

**The Role of Violence and Its Backlash in the Naxalbari Movement
(1965-1975):
Re-reading History and *Inquilaab: A Play in Three Acts* (1971)**

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Introduction

In this paper, my objective is to study the representation of violence and its disillusionment in the Naxalbari movement of Bengal (1965-1975) as dramatized in *Inquilaab: A Play in Three Acts* (1971)¹ by Asif Currimbhoy. The Naxalbari movement was the first post-independence insurgency in India that incorporated violence within its tenets. This paper shows how violence played a dominating role in the movement. Although the state machinery employed severe repressive measures to suppress the Naxalites, this paper is mostly concerned with the use of violence within the movement. I interrogate that violence by depicting how one of the tenets of the movement, the so-called annihilation doctrine,² pushed the objectives of the movement to the margin. Employing critical lenses supplied by Slavoj Žižek and Hal Draper, I analyse how *Inquilaab* engages with historical events by showing that the movement failed due to its promotion of violence.

Political Violence in India

Political violence, especially peasant violence, has been practised in India since the beginning of colonial rule: “No less than 110 violent peasant uprisings have been recorded between 1783 and 1900” (Guha, 1983: 6). This use of violence, albeit mostly local, was a major characteristic of peasant violence in India. If we dissect this violence using the terms of subjective and objective violence as proposed by Slavoj Žižek, the violence of the peasantry would fall into the category of subjective violence. Žižek has delved into the roots of violence to decipher the cause of the most visible form of violence which resulted in distinguishing between subjective and objective violence. He writes, “subjective violence is seen as a perturbation of the normal, peaceful state of things. However, objective violence is precisely the violence inherent to this normal state of things. Objective violence is invisible since it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as subjectively violent” (Žižek 2008: 5). Objective violence, mostly in the form of systematic violence, usually is not in the form of “direct physical violence” but can be perceived in the “more subtle forms of coercion that sustain relations of domination and exploitation” (Žižek 2008: 10). Thus,

¹ The term *inquilaab* means “revolution,” and is one of the most commonly used phrases among the leftist organisations in India.

² The annihilation doctrine proposed the annihilation of class enemies. According to this doctrine, the educated youths would stay with the villagers, forming guerrilla squads. The squads would then declare their lands to be independent of the landlords, and the landlords would be annihilated. A clearer definition of the doctrine, and how it would aid in creating a new social system, is given in the latter part of the paper.

according to Žižek, subjective violence is a response and an endeavour to end the continuous objective and systematic violence that resulted in the systematic oppression of one group of people by another. We can say, then, that the peasant uprisings that used violence can be recognised as a response to the objective violence of the landlords in particular, and the governmental policies in general. The Tebhaga movement of Bengal provides the evidence that the use of subjective violence among the peasantry did not stop with the transfer of power that asserted the independence of the Indian nation-state. In fact, the Tebhaga movement reaffirms that the tendency towards violence in any mass protest was an inherent quality of the peasantry that revealed itself in the colonial era³ and continued even after Indian independence within the Naxalbari movement. However, this paper reveals how the local trait of peasant violence took a leap to a larger scale and got officially warranted in the Naxalbari movement through the so-called annihilation doctrine proposed by its leaders. The paper argues how this sanctioning of violence was a Blanquist⁴ step that, instead of strengthening the movement, resulted in chaos and anarchy.

The Naxalbari Movement: An Overview through the Lens of Violence

The Naxalbari movement is the first agrarian movement post-Indian independence (Singh 2006, Banerjee 2009). Like the other peasant insurgencies, it employed subjective violence as a primary tool to end the objective violence that the landlords systematically promoted. The Naxalbari movement officially began with the resolutions passed in the Tarai Krishak Sabha on the 18th of March, 1967 (Banerjee, 2009; Bhattacharjee, 2018). Though the Tebhaga movement resulted in the passage of the Land Ceiling Act in 1953, it could hardly be implemented since the landlords holding beyond 25 acres of land would transfer the excess land to their wives or children and thus easily escape the act. So, the landowners continued to maintain their supremacy in the villages. As Biplab Dasgupta has written, “It was widely recognized that the lack of political will of the parties in power in West Bengal was the key factor in the poor implementation of the land reform laws, and the landlords in alliance with the police and local administration could easily deny the poor their rights” (Dasgupta 1974: 86). At this stage, regular party camps were organised by the Communist Party of India (Marxist), shortened as C.P.I. (M), trying to gain popularity in Bengal (Bhattacharjee 2018). In North Bengal, these camps were organised and headed by Charu Majumdar, Kanu Sanyal and other veteran peasant leaders who had been associated with the Tebhaga movement. Bhattacharjee notes, “these camps and party classes aimed to bring a change among the peasants from class-in-itself to class-for-itself” (Bhattacharjee 2018: 22-24):

From 1951, there was continuous movement; the Kishan Sabha built up its organisation during 1951-54; in 1955-56, the bonus struggle in tea garden labourers went hand in hand. Responding to the call of the West Bengal Kishan Sabha, the Naxalbari Unit carried on the movement for the occupation of Benami land during 1958-62; clashes occurred between jotedars and peasants and about two thousand peasants were arrested in 1958-59” (Sen 1982: 215).

³ The use of violence by the peasantry and indeed the masses since the colonial era is recorded by Sumit Sarkar, Ranajit Guha and other Marxist and subaltern historians. In fact, as Sumit Sarkar (1983) argued, the autonomy of the peasantry was visible through their violent actions.

⁴ The term Blanquism comes from the French political scientist and activist named Louis Auguste Blanqui (1805–1881). He proposed that revolution should be carried out by a small group of organised and secretive conspirators. After seizing power, the revolutionaries would introduce socialism in the state.

Hence, it can be concluded that violence had always been a part of the movement since its initial days and was repeatedly exhibited through the peasant insurgencies.

At such a juncture, there was an upheaval in North Bengal: “[T]he farmers, sharecroppers and landless agricultural labourers of one of the villages of Naxalbari were largely against a tyrant landlord named Buddhiman Tirke. When he killed a farmer named Bigal Kishan, the farmers of the area rose against him” (Das 2015: 50). Since the villagers received the support of the veteran peasant leaders, they became more inclined toward the political organisation. Hence, the Krishak Sabha was attended by more than 1800 peasants from North Bengal (Sen 1982). Bhattacharjee writes, “On 18th March 1967, the Siliguri sub-divisional peasant convention was held in Rambola Jote” (Bhattacharjee 2018: 23), where four doctrines were adopted: 1) police were not allowed to enter the village; 2) arms were to be taken away from landlords; 3) excess lands were to be seized from landlords and distributed among the peasants; and 4) lands were to be made available for tillers (Mukherjee 1987, Dasgupta 2011, Banerjee 2009). It is to be noted that no resolution regarding the annihilation doctrine was passed in this meeting: “The line adopted in Naxalbari was not to annihilate the landlord physically but to wage a struggle to get rid of the feudal system” (Bhattacharjee 2018: 24). Following the Rambola Jote meeting, there was an increase in armed demonstrations against the landlords and redistribution of land among the tillers: “In May, Hareprasad Konar, the Land Revenue Minister met Sanyal, and the Superintendent of Police proposed that armed demonstrations should cease, and those wanted by police had to surrender” (Mukherjee 1978: 46-48). Following the incident, the police forces tried to enter through the Bijay Nagar Garden area on 19th May, 1967 and again on 22nd and 23rd May. On each of those days they were compelled to retreat in the face of armed resistance by the peasants (Bhattacharjee 2018: 24). Thereafter, two violent acts committed by the Naxalbari took place on 24th May 1967 and 25th May 1967: “On 24th May the peasants, armed with bows and arrows, resisted the police party that went to a village to arrest the peasants ... and a policeman was killed; the next day [25th of May] the police party ... fired eighteen rounds killing the peasants that included eight women and three infants” (Sen 1982: 217). Thus, the uprising that used subjective violence was a mode adopted by the peasantry against the objective violence that systematically allowed the landlords to oppress the peasantry.

However, as the movement took on a more violent turn, it started attracting attention from the central government. The conflict between the state machinery and the peasantry also got the attention of C.P.I. (M)’s central committee. Though the four doctrines had been passed in the Krishak Sabha headed by C.P.I. (M) leaders of the Darjeeling zone, the central committee refused to take responsibility for the uprising (Bhattacharjee 2018: 33). Since a few leaders from the Siliguri district and Darjeeling zone refused to withdraw their support from the villagers, they were expelled from the organisation. The few leaders, namely Kanu Sanyal, Charu Majumdar, Khokon Majumdar, and others, formed the All-India Co-Ordination Committee for Communist Revolutionaries (A.I.C.C.R.) on 12th November 1967, which developed into the new political party named Communist Party of India (Marxist Leninist), shortened to C.P.I.(M.L.) on April 22 and was officially declared on May 1, 1969 (Ghosh, 2009; Bhattacharjee, 2018). This newly created political organisation attempted to expand the violence used by the peasantry for their local demands on a larger scale: “After working with the landless peasants for years, Majumdar and Sanyal were convinced that the objective condition in India was ripe for a massive uprising against an oppressive social and political system” (Singh 2006: 72-73). They argued that building the mass organisation throughout India was unnecessary under the prevailing condition, and a simple spark in any part of the rural country would unite the peasants. Hence, the uprising of the peasantry convinced the peasant leaders that violence was necessary for disrupting the existing social system. Mehra writes,

“the class enemy can and should be annihilated through terrorist tactics, rather than be overwhelmed through electoral politics” (Mehra 2000: 178). Thus, they believed that constitutional agitation could not be an option for changing the social structure. The peasant leaders’ commitment to violent struggle was so profound that the new political organisation included armed barricades⁵ within its tactics. The preference for armed struggle was therefore included within the tenets in *Historical Eight Documents* by Charu Majumdar. Indeed, the preference for armed revolution by Majumdar can be deciphered long before the formation of the C.P.I (M.L.). Out of the eight documents written by Majumdar that formed the theoretical base of the political party, six documents spoke against the revisionist policy (Bhattacharjee 15). One of them clearly described the use of annihilation as a *modus operandi*. According to the annihilation doctrine, the educated youths would need to stay with the villagers, instilling class consciousness and forming guerrilla squads. These squads would declare their small areas independent from the slavery of the landlords and redistribute lands among peasants. In case of resistance from the landlord he would be annihilated. Gradually the members of the guerrilla army would increase, and they would be able to snatch power from the hands of landed and finance capitalists, industrialists and the political parties. Thus, the annihilation doctrine, which formed a pillar of the organisation, paved the path for institutionalising the subjective violence of the peasantry on a larger scale.

Violence and *Inquilaab*

The historical section above shows how subjective violence gradually engulfed the whole movement. *Inquilaab: A Play in Three Acts* (1971) by Asif Currimbhoy explores the collateral damage in this use of violence, and how it actually took a Blanquist turn. Indeed, the paper shows that the movement fails in achieving its goals. *Inquilaab* explores the Naxalbari movement through the protagonist, Amar, and Ahmed, the leader. A foil has been created in the character of Das, the father of Amar, a professor who teaches in the same college that Amar attends. By exploring Amar’s journey, the play shows how the prominence of violence resulted in disillusionment among many members associated with the Naxalbari. At the beginning of the play, Amar is influenced by the movement’s policies. However, by the end, he is disillusioned by violence and thus chooses to disentangle himself from the movement.

Through my analysis of the play, my paper explores how the Naxalbari movement unintentionally followed Blanquism. Instead of opting for mass awareness, uniting the peasants and the workers, the movement followed the policy of annihilating its enemies through a group of youths who were affiliated with the movement and acted secretly. It therefore closely followed Blanquism, whereby there is an endeavour by a group of people to bring a new social system through revolution (Johnson 2011). Though violence was not the intention of the movement leaders, as the theoretical organ titled *Historic Eight Documents* mentions, the practical approach turned out to be a model of Blanquism. This was due to the lack of education

⁵ In the Naxalbari movement or any left movement, the term barricade means a defensive barrier. Barricades in the left literature in general means barricade of people who would protect each other and thus form a defensive barrier either against the authorities or the opposing force. What made the barricades of the extremist left movements like the Naxalbari movement different from the barricades of the other left movements was that they were armed. However, these armed barricades were not meant to attack, but only to defend themselves against the armed attacks of the opposing forces. These barricades of peasants were very small and local (consisting of one or two villages). Since violence had always been an intricate feature of the peasant insurgencies or any movement of the masses in the nationalist movements, the concept of armed barricades within the very tenets of the movement was quite suitable for the peasantry and made the movement all the more popular.

of the masses. While Kanu Sanyal argued that the ground⁶ had not been prepared, and the people would not join the movement spontaneously, Charu Majumdar firmly believed that the violent clash in Naxalbari was evidence that the movement would have spontaneous joining of people.⁷ The play also shows how the prominence of the annihilation doctrine resulted in marginalising other aspects of the movement.

The Juxtaposition of Opposite Poles

Before delving deeper into its impact, I shall juxtapose two characters from the text, namely Professor Das and Ahmed, the former representing non-violence, and the latter representing subjective violence. The two scenes of the first act show the ideological differences between the two characters and the choice of the college students as far as their support was concerned. The time frame is 1971, “with [the] Naxal revolt and violence having reached the university campuses” (Currimbhoy 1971: 10). The first scene shows how the students were so highly influenced by the romanticism of the Naxalbari movement that they were not ready to listen to any alternative. The second scene shows how Ahmed, a local leader, preached the annihilation doctrine to the youths in a lecture. Instead of focusing on the principle of uniting the peasants, which was supposed to be the main tool of the movement, the leader only taught the youths to kill the landlords and government officials. Thus, the night class of the leader projects how the movement failed to popularise the principle of uniting the peasants, and instead became a platform of terrorism.

Professor Das is a senior person who had witnessed the colonial days, lived his life by following the principles of Gandhi, and was deeply associated with the mainstream nationalist movements that followed the principle of non-violence. Pained by the Naxalbari movement’s ideology and realising how it influenced the young minds, he tries to deter students from the path of violence followed in the movement. So, he attempts to teach the philosophies of Gandhi and Nehru, and the relevance of constitutional ways to achieve long-term goals. In the first scene, Professor Das is shown to address the entire class in a friendly manner, asking them the reason for their restlessness: “aren’t we all ... restless ... before the break of Durga Puja holidays?” (Currimbhoy 1971: 10). He then tries to teach the students the importance of non-violence propagated by Gandhi in the nationalist movements, and how it successfully attained freedom and created the democratic socialist nation-state and “a free economy” (Currimbhoy 1971: 11). His speech reflects that he is opposed to the Naxalbari movement’s objectives and modus operandi, especially the use of violence. In particular, he opposes to the idea of dismantling the educational structure and the attacks on educational institutions. According to him, the violence that the youths engaged in is futile and has no ulterior aim. Moreover, their engagement with violence could threaten their career and life. So, according to Professor Das, the purpose for the use of violence is not clear among the movement’s participants:

“Are there bombs in your head or brains, gentlemen? I hear there are some amongst you ... the tyranny of minority I call it ... who question these holy institutions of learning ... These are institutions of democratic learning in a democratic government.” (Currimbhoy 1971: 10)

⁶ “Ground” is a metaphor referring to the ideology/mental framework of the masses.

⁷ This is broadly discussed in the following section.

In the later part of the play, in the absence of the students, he reflects on the practice of non-violence. Looking into the pictures of Gandhi and Sir Ashutosh Mukherjee, Professor Das contemplates how the non-violent mode of resistance enabled the Indians to end the objective violence of British colonialism (Currimbhoy 1971). There is a monologue where Professor Das remembers how the Indian Independence was attained by following the non-violent model: “How to make them understand that non-violence is an active philosophy? That it was used by you [Gandhi] to fight violence?” (Currimbhoy 1971: 12). Thus, his view of the movement is unfavourable chiefly due to its use of violence.

In stark contrast to Professor Das, the character of Ahmed, the Naxal leader, believes violence and extremist left ideology to be the only way to remove the class hierarchy. He had fought the police force and defeated them single-handedly by guerrilla tactics in the Chota Nagpur area (Currimbhoy 1971: 19). The police searched for him, but they always met with failure. Being one of the movement leaders, he used to come to the college at night to take classes to recruit participants in it. Thus, while Professor Das tries to teach the values of non-violence to the students, Ahmed believes that theories and non-violence cannot change the contemporary social structure. So, he argues, “revolutionary theory without revolutionary practise means nothing. Everything that you learn here must be put to practice outside” (Currimbhoy 1971: 25). As opposed to Professor Das, Ahmed does not believe in the parliamentary structure since it had failed to alleviate the country’s social problems. As Ahmed says, “parliamentary democracy is not an effective weapon ... an armed struggle is inevitable” (Currimbhoy 1971: 25). Within the contemporary social order, one class of people held all the resources while the other class depended on the former. Ahmed wants to change this unequal structure through the movement. He is certain that only violence, which has been the tool of the peasants, can help the movement to reach its goal: “Without the peasants there can be no revolution. To reject this is to reject the revolution ... [e]stablish peasant bases ... [o]rganise the peasant unions [for] the attack” (Currimbhoy 1971: 25-26). Although Ahmed refers to the peasantry, he speaks about them only in terms of manpower. In his speech there is no mention of arousing the class consciousness of the peasantry. Instead, he speaks merely of uniting the peasants in the hunt for class enemies.

The manner in which Ahmed, who represents the Naxalbari movement in the text, denounces democracy is similar to what Žižek argues in his theory of violence: “Today, the enemy is ... called Democracy” (2008,183). Žižek argues that democracy is always a tool for the people in power and “a passivization of the popular Will ... a form of corruption” (2009, 135-136). Although Žižek is specifically attacking Western bourgeois democracy, Hal Draper has argued that, for Marx, democracy was the ultimate weapon of the proletariat. Democracy, in Marx’s view, was considered to be the only means through which the working class could attain freedom in the long run. As Draper argues, “Marx’s theory moved in the direction of defining consistent democracy in socialist terms and consistent socialism in democratic terms” (1977, 283). Thus, Žižek’s opinion of democracy as being the enemy, which is proposed by Ahmed as well, ignores a fundamental aspect of Marx’s concept of revolution. Furthermore, Ahmed’s speech and teachings express a Blanquist ideology, whereby relatively few individuals carry out the task of revolution.⁸

⁸ In a stinging critique of Žižek’s view of violence, Alan Johnson has argued that Žižek is both anti-democratic and a Blanquist: “Žižek celebrates the moment when ‘Lenin violently displaces Marx’ because he believes that it is ‘only through such a violent displacement that the “original” theory can be put to work’ (2001c). Lenin consummated the marriage of Hegelianism and Blanquism when he substituted an anti-democratic concept of the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ for Marx’s democratic original, thus ‘Marxifying’ arbitrary construction and

The students are shown to be inclined toward the ideology of Ahmed. As mentioned earlier, Act 1, scene 1, introduces the lectures given by the professor during the day, while scene 2 introduces the lectures given by Ahmed at night. The place of action is the same lecture hall. In the first instance, the students do not consider listening to their professor: they interrupt his lecture by banging the desks with their sandals (Currimbhoy 1971: 4). Indeed, the students are so deeply engrossed in far-left ideology that they do not let the professor talk. Instead of allowing him to finish his lecture, they start shouting, “Down with autocratic government, Inquilaab Zindabad, Down with the Bourgeoisie” (Currimbhoy 1971: 4), drowning out the professor’s voice. Thus, any attempt by the professor fails due to the commotion created by the students. On the other hand, the same group of students are completely silent and give their full attention to Ahmed’s lecture (Currimbhoy 1971: 7). The engagement of the students with Ahmed and his ideology proves that they want an immediate solution and are not eager to follow the democratic path. As historian Keith Harnetiaux has argued, “Anti-establishment rhetoric and leftist activism were common on university campuses, especially in Bengal. As the clashes between police and youths worsened ... the student population became more radicalised” (Harnetiaux 19).⁹ Indeed, they were indoctrinated by the movement and far-left policies to such an extent that they rejected listening to any alternative. This atmosphere ignited the movement’s ideology among the students.

A closer study of the text reveals that chiefly it was unemployment that drove most students to favour the movement. After the class, when Amar and Professor Das are together, Amar explains that he rejects the educational structure that generated unemployed youths. In his words, “institutes of education [exist] that [have] ... shackled us for generations ... [and produced] unemployed millions” (Currimbhoy 1971: 14). The failure of the working government to solve the problem of unemployment made the youths oppose the government and the education system with equal vigour. The students cited the problems of corruption along with the problems of unemployment and increasing poverty as examples of the government’s failure. So, against the ruling government, the youths favoured the movement that promised to set up an egalitarian structure and end unemployment and poverty. An excerpt from a few students’ conversations proves how the movement was joined by many students and made several others its sympathisers: “they [the movement] demand the overthrow of the present rotten system. . . . Would you say the government is honest with us? Have they done anything to fulfil their promises either with us or themselves? Ever since they captured power 23 years ago, they just kept perpetuating British colonialism” (Currimbhoy 1971: 45-46). However, as the text unfolds, the students’ quick solution also triggers violence, and they do not anticipate the long-term impact of their actions.

Failure of Violence

The series of violent incidents that unfold proves that the movement had gone in the wrong direction. It was as Kanu Sanyal had argued, that the ground was not ready. Historical studies on the movement confirm that there was a debate between Kanu Sanyal and Charu Majumdar regarding the action of the movement. Sudeep Chakravarti has observed that both leaders believed any movement necessarily contained two phases: first, preparing the ground and, second, the action (Chakravarti 312). Sanyal did not believe that the primary ground was

the cult of force. Marxism was turned into an organized Blanquism, or, in Žižek’s revealing phrase, Marx was ‘put to work.’”

⁹ During the years of 1970-1975, the Naxalbari movement gained a big base among the middle-class youths and through them spread to the educational institutions (Chakravarti 361-362, Bhattacharjee).

yet prepared, and he therefore proposed that the political organisation should continue organising the peasantry through regular party classes instead of immediately taking the movement to the secondary level, which demanded action. But after watching the uprising of the peasantry on 24 May and 25 May, Majumdar was convinced that the people were ready to act. The play shows that the Kanu Sanyal's analysis was correct and indeed the movement lost its way due to the annihilation doctrine. Rosa Luxemburg had argued that Lenin's policy of revolution was far removed from that of a truly democratic socialism, and was closer to Blanquism. She claimed that, for Lenin, the difference between Blanquism and socialism was only that of a handful of conspirators and a class-conscious proletariat (Luxemburg, 2007). However, Luxemburg claimed that Lenin missed the point that this difference would mean educating the proletariat and uniting them. Ahmed's class reveals the same problem. He was bent on convincing students to act but failed to realise that this action should be preceded by organization and education.

Ahmed's class reveals how the movement was therefore focused on violence. Compared to Professor Das's lecture, Ahmed's class looks partial. While Professor Das tried to teach non-violence through the history of the Indian nation-state, Ahmed did not teach the students about the country's socio-economic structure or political history. There was no lecture on Marxist ideology, the difference between Marxism and Leninism, and how the two were combined into the movement. The goal of creating an egalitarian society by removing the class hierarchy was also absent in his lecture. Neither was there any discussion of the problems of the peasantry, nor any talk about land redistribution. Instead, the classes were focused only on the failure of the parliamentary policies: Ahmed says, "Parliamentary democracy is not an effective weapon for socialist revolution: an armed struggle is inevitable. . . . A revolution in backward countries can only be brought by peasants: start organising the peasants for militant action" (Currimbhoy 1971: 25). Thus, the whole focus of the class was on the annihilation doctrine while failing to draw the full significance of the movement in uprooting the systematic class hierarchy.

Further, rewriting the history of Indian independence and the Indian nationalist movements from the perspective of the proletariat and farmers had always been a prime agenda of the movement. But Ahmed did not attempt to rewrite the history of Indian political movements in his classes. Even the teachings on the annihilation doctrine were incomplete since Ahmed focused only on one section of the doctrine, which involved killing class enemies, while ignoring the other section that focused on how the subjective violence would be used to end the objective violence. His teaching also did not convey that the students would need to stay with the villagers, and hence declass themselves. Only after declassing themselves could the students contribute to the movement by uniting the peasantry and forming squads. Indeed, Ahmed did not teach the students to recognise the objective violence that penetrated society through the class hierarchy. Consequently, the students who joined the movement were only focused on killing: the targeted individuals could be traffic police officers or professors in cities or landlords in the villages. The emphasis on subjective violence also omitted the goal of land redistribution and gave way to random brutal murders without any long-term plans.

Rupture between Subjective and Objective Violence

The chain of events in Act 2 that follow the class conducted by Ahmed is a series of violent incidents. Since the play explores the Naxalbari movement through the journey of Amar, the protagonist, his experiences are highlighted. His first task is in his village, where he

instigates the local farmers to join him and his comrades in the murders of the local zamindar, Jain. The play describes the meeting of the farmers headed by Amar. In this meeting, all the farmers agree that Jain is a benevolent landlord who gives the landless labourers and sharecroppers their due and has looked after them during times of illness. Sometimes he also joins the farmers in their work and makes sure none of them goes to bed hungry. In a conversation with Amar, Jain speaks about the hard work: “Look at these hands ... just because I am fat and rich doesn’t mean I don’t work ... I work with my hands” (Currimbhoy 1971: 19). The only place where he mentions his land ownership is at the Amar’s house: “What I have is mine, and it shall be protected by law ... and if necessary, by force” (Currimbhoy 1971: 32). This sentence affirms that despite his caring attitude towards the peasants, displayed through providing substantial wages, Jain will not part with even a tiny share of his land. In other words, he is eager to look after his employees but will not give away an inch of his land for surplus production or community holdings. But Amar fails to understand this underlying problem. Through Ahmed, he learnt only about the annihilation doctrine and was expected that killing landlords like Jain would change the social structure. It is evident during his speech to the farmers where he speaks about the ruthlessness of the landlords. Instead of focusing on the main problem of landlessness, however, he misleads the farmers by telling them that Jain’s position as a landlord justifies killing him: “It’s no longer a question of distributing surplus land ... there will be no distinction between good and bad landlord, being a landlord is bad enough” (Currimbhoy 1971: 20). Thus, the goal of the meeting and Amar’s speech is the murder of Jain instead of redistribution of lands. The participants of the movement reluctantly kill Jain but the murder proves meaningless since killing one landlord will not change the class structure or the objective violence of class hierarchy. Further, after the killing, as expected, there is no effort to redistribute land. The murder demonstrated that the annihilation doctrine had become an end in itself and, thus, failed the goals of land redistribution and the creation of a classless society.

The play, therefore, shows that the murder of Jain is a shallow and impractical approach to change the social and economic structure. Violence, for youths like Amar, becomes an end in itself. So, using subjective violence as a tool to remove the systematic violence does not work in the long run. As far as the movement is concerned, in practice, the prominent use of subjective violence results in its disassociation from systematic violence; that is, it no longer remains a tool to challenge the systematic violence, which, in this case, is class hierarchy. Instead, the prominence of violence through the annihilation doctrine resulted in ignoring any peaceful means of land redistribution. The act clearly proves that sanctioning the violence in the movement, which had been a tool of the peasantry in local protests, was the wrong decision. Historically, the peasantry had always resorted to violence in colonial and post-colonial India. However, the success of this use of violence was also local and limited to short-term goals. Using this tool for a larger goal would always fail. This is because it would overpower the goal in itself. Further, as the next section will prove, the impossibility of harnessing the violence in the larger scale results in collateral damage.

Collateral Damage

Following the murder of Jain, the text shows how the young Naxal members, including Amar, planted bombs at a traffic point to kill traffic police officers and blast the police van to threaten the state authority (Currimbhoy 1971: 65). But they did not calculate that planting bombs in crowded areas would result in several other deaths. The bombing, instead of killing any representative of state authority, killed a beggar and wounded a child who was standing

near the police van: “Some rumours also spread that two were wounded and one killed” (Currimbhoy 1971: 67). So, a discrepancy can be noted in Amar’s words and his actions: while on the one hand, he claims to fight for the underprivileged and talks about individuals being chained to the system, on the other hand, his actions cause the death of innocent people. Against the background of his actions that killed the beggar and the child, Amar’s words are shallow and lack understanding of the political goals of the movement: “None can abstain, none are innocent. We’re all involved” (Currimbhoy 1971: 55). Amar and his comrades failed to comprehend that the random attacks were becoming an end in themselves without any ulterior motive. They neither helped end the systematic violence nor established an egalitarian society.

Through the bombing, the text dramatizes the side-effects in the use of violence. Violence resulted in the death of people from the proletariat section of the society instead of bringing any positive changes. While the killing of Jain was intentional, the death of the beggar was unintentional. Thus, the tool of violence to change the system cannot affect the system or even the state authorities and results only in collateral damage or useless murders. Thus, the Žižekian model of removing the objective violence through subjective violence is a complete failure in the larger scale. So, in the long-run, it is only by using parliamentary democratic means that the government can become the rule of the proletariat. As Hal Draper has written, quoting Engels, “the working class can come to power only under the form of the democratic republic. This is even the specific form for the dictatorship of the proletariat” (Draper 1986, 318).

The Disillusionment of Amar: Parliamentary Democracy Is the Answer

The text finally rejects the path of violence through dramatizing the disillusionment of Amar in the movement. After the bombing and the beggar’s death, he is consumed with guilt and remorse for his actions. The movement fought on behalf of the proletariat and the peasants, yet it was the members of this group who become the victims of collateral damage. Thus, he confesses to his lover, Suprea, “I don’t know the difference between good or bad anymore” (Currimbhoy 1971: 60). A gradual disillusionment can therefore be recognised. Soon after this conversation, Amar reluctantly joins in the burning of the college library. The youths resort to violence to change the educational structure. They chose to burn libraries and bookstores to destroy the written histories that focused on Gandhi, Nehru and other leaders. They do not realise that the attempt will only create chaos instead of bringing any change. Amar joined the youths in destroying the library. But the presence of Professor Das in the library is unexpected. When one of Amar’s comrades tries to attack the professor, who is attempting to stop the masked youths, Amar runs to protect his father and retorts, “if you so much as touch him” (Currimbhoy 1971: 68). However, as soon as there is a chance of being recognised by his father, he joins his comrades. This incident profoundly affects him, which can be illustrated by the next scene, where Amar officially resigns from the movement and tells Ahmed about his disillusionment.

Thus, there is a gradual shift in Amar’s character. Initially, he had argued with his father about the flaws of democracy (Currimbhoy 1971: 42). He rejected parliamentary government, favoured by his father, and sought an immediate solution to the problems in society. He supported the ideology preached by Ahmed and believed that only far-left ideology could solve the problems of unemployment, corruption, and the food crisis. Through his active participation in the movement, he moved closer to Ahmed. However, his disillusionment with the movement and its modus operandi gradually increased. He recognised the drawbacks of the annihilation

campaign, and by the end of the text, he chose to disentangle himself from the movement due to its involvement with violence. Thus, in the final act, he opts to complete his education and speaks in favour of a gradual change, associating himself with democratic means of change. Through the shift in the character of Amar, the text establishes its rejection of violence. Though initially subjective violence might appear appealing with the potential of changing the system, as the text shows, any positive long-term intention of producing systematic change is difficult to attain. As Alan Johnson has written in his essay, “Slavoj Žižek’s Theory of Revolution: A Critique,”

For Marx the ‘rule of the proletariat’ meant the working-class leadership of an ‘immense majority block,’ while the governmental form of that rule was the democratic republic: popular control over the sovereign body of the state, universal suffrage, representative democracy, a democratic constitution, and truly mass involvement in political decision-making. (Johnson 2011)

Thus, the true dictatorship of proletariat, as per Marx, had nothing to do with a sudden revolution, but would be ensured through a parliamentary democratic process. In fact, Amar’s disillusionment from the movement confirms that using violence can neither accelerate any movement nor provide solutions to the problems relating to social inequalities. In the long run, it is only the democratic parliamentary process that can reach out to the people and establish the rule of the proletariat.

The Role of Government and Naxalbari Post-*Inquilaab*

Historically, the use of violence led to a major backlash against the Naxalite movement: state repressive policies. Although the Indian government had been democratically elected, when a section of the population joined this rising dissenting movement, the state reacted violently. As mentioned in the earlier sections, the movement questioned the policies of the government as it had failed to resolve fundamental economic and social issues. When the movement used the annihilation doctrine, it became easier for the government to use violent means to suppress the movement. Hence, the government banned CPI (ML) in 1972 and its activities became illegal. Concerning the 1970s situation, Dipak Gupta notes,

The situation of anarchy prevailing in the eastern state and, under the Indian Constitution, resulted in a state of emergency. Under this sweeping declaration, they suspended the freshly elected state government and imposed from the centre a ‘President’s Rule’ in March 1970 ... Under the new rule, there was no ambivalence toward the Naxalites, exhibited previously by the United Front government with its Communist allies. In April, a joint campaign was launched by the Indian military (Eastern Frontier Rifles), the Central Reserve Police. They coordinated their efforts with the local police rifles (Gupta 196-197).

This was a part of the so-called Operation Green Hunt, when the government used the President’s rule to suppress the movement. “By August 1970, forty-four leaders including Kanu Sanyal, Kadam Mallick and Jangal Santhal were arrested” (Sen 218). The case of Archana Guha suggests that family members of Naxalites also underwent severe torture by the state authorities. After the death of Charu Majumder, the government took all measures to repress the movement. Abhijeet Das records in his memoir *Footprints of Foot Soldiers*, “By October 1970, the repression of the state machinery had reached the peak, and many youths had been

arrested. Youths between the age of fifteen to twenty-five were hauled away on mere suspicion” (Das 147). All these repressive measures were justified by the government under the pretext of maintaining peace and security. Thus, it was the government elected by people that used repression against a section of the population. Hence, elected governments can also become autocratic against dissenters.

However, justification could be provided by the government only because the movement had used the annihilation doctrine within their policies. This pretext continues today, as can be witnessed by the government’s declaration that Naxalites and Maoists are the country’s greatest threat to internal security. According to one of the mainstream Indian papers, “... the capacity of Left-wing extremists to retaliate with ferocity indicates that Maoism still remains the biggest threat to our internal security, almost 11 years after then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh acknowledged and framed the scale of threat in exactly this manner” (Azad 3). Though the movement was dismantled in 1970s, new organisations emerged that claimed to carry on its legacy. Many of these organisations continued to follow armed revolutionary doctrine. Hence, it became easier for the government to declare these organisations as threats to the society, and use armed repression to suppress or demolish the dissenting organisations. Further, the presence of these organisations also suggests the relevance of the demands of the movement in the contemporary period. In the paper titled, “Income and Wealth Inequality in India, 1922-2023: The Rise of the Billionaire Raj,” the authors have noted that “By 2022-23, [the] top one per cent income and wealth shares (22.6 per cent and 40.1 per cent) are at their highest historical levels, and India’s top one per cent income share is among the very highest in the world, higher than even South Africa, Brazil, and the US.” *Time Magazine* suggests that India’s income inequality is now worse than it was under the colonial British rule (Rajvanshi). Thus, the data and analysis suggest that income disparity has widened in India, leading to the solidification of class hierarchy.

Hence, the problems raised by the movement in the seventies have not been ameliorated; instead, the reports show that class hierarchy is gradually increasing, leading to a handful of individuals holding more than seventy percent of the nation-state’s wealth. The movement had tried to fight against this class hierarchy, and hence the demands of the movement are more relevant now than ever. Thus, in order to bridge the economic gap and reduce class hierarchy, a government needs to be created on the basis of socialist democracy, and educating the people is the first step towards this goal. This is what Sanyal had meant by “groundwork.” Since this work was not completed, it is not surprising that the elected government has also failed to ameliorate the grievances raised by the movement.

Conclusion

Through *Inquilaab*, this paper reaffirms that the assessment of Kanu Sanyal was not completely mistaken. Sanyal had predicted that efforts to educate the people and arouse class consciousness was incomplete. Moving to the second phase of action, of grasping power, was therefore premature. Through the actions of the protagonist, his disillusionment, and the playwright’s depiction of collateral damage, Currimbhoy clearly takes a stand against the use of violence in the movement. Indeed, instead of strengthening the movement, the play shows that the use of violence reduced the movement to a series of murders. Although Currimbhoy is clearly an advocate of Gandhian non-violence, history demonstrates that, in the nearly sixty years since the publication of *Inquilaab*, democratic means have also failed to solve India’s economic crisis. Hence, educating the masses continues to be a major goal of forming a

socialist democratic government. As Sanyal argues, the struggle might consume years or could even include violence. However, it is only through the continuous struggle of the masses that a long-term change through socialist electoral democracy can be attained in favour of the have-nots.

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