the police. After her release from jail, the party started looking for a life partner for Ajitha. But she says:

I couldn't accept their advice. I was against arranged marriages whether arranged by families or the party. Then one day I asked Yakob (another comrade) if he would marry me. He was eight years younger to me. Moreover, he came from a Muslim family. He had many doubts and anxieties. But I was adamant. Finally, we got married with the help of comrades, friends and relatives. No garlands were exchanged, but we were declared man and wife. Later we registered our marriage under Special Marriage Act (Ajitha 2008: 282-3).

- 29 She tries to present herself as resisting tradition here, demonstrating her agency in choosing her life partner as well as the form of marriage. The party's reaction in Bandyopadhyay's case was very different. After the killing of Dronacharya Ghosh by the police, she was considered as a martyr's widow and was expected to live up to that status, which she resented and resisted.

My role at that time was to inspire others as a martyr's wife. Dron's death had apparently given me a new 'status' within the party. And their vibes made it obvious that I was to have no other relationship in my life. No one was able to accept my second relationship. All sorts of comments were passed, even specific

excerpts from Dron's letters were quoted by some who said, 'This is why he had said such-and-such thing' (I don't enjoy talking about all this; yet, I am writing about it to show the kind of mindset they had). I got very upset and said, 'Do you want to hark back to the pre-Vidyasagar era?' I realised after such a long time why Vidyasagar's statues had been destroyed. My comrades were livid at this. But after that outburst, no one tried to harass me by bringing up the topic (Bandyopadhyay 2008: 57).

- 30 This account demonstrates how despite the encouragement to transgressive practices like inter-caste and inter-class marriages, most of the male leadership continued to stick to ideals of monogamous relationships and female chastity. Srila Roy (2006) has argued that 'the Party became the social self-consciousness of the collective, substituting for the morality and legality of middle-class society in the underground'. Ajitha and Bandyopadhyay in their different ways tried to challenge these diktats of the Party.
- 31 It is through subversive acts such as these that they might identify themselves as feminist.<sup>4</sup> It is quite interesting to note how the term feminism gets employed in the accounts of these two women. Bandyopadhyay's memoir when translated in English is titled *Naxalbari Politics: A Feminist Narrative*. It is very clear that the term has been added by the translator since the Bangla version of the article was titled *Abirta Larai*, which translates into 'Relentless Struggle'. Of course, there is no doubt that Bandyopadhyay's narrative raises feminist concerns and critiques of Naxalite politics. She ends the memoir in this way:

The Naxalites left the older parties in order to come together and set up the CPI-ML with a new outlook. They aroused trust and hope in the minds of the people. Women, too, came forward to join a movement that was so full of promise. Taken up with fighting against a system, I never realised when I entered the realm of a completely different struggle. At that time I did not appreciate how necessary this struggle was. But today I feel that if all of us had continued and sustained it, we women would have stood side by side with the men and had an equal say in decision making. Perhaps the history of the Naxalbari movement would have been written differently then (Bandyopadhyay 2008: 59).

- 32 Later in her life, Bandyopadhyay involved herself in feminist activism and edited *Khoj Ekhon*, a feminist little magazine. She says: 'The point is that the women's liberation movement or the movement for national identity are not divorced from the struggle to reform society; both must continue simultaneously'. Therefore, she argues that the women's question should have formed an integral part of the politics itself. Women do not 'automatically become free when society is liberated' (Bandyopadhyay 2008: 53).
- 33 It seems to me that it is only over time that such critical reflections emerge. Bandyopadhyay's memoirs were first published in 2002, so she had several years to reflect. Ajitha's memoirs came out in 1979, and we see that she is less critical of the gender dimensions of the movement. However, as her translator (Ramachandran 2008) points out, in the preface to the second edition of her book in 1993, Ajitha declared that she was no longer part of the Naxalite movement and was a Marxian feminist now. Even in the epilogue that she has written for the English translation of her memoirs, Ajitha explains:

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 2008: 284-5).

- 34 Ajitha admitted that while generally accepting class struggle, there was a need to move away from left movements since they completely ignored gender paradoxes. Since the late 1980s, she got involved with several groups which raised issues of women's oppression and later founded a women's counselling centre as well as an umbrella organization of various women's groups in Kerala.

## Conclusion

- 35 Life histories are often used to uncover the silences of dominant academic scholarship. The memoirs of women from the Naxalite movement are valuable sources from a feminist perspective that seeks to overcome the silences surrounding women participants of the movement as well as the gender dynamics of the movement. Contrary to what one would expect, neither of the two memoirs paint a unified heroic figure of a woman revolutionary. The women not only recount the instances where they committed acts of resistance and subversion, but also how they felt limited, disappointed, marginalized, discriminated against, and victimized in several ways. Instead of dismissing the possibility of any agency, I see it as simultaneously existing with domination and conceptualize it as non-sovereign. I argued that agency emerges through the act of constructing one's subjectivity through the memoir. Self-making in negotiation with structures and discourses of power is in itself an agentive act, and these women demonstrate a non-sovereign agency in constructing their subjectivities through self-writing.

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## NOTES

1. The Naxalite movement is said to have begun in May 1967, when a confrontation broke out between peasants and the police in the Naxalbari area of West Bengal. Naxalbari awakened the dream of a people's war in India among some leaders of the CPI(M), particularly in West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala. Revolutionary ideologues started to see merit in Mao's concepts of 'semi-feudal' and 'semi-colonial' to describe and analyse the Indian countryside. The time was seen as ripe for India to follow China's path of struggle towards a 'New Democratic Revolution'. In this context, the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) (CPI(M-L)) was formed in 1969

with the aim of truly following Marxist-Leninist and Maoist ideology. It was repressed by the state by the mid-1970s but groups following Maoist ideology continued to operate in many states. The CPI(ML) split into several factions, key among them the CPI(ML) Party Unity and CPI(ML) People's War. In addition, the Maoist Communist Centre (MCC) had been working separately in Bihar and Jharkhand since its formation in 1969. In 2004 MCC and CPI(ML) People's War (Andhra and Chhattisgarh) merged to form the CPI(Maoist). As of today, the movement led by the CPI (Maoist) is active in the states of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, West Bengal, Bihar and Maharashtra.

2. Anuradha Ghandy came from a middle-class family, had completed an M.Phil degree, and had been working among Dalits in different parts of Maharashtra in the eighties. She and her husband Kobad Ghandy came into contact with Naxal leaders in Gadchiroli, Maharashtra. They were instrumental in the formation of the People's War Group. She passed away in 2008. Anuradha Ghandy can be described as a Maoist feminist intellectual, the first of her kind in India, who wrote extensively on Marxism, and caste and gender issues. The party's position on caste and women draws a great deal from her thoughts.

3. Mallarika Sinha Roy (2012) conducted interview with a woman named Shefali, who was encouraged to marry another comrade while working in the villages, because her unmarried status was proving to be a problem.

4. I do not want to go into a discussion about forms of feminism, and the different things it might mean.

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## ABSTRACTS

Women were active participants in the Naxalite movement of the 1960s and 1970s in India but were made invisible in the mainstream historiography of the movement. However, memoirs and autobiographies of women Naxalites bring out their experiences of participation in the movement. This paper engages with the memoirs of two of them, K. Ajitha and Krishna Bandyopadhyay, and argues that these women demonstrate a non-sovereign agency in self-making through these autobiographical narratives.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** women, autobiography, left extremist movements, agency, India, Naxalite movement

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