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Memory and Everyday Life in Prisons: The Naxalite Female Prisoner in West Bengal (1967-1975)

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Introduction

The Naxalbari Movement is regarded as a watershed in the long history of communist movement in postcolonial India. In 1970s, when the Communist Party of India (Marxist Leninist) under the leadership of Charu Mazumdar, took a radical turn, large number of activists were imprisoned in various jails for their involvement with the CPI(ML) politics (which was a bitter critique of the Indian state at this time). The Naxalbari Movement was a violent uprising that emerged in 1968 and continued till the middle of the 1970s. It took up the cause of the rural poor peasantry, who were suffering under the oppressive feudal order of the *jotedars* (absentee landlords). Sumanta Banerjee argues in his book, *In the Wake of Naxalbari* that the movement was a “turning point” in the long history of communist movements that had long-lasting impacts on the political and social fabric of post-independent India.

This paper is situated in West Bengal (which witnessed the emergence of the movement, and continued to remain an important site of development) and discusses the memories of Naxal prisoners through the crucial years of their imprisonment (1967-1977). In studies of the colonial Indian prison based on governmental documents, (such as police files, prison manuals) the prisoners are defined in a limited scope, mostly seen as objects of oppression and not as subjects themselves.² In colonial prison studies, prisoners’ individual and collective experiences often get obliterated, giving way to a richer study of the structural apparatus. However, in my ethnographic study, prisoners’ memories often revealed that the prison was not merely a space of control and oppression but sometimes even emerged as a space of learning and affect.

The history of the everyday life of prison is based on several “anecdotes” and memories revealed through oral histories and autobiographical accounts. In doing so, it in a way differs from how the prison is defined as a “normative punitive space.” This paper traces the prisoners' experience, both as an individual and in a collective whereby she assumes a subjective role, through her memory and recall. In so doing, the prison is remembered as a

space of learning and also as a space where affective ties were forged.¹ The interviewees, who remember the prison as a site of affect, counter the apparatus of “reform” and provide a new optic on prison life. Reading experience is a subject forming process. Joan Scott argues that though it is individuals who have experiences, through the process of experiencing, subjects are constituted. Furthermore, subjects have a certain agency that is produced through the situations and statuses conferred on them.

The “prison experience” itself may produce multiple subjectivities among the prisoners, as will be traced in this paper.

The paper is divided into three sections, while the first section will discuss the gendered differences of remembering prison life, the second section describes the various practices of *adda*, story-telling and playing indoor games, that forged newer bonds of community amongst prisoners. The final section analyses an idea of “jail as a university” or a site of learning that repeatedly emerged in the recollections of the prisoners.

Memory and History

Methodologically, I use oral history to address the various research questions.² This paper is based on several in-depth conversations with seven interviewees over a period of two years. Often the conversations were unstructured and mostly focused on the theme of “remembering prison life.” It is only afterwards that a thematic narration was teased out from the transcripts. In doing so, I borrowed substantially from Alessandro Portelli’s argument that the objective of oral history is to unearth the lesser known events of daily life of a certain social group (in this case the Naxal prisoners). Portelli argues that the validity of oral sources lies not in the “facticity” of the narration, but more in generating the “meaning of the event.” Interviews and testimonies often reveal unknown experiences of known events, and thus they focus on the “unexplored areas of the daily life of non-hegemonic groups.” In my analysis, my subjects do not unproblematically constitute the “non-hegemonic”, as we will see their own substantial political engagements within the prison, but through all their actions, often which led to them assuming certain pedagogical roles amongst the rest of the prison population. They consistently impressed upon the idea that the jail authorities were “enemies” of the prisoners. Thus it is the Naxal prisoner’s historical memory that becomes the means of historical reconstruction in this case. Arising from the paucity of archival (governmental) documents on the theme, while both the Naxalbari Movement and prison as an institutional space are extensively researched upon, the former is usually analysed in terms of its political goals and effects. Similarly, most historical studies on the prison relate to the colonial Indian prison.

¹ Though I borrow from the field of affect theory, this paper is invested in understanding the processes of affectivity between prisoners that led to new solidarities among these subjects.

² This paper is primarily based on oral interviews of former CPI(ML) activists. These interviews are in-depth conversations in nature and they were conducted during the author’s M.Phil. fieldwork in 2017. For ethical and academic purposes: the names of the respondents have been changed. This is to keep their identities anonymous, sometimes on their request and further supplemented by the author’s discretion. All the material in Bengali have been translated and transcribed by the author.

Gendered Act of Remembering

In using oral testimonies along with other written sources, I describe a particular “telling of history” that is based on the “voice of historical memory of the survivor,” as Kavita Panjabi argues. Lipika Kamra while writing on the veracity of autobiographical narratives says though they are “not self-evident statements of historical truth” autobiographies should be interpreted in such a way that one focuses not merely on the individual alone, but rather on the “networks of identities, relationships, and structures within which the individual is embedded.”³ The survivor’s memory is of primary importance here, as James Young argues: “The survivor’s memory includes both experiences of history and of memory: the ways memory has already become part of personal history, the ways misapprehension of events and the silences that come with incomprehension were part of events as they unfolded then and part of memory as it unfolds now.”⁴ In this paper, the survivor is not essentially to be seen as the “victim” merely, but the survivor of a past experience of imprisonment. The narrative constantly alternates between the two forms of memory; in individual memory and the collective memory of prisonhood, further reinstating that the act of remembering is a subjective process.

This paper is constructed from “anecdotes” or “small units”, (a predominant tool of microhistory) narrated by Naxal prisoners based on the everyday interactions they had with other inmates.⁵ I argue that these small units do not undermine the “big details” of prison life; instead, they are the windows to a nuanced structural analysis of the prison. The prisoner who is usually devalued in the existing historical accounts on prisons is now brought to centre stage, and it is the prisoner’s voice that assumes primacy in understanding the prison. During conversations, while women interviewees spoke about the shared space more than men, each of these memories was of an individualised experience. Women recalled prisoners interacting with each other through cooking and reading letters aloud. They often defined the prison ward as their “homes.” Recollections of male prisoners, however, remained “official” and rarely admitted the personal. Moreover, women usually refrained from addressing the general hardship (that is prison life) and instead remembered how this “experience” had, in turn, transformed them personally. They also sometimes insisted that prison life had “shattered a lot of preconceived notions.” Kishori Banerjee (who was a middle-class Bengali girl from Calcutta) explained that her “narrow-mindedness” would initially deter her interaction with other inmates. She also felt that it was a “limitation of her political ideology (*rajniti*)”, that somehow did not open her up to the possibility of

³ Lipika Kamra, “Self-Making through Self-Writing: Non Sovereign Agency in Women’s Memoirs from the Naxalite Movement”, *South Asian Multidisciplinary Academic Journal (Ethics of Self-Making in Postcolonial India)*, Vol. 7, 2013. p: 3

⁴ James Young, “Between History and Memory: The Uncanny Voices of Historian and Survivor”, *History and Memory*, Vol. 9, No. 1/2, (Passing into History: Nazism and the Holocaust beyond Memory — In Honor of Saul Friedlander on His Sixty-Fifth Birthday). Fall 1997 p: 53.

⁵ Carlo Ginzburg’s theorisation of “microhistory” (1977) refers to writing history based on small units of analysis, such as events and individuals, the concept was further studied in several geopolitical contexts, the German historian Alf Ludtka, used it to study *Alltagsgeschichte* (history of everyday). In have borrowed, from these theoretical standpoints to further use anecdotes as a form of writing history.

interacting with those who were culturally different from her. She remembered that she initially felt inhibited and alienated from the ordinary prisoners because they were mostly from a stark different background. Her other inmates were usually rural and tribal women, in Hoogly Jail (where she was first imprisoned), she recalled,

I don't know, somehow I felt inhibited in the beginning. I would not mingle with them and just sat by myself. Sometimes I would sing on my own, sometimes I even cried. One day a girl named Khunsun came up to me and asked why I was crying. All the others used to sit in a circle every evening and give *adda*.⁶ She asked me to join them and I told her I would not like it because they used crass language. She pulled me by my hand and said, I have misjudged them, they are not as bad and took me to the others. After befriending them I was surprised that they were not half as bad. [trans]⁷

Similarly, Mary Tyler in her introduction of "Sister, you are still here? Diary of a Sindhi Woman Prisoner" commented that the diarist, who was a "city girl from a middle-class urban background," initially found herself at a loss in prison. Tyler observed that, "as a result of her imprisonment, she was thrown into intimate contact with women from classes she may have otherwise scarcely encountered." These women were at the outset, confronted with a sense of alienation from other inmates which was only bridged overtime.⁸

On the other hand, male interviewees consistently referred to their prison life with regard to their political participation and the struggles they launched against the authorities; they also elaborately spoke of a primary task, as disseminating their political ideas among the other prisoners and thereby to winning them over to their side during any clash with the authorities. Amit Bhattacharyya in his autobiography admitted that his interaction with the other prisoners was driven by his political motives. He also indicated that the Naxal prisoners assumed a "pedagogical role" amongst other prisoners and constantly tried to politically indoctrinate them. Similarly, Bappa Sengupta in his interview recalled,⁹

After interacting with the 'ordinary prisoner' I realised that they had a certain amount of respect for us. This stemmed from the belief that their (*oder*) life of crime was condemnable, but the political work we (*amra*) did [had] a place in society. *They*

⁶ Kishori Banerjee, interviewed, August 2017, Kolkata

⁷ Kishori Banerjee joined the CPI(ML), while she was still in school. Kishori was a part of the rural programme of the party (that is, she mostly worked in the villages) and was finally arrested in 1970 and subsequently jailed in Hoogly jail (West Bengal, India). Kishori was later transferred to Presidency Jail, Kolkata and continued to live there until she was finally released in 1977, after the National Emergency ended.

⁸ Mary Tyler writes that, Akhtar Baluch, was a young student activist, who was arrested several times during the national movement. The account used in this chapter, is a compilation of sections of her journal, from Hyderabad Jail in 1970. Mary Tyler and Akhtar Baluch, "Sister are you still there? The diary of a Sindhi woman prisoner", *Race & Class*, Vol. 18, 1977 : p: 220.

⁹ Bappa Sengupta was imprisoned in Presidency Jail Kolkata, between the years of 1973-1977. He got involved with the CPI(ML) politics as a 19 year old college student. After his release Sengupta continued his activism and later joined the APDR (Association for People's Democratic Rights), a civil rights organisation in West Bengal.

also respected us, because we were educated, on the other hand, *they* were not. [trans.]¹⁰

This honest admission by Bhattacharyya provides a window on the overall perception that male prisoners had about the rest of the prison population. The account also illustrates that there was a strong sense of *us* and *them* (*ora/amra*) among male prisoners, also underscored by Sengupta's account, since evidently the male Naxal prisoners perceived themselves as a collective identity and the rest of the prison population was understood as "less privileged and ignorant." In other words, they were considered as the "other."

Interactions and Exchanges among Prisoners

In both interviews Kishori [Banerjee] repeatedly mentioned her interactions with different women in prison. These women were all "different" from her (in terms of their socio-cultural identities), nonetheless, she believed they were instrumental in "shaping me [her] up as a person". As the interview progressed to the time Kishori was transferred to Burdawan Jail, where she met *Mashi* (Aunty), who was about fifty years old and had been charged with murder, Kishori remembered: "*Mashi* was so kind and compassionate, always thinking about others..... She used to pull me close to her and put me to sleep. She used to nurse me to sleep like a mother. I used to love the sweet smell of her sweat. She would embrace me and I would sleep on her bosom."¹¹ These interactions aided a growing sense of intimacy between every inmate that ultimately helped to develop a more collective orientation within the ward. Kishori's recollection of *Mashi* as her surrogate mother figure is emblematic of this growing sense of intimacy.

Casual conversations or *addas* with other inmates were an intrinsic part of prison life which both Geeta and Kishori referred to as *Jailkhanar adda*. Women prisoners congregated for conversations everywhere, mostly unnoticed by jail authorities. The practice of reading personal letters aloud or calling each other by their familial pet names can be read as a slow erosion of any sense of privacy among prisoners, as Geeta casually mentions later on, "*Kono kichu personal chilo na*" (there was nothing personal amongst us). Joya Mitra narrates an instance of *adda* in Behrampore Jail. Mitra was mostly confined to a solitary cell due to her prolonged illness and found little opportunity to have such conversations.¹² However, this one incident of *adda*, she remembered:

It was a memorable afternoon, about ten of us stayed back in the hospital with *Baroda*. The rest sat in the front of the closed door spending their free afternoon chatting with each other. I crushed the boiled rice into one plate for all twelve of us. Shanta brought out her hidden stash of mustard oil. The oil tasted better than the very best mayonnaise. I mixed it in the rice and we thoroughly enjoyed our picnic lunch in

¹⁰ Bappa Sengupta, interviewed, Kolkata, 3/10/2017.

¹¹ Kishori Banerjee, interviewed, Kolkata, 8/9/2017.

¹² Joya Mitra, left her home to join the political movement of CPI(ML) in 1968, when she was 18 years old, her political work involved working in villages for the next two years until she was arrested in September, 1970 in Calcutta. She was imprisoned for four years as an under-trial prisoner, and in the meanwhile, moved between Behrampore Jail and Presidency Jail.

a prison cell. They had all been in jail longer than I had so my two-year-old stories of the outside world still sound fresh to them. As they listened they traversed their own terrain of memories.¹³

Dipesh Chakrabarty describes *adda*, as a “practice of friends getting together for long and unrigorous conversations.”¹⁴ However, for the Bengali community, *adda* is associated with a certain “pleasure in the pure art of communication” and debate that necessarily does not always reach a “terminal point.” Thereby *adda* in itself is seen as a source of pleasure; *Jailkhanar adda* is in many ways a distinct phenomenon though it also draws upon the typical Bengali *adda* described by Chakrabarty. Yet it has its distinctive form, especially since it took place within the female ward, it thereby exceeds the historical limits of the *adda* as an “intimate male space.” Chakrabarty argues that historically women rarely participated in the forums of *adda* and only in the 1960s did some women come to the Coffee House in Calcutta for “midday addas”. According to Chakrabarty, Bengali modernity never transcended the opposition between the domestic space and *adda*. The *adda* for Naxal prisoners held a different value for each participant; for Joya Mitra, who was confined in a solitary cell, the afternoon picnic was both memorable and rejuvenating.

For Kishori and Geeta, who lived in female wards of Presidency Jail in Calcutta, the *adda* was a more regular affair. Although the nature and content of the *adda* differed for each of them, it was uniformly a source of pleasure amidst the hardships of prison. *Jailkhanar adda* always reached a terminal point in terms of its intention of providing respite to the prisoner, bringing them together in the process. It is also important to note how *adda* continued to resonate within the prison as a certain “middle-class Bengali culture”, a continuity of certain cultural practices that these women carried into the prison from their worlds outside.

The prison space, which is far removed from the public, witnessed a breakdown of barriers, and the women’s *adda* served both as a source of pleasure and as a tactic for surviving the hardships of prison life. Prisoners also interacted through a variety of activities, such as performing skits, reading and reciting together and also sometimes playing games that they devised.

Another form of everyday interaction between prisoners was through the practice of storytelling or role play. Kishori remembered that the female inmates often spent their time playing a “game of storytelling”, every evening they would sing songs or write down stories. Krishna Bandapadhyay mentioned this unusual practice of role play or *shomporko patanor khela* (or, a game about familial relationships), where inmates pretended and enacted as a family unit. She said, “We were all united into a small family inside the prison. We were a group without any patriarch or matriarch.”¹⁵ The *shomporko-patanotor khela* in this context was not merely an imaginative device but reinforced familial bonds within the prison. The metaphor of “family” is important here, as it reflects that these women, who had left their

¹³ Joya Mitra, *Killing Days: Prison Memoirs*, New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2004. p: 35

¹⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarty, “*Adda: A History of Sociality*” in *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000. p: 181

¹⁵ Krishna Bandapadhyay, “*Meenakshi tui kothaye?*” (Where are you Meenakshi?). pp: 285-286

homes at an early age and subsequently shunned by their families due to their political work, re-imagined the prison as a site of affect and family.¹⁶ *We Were Making History* (an evocative feminist historical text, tracing the lives of women who participated in the Telangana Movement), argues that often the “metaphor of family was used to describe the party”, which must be read as a “reinforcement of feudal cultures” that wanted to ascribe particular gendered roles to women activists within the party unit.¹⁷

While a study of the Naxalbari Movement would also indicate similar practices within the CPI(ML), the prison space due to its segregated nature allows the metaphor of family to be read as a specific instance of “coping” by these women. One doesn’t get a clear understanding of the exact enactment of the family in this case, however the rejection of “the patriarchal feudal structure of family” was also an extension of their political ideology that critiqued it (normative structures), as a source of oppression. The re-imagination of the “prison as home” is indeed revealing, and we find it in many prison memoirs. This “feeling of home” emanates from a general sense of loss that the prisoner had experienced.

Learning and Unlearning

Sumanta Banerjee observed that in the early 1970s the CPI(ML) leadership appealed to sections of young students to join the Naxalbari struggle. He identified this phase as the “youth upsurge”, following the provocative appeal of Charu Mazumder (the leader of the party).¹⁶ Banerjee points out the CPI(ML) “sought to give a political direction to the...Calcutta students by providing an ideological justification and sometimes channelizing the youthful anger.”¹⁸ Thereafter, a large number of youths joined the movement by dropping out of schools and colleges. This lack of a formal education is somehow supplemented by the “prison experience” for most of these interviewees. It proved to be transformative, and introduced them to “new ideas and realities”, that their early life or their political activism had failed to provide. A popular notion of the “Jail as a University” emerged in their recollections. Joya Mitra observed that for her the jail was the equivalent of a “real university,” which taught her valuable lessons in life. She said, “I hadn’t been to the regular university, I left after four days in class (at the University of Calcutta) following the

¹⁶ Krishna Bandopadhyay, joined the CPI(ML) as an 18 year, old in 1970. Bandopadhyay belonged to a middle class Bengali household from Hoogly, West Bengal and claims that she was drawn to politics (as it promised a social change) because of the discrimination she faced at home. She said that only her mother supported her political work, as her (Krishna’s) maternal uncles had been involved in communist politics before. However, her paternal uncles (with whom she cohabitated) disliked her political activism. She narrated he once scolded her and said “this girl will fall in trouble soon”. Krishna left home soon after this incident (when she was 19 years old) to work in villages soon after, she claimed that he decision was to not “I will cause trouble for everybody in the family.” Similarly for Meenakshi Sen, too she left her home for political work at a young age (20 year old). She belonged to an urban middle class family from Calcutta and had always been well acquainted to left politics.

¹⁷ Stree Shakti Sanghatana, *‘We Were MakingHistory’: Life Stories of Women in the Telangana People’s Struggle.*, New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989. p: 269

¹⁸ Sumanta Banerjee, *In the Wake of Naxalbari.* p: 225, quoted that, Charu Mazumdar said, “it will give me the greatest pleasure if you (individuals between 18-24 years) plunge yourselves into the revolutionary struggle here, instead of wasting your energy in passing examinations.”

CPI(ML) directives. But the very learning process was done in Jail. I came to understand what my people are, who really are my people.”¹⁹

Similarly, Kishori and Geeta had started their political work at an early age, Kishori mentioned how as a 19-year-old she was “inexperienced and ignorant about the ways of life.” When she met a transgender woman, Jamuna, in Burdawan Jail she was quite astonished. She remembered asking Jamuna, “*tomader moddhey bhalabashahoye?*” (do you make love?) and Jamuna humored her by calling her an “ignorant Naxal”. The specificity of this account is that it highlights that Kishori’s misnomer of ‘conjugal love’ as *bhalobasha* (romantic love) specifically revealed her unease to address questions of sexuality and Jamuna’s response buttressed the fact. It also indicated her “unaware and inexperienced self,” as her political work (the party outfit) had failed to introduce her to concepts of counter heteronormative sexuality in the way that she encountered in prison.

Mitra, who was kept in seclusion in Behrampore Jail, hardly got an opportunity to interact with the other inmates; however, she still managed to observe the other women prisoners whenever she could. She noticed “determination and willpower of her fellow women prisoners” and especially remembered Nazima Khatun, who was a seventy-year old Muslim woman. Mitra recalled: “She was a bigger woman, and a lifer. I never saw her crying, sometimes she became very sad and sat quietly, but mostly all throughout the day doing chores she had invented. She used to kindle dried leaves (that she collected throughout the day) and make *chanabhuj* (a fried snack). This took her hours and sometimes days, but she created her own world of love. This power of love, this power of taking everything and turning it into a thing of love, taught me afterward how to endure and include more and more people in my own world.”²⁰

Furthermore, Kishori recounted the time in Hoogly Jail when she was sick with a severe fever and was also menstruating at that time. During that time, a fellow inmate named Champa had nursed her and even washed and cleaned her used feminine hygiene products. Kishori was overwhelmed and said, “I could not even imagine she would do that.” She recalled, “I have seen such violence in jails, but then again there was so much love; prisoners were so compassionate to each other.”²¹ Apart from these memories of their stay, these women also mentioned that being incarcerated had a profound effect on their personalities and also subsequently altered them. Prison introduced them to people who constantly challenged their earlier “middle-class notions” of life. Joya Mitra claimed that living in the female ward made her understand the conditions and struggles of women. She implied that it made her more “sensitive and receptive” as a person; she saw the jail experience as more educational than her political training before. Joya recalled:

Mostly it is the women I saw, that was the real lesson of my political thoughts. Before that we were thinking from a lens of theory, but while in Jail I came to think of individual people’s stories and came to understand that these stories were not as simple as we thought them to be. That was the first time I started understanding the politics of love and not loving, till now I believe we should understand more and in a

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Joya Mitra, *Killing Days: Prison Memoirs*, New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2004. p: 112-114.

²¹ Kishori Banerjee, interviewed, Kolkata, September, 2017.

better, deeper way the politics of love, because if I have to say power, power meaning the ability to do something constructive, [it] is the power of love, not the power of violence, hatred or division or exclusion. And this lesson began in Jail.²²

For Kishori too, the primary function of prison is to punish and torture the inmates. However, with efforts from her fellow inmates the jail was transformed into a “university” and the “prison experience” became a learning process.

Discussions around “love” had a special part in the everyday life and are embedded in the memory of these prisoners. Rajashri Dasgupta, in her obituary for Meenakshi Sen, wrote:

We shared a bond of mutual respect and love, we had to know every detail about each other, especially on matters of personal ideology and political views. Revolution is not devoid of Love and romance; we spent sleepless nights in jail discussing about love, the variants of love, first love, love in school; about the love that could not prosper under parental control, and about our dreams about the future – those stories of love, so many stories of love.[trans.]²³

The intrinsic link between “love and revolution” that Dasgupta points out in her account is analysed by Srila Roy as a specific “imagination,” evoked in communist cultures. Roy argues during the time of Naxalbari, there was definite “subordination of conjugal love,” for the larger goal of “revolution or liberation.” The activists were urged to show “selfless love to the utopian idea of *biplop* (revolution),” often which meant the loss of the personal. There is a certain “politicisation of love” in this case.²⁴ Belonging to this tradition, the prisoners in my study speak of a different kind of love in this context, the one that cannot be categorised as an extension of “politicisation of love:” that is, love for “revolution,” or conjugal love. However, it is indicative of a different “personal intimate love” that stems from cohabiting in a common space (that is the prison), which also proves to be an emancipator.

The idea of the “politics and power of love” that is repeatedly mentioned by the women prisoners revealed the “emotional journey” that characterised their years of imprisonment. These experiences, as they are remembered and recounted, throw light on this “notion of compassion” that fellow prisoners demonstrated. Martha Nussbaum argues that human beings experience emotions that are both shaped by individual histories as well as social norms, sometimes they are further marked by gendered differences.²⁵ This notion of the gendered difference of emotions is particularly useful in understanding how the women prisoners, in this case, tend to address and vocalise certain specific emotions of love and compassion that they felt in prison, as opposed to the men in my study.

²² Joya Mitra, interviewed by Dr. Uma Chakravarti (transcription and translation author’s).

²³ Rajashri Dasgupta, “Meenakshi ke Mone Kore”. (In Remembering Meenakshi), *Mukhayob (special edition, Meenakshi: Jibon, Kotha r Sristi)*, April-May, 2014. pp:303-303.

²⁴ Srila Roy, “Bhalobasha, Biye, Biplop” (Love, Marriage, Revolution), in *Remembering Revolution: Gender, Violence and Subjectivity in India’s Naxalbari Movement*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012. pp: 99-119.

²⁵ Martha Nausbaum. *Upheavals of Thought: Intelligence of Emotions*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001pp: 140-141.

Conclusion

Multiple examples of sharing and communicating complicate the picture of a prison as merely an institution of control. The picture of the prison as a punitive space is challenged by these narratives of human endurance and also humanising experiences. The prison was for some prisoners a new social space that transcended the more repressive segregation to achieve new solidarities. In a sense, this provides a space for a re-imagining of the prison set-up, through the focus on the subjectivities of prisoners. Practices of *adda*, story-telling and playing games within the ward helped cement affective ties between prisoners. The predominantly “Bengali, middle-class culture” of the Naxals was challenged inducing greater sharing and coexistence within the prison.

Finally, in the section about “jail as a learning experience”, we understand how these subjects did not merely recall their past life, but how everyday was transformed in a way that remained a lifelong legacy. An analysis of everyday life in prison evidently ruptures the idea of prison as a purely repressive space, indicating that there was possibly a much richer, unexplored, transformative experience when one pays attention to life stories of inmates. Coping mechanisms, strategies of solidarity, and long-lasting lessons that arose from forms of cooperation come to the fore to present a fuller, richer account of prison life in West Bengal, India around this time.

Works Cited

Collection of Interviews

The oral interviews were conducted in Kolkata and Hoogly district of West Bengal, India between August 2017 to September 2018 as a part of the author’s M.Phil fieldwork. The author is also indebted to Prof. Uma Chakravarti for giving her the permission to use some of the interviews collected by Prof. Chakravarti herself. All interviews were primarily in Bengali which was then transcribed and translated by the author.

A list of interviewees is given below:

1. Amitabho Kumar (name changed), interviewed, Hoogly (West Bengal), 22/09/2017
2. Bappa Sengupta (name changed), interviewed, Kolkata, 3/10/2017, 16/7/2018 and 17/7/2018
3. Kishori Banerjee(name changed), interviewed, Kolkata, 30/8/2017 and 8/9/2017
4. Geeta Ray, interviewed (name changed), Kolkata, 11/09/2017 and 21/7/2018
5. Biren Sen, interviewed (name changed), Kolkata, 28/09/2017
6. Mitali Sen,(name changed) conducted by Dr. Uma Chakravarti (sourced out from her)
8. Joya Mitra, interviewed by Dr. Uma Chakravart

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