

# The Invisible Comrade: Women, Gender Blindness, and the Naxalbari Revolutionary Imaginary

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**ABSTRACT:** This article examines the constitutive gender blindness of the Naxalbari revolutionary movement and its literary representations in 1960s and 1970s Calcutta. While the CPI (ML) and allied formations proclaimed themselves agents of total social transformation, their theoretical apparatus and organisational practice systematically erased women's subjecthood, relegating women activists to subordinate, domestic-adjacent roles and rendering gender invisible as a category of political analysis. The article argues that this blindness was not incidental but structural, rooted in the movement's exclusive focus on class as the master category of liberation politics and its unexamined reproduction of patriarchal norms within its own ranks.

**KEY WORDS:** Naxalbari movement, gender blindness, women activists, subaltern, revolutionary politics, class reductionism, feminist historiography, political subjecthood, Maoist ideology.

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Date of Submission: 08-04-2026

Date of acceptance: 20-04-2026

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## I. INTRODUCTION: REVOLUTION AND ITS SILENCES

Foucault's observation that 'silence itself... is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said' provides a productive entry point for an analysis of the Naxalbari movement's relationship to gender.<sup>1</sup> The Naxalbari uprising of 1967, and the broader CPI (ML) formation to which it gave rise, generated an enormous discursive archive — manifestoes, pamphlets, theoretical documents, literature. What is striking, in retrospect, is not the content of that archive but its structuring absence: women, as political subjects with gendered interests and experiences, are almost entirely invisible within it.

Mallarika Sinharoy, in her study of women in the Naxalite movement, has observed that 'Women nearly disappeared behind the male-identified ideology and vocabulary, and their specific problems were increasingly being imbricated within the professed universality of revolutionary politics.'<sup>2</sup> This article extends and theorises that observation, arguing that the movement's gender blindness was not a marginal failing but a central feature of its political imagination — one with significant consequences for the literature it produced and inspired.

## II. METHODOLOGY

This article adopts a social historical methodology informed by feminist historiography, bringing together party documents, political manifestoes, activist testimonies, and literary texts produced within and around the Naxalbari movement between 1967 and 1975. The interpretive framework draws centrally on Michel Foucault's theorisation of discourse and silence, Simone de Beauvoir's analysis of women's structural positioning as Other within masculine political consciousness, and Spivak's theorisation of the subaltern subject. The methodology is attentive to what the archive does not say — the structuring silences that Foucault identifies as integral to any discursive formation — as much as to what it explicitly articulates. In practice, this means reading the absence of women as political subjects in Charu Majumdar's writings not as an oversight but as a constitutive feature of the movement's political imagination. Alongside official party documents, the article makes extensive use of women's testimonies, particularly that of Krishna Bandyopadhyay, treating first-person accounts as historical evidence that complicates and contests the movement's self-representation. Literary texts produced by Naxalite poet-activists are read not for their aesthetic value alone but as documents of a political unconscious that reproduces patriarchal norms even within a revolutionary formation. The methodology is therefore consciously counter-archival: it reads the dominant archive against itself, foregrounding the voices and experiences that the official record of the movement systematically marginalised. This approach aligns with the broader project of feminist social history, which insists that gender must be restored as a category of historical analysis even — and especially — in contexts where it has been rendered invisible.

### III. THE PARTY DOCUMENTS: ADDRESSING THE UNIVERSAL SUBJECT

The writings of Charu Majumdar, the principal theoretical voice of the CPI (ML), consistently address the various constituencies of the revolutionary movement in gender-neutral but implicitly masculine terms. His calls to action are directed 'to the youth and students', 'to the comrades who are working in the rural areas', 'to the working class', 'to the revolutionary peasants'. Women, as a distinct subject of revolutionary address, are conspicuously absent.<sup>3</sup>

This is not a superficial oversight. It reflects a deep theoretical commitment to class as the exclusive axis of political analysis. In the Maoist framework that Majumdar adapted, the primary contradiction was between imperialism and feudalism on one hand and the peasant masses on the other. Gender, sexuality, and domestic patriarchy were not theorised as constitutive of the social formation that the revolution aimed to transform. They were, at best, secondary contradictions that would resolve themselves in the wake of class liberation.<sup>4</sup>

The consequences of this theoretical framework for women activists were severe. As Krishna Bandyopadhyay, a woman who participated in the movement, recorded: 'Within the party, women were considered second-class citizens. We were not given any line at all.'<sup>5</sup> Women were employed principally as nurses, couriers and shelter-givers — roles that reproduced, within the revolutionary formation, the domestic and care-giving functions that patriarchal society had always assigned to women. The revolutionary party, in its internal structure, mirrored the household it nominally sought to overturn.

### IV. THE LITERATURE OF THE NAXALBARI MOVEMENT: GENDER AND METAPHOR

The literary productions of the Naxalite movement reproduce and amplify the movement's political gender blindness. In the poetry of Dronacharya Ghosh, a poet-activist of the movement, the beloved woman is repeatedly figured as the promised future — supine, passive, awaiting liberation by male revolutionary agency. She is the destination, not the agent, of the historical process.<sup>6</sup>

This figuration is profoundly telling. It reveals that even within a radical politics that claimed to speak for all the oppressed, the woman retained her traditional function within patriarchal representation: she is the object of desire, the symbol of the utopian future, the reward that awaits the male warrior. She is the territory to be liberated, not the subject who liberates. This is precisely what Simone de Beauvoir identified as the structure of masculine consciousness: 'He is the Subject, he is the Absolute — she is the Other.'<sup>7</sup>

The movement's theoretical blindness to gender thus finds its formal correlate in the literary imagination. Even those poets who were most radical in their class consciousness — who denounced feudalism, imperialism, and caste oppression — could not imagine the woman as a revolutionary subject. She remained, in their imagery, a metaphor for the world that the (male) revolution would win.

### V. THE EXPERIENCE OF WOMEN ACTIVISTS: INVISIBLE LABOUR

Against the grain of the movement's official self-representation, the testimonies of women who participated in the Naxalbari struggle offer a different account. Krishna Bandyopadhyay's memoir records two incidents that are particularly illuminating. In the first, she and her female comrades demolished school benches during a Gandhi birthday ceremony — an act of revolutionary boldness whose sole motivation was to gain a mention in the party mouthpiece *Deshabrati*.<sup>8</sup> In the second, she experienced elation when the police came to enquire about her — satisfaction that the state had finally recognised her as its enemy. These are not the testimonies of confident political subjects. They are the testimonies of women whose participation in the revolution was systematically devalued, who had to demonstrate their relevance through increasingly desperate acts.

The movement's spatial organisation reinforced this marginalisation. Women were sometimes barred from going to villages on the presumption that rural populations would not respond to female political leadership.<sup>9</sup> Those who remained in the city were assigned to hospitals and safe houses — spaces that were, once again, extensions of the domestic. The city — already figured in revolutionary discourse as a 'ghost-city' whose fate depended on the peasant uprising in the countryside — became, for women activists, a space of enforced waiting and secondary participation.

### VI. CONCLUSION: THE UNFINISHED REVOLUTION

The Naxalbari movement's gender blindness constitutes a foundational failure of its revolutionary project. A politics that claims to speak for all the oppressed but cannot theorise the oppression of women within its own ranks has not merely failed women; it has failed its own stated principles. The movement's literature, which is rich in class-conscious critique and revolutionary fervour, is correspondingly impoverished in its imagination of gender relations, reproducing in aesthetic form the very patriarchal hierarchies that a genuinely radical politics would have needed to confront.<sup>10</sup>

This failure is, moreover, historically consequential. The invisibility of gender within Naxalite revolutionary discourse contributed to a pattern that has persisted within South Asian left politics: the assumption that class liberation is the master key that will unlock all other forms of subordination, and that gender, caste, and sexuality are secondary concerns to be addressed after the revolution. The testimony of women who participated in the Naxalbari movement suggests that this assumption exacted a high human cost.

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