

## Article

### **Ideology and Subversion: A Comparative Study of Mrinal Sen's '*Padatik*' and Raghav Bandyopadhyay's '*Communis*'**

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What is it to be a Communist? Is it to be like AB of Raghav Bandopagyay's *Communis*, or Nikhil of Mrinal Sen's movie *Padatik* - party leaders with unquestionable orthodox policy embodying the theories of Marx, Lenin, Mao, and without any ability to be ingenuously revolutionary? Or is it to be like Biman of *Padatik* or Suku, Biru, Montu of *Communis*-workers, peasants, and petty bourgeoisie, often unequipped with theories but functioning on revolutionary passion, and blind obedience to a leader who has promised them a revolution? Or is it to be like Minu or Shilpi, who do not know much about class-struggle or revolution, but are struggling for a personal loss? Or is it to be like Gora and Sumit, who have their theories and know the social situation, but also know to raise a question, when things do not seem right?

*Padatik* is a movie of Mrinal Sen's middle period, but it never got the recognition it deserved. His hero questioned the ideology of the political party and leadership, which reflected the inner squabbles and contradiction of the then Communist party. Sen who was appreciated for his previous venture, *Calcutta 71*, was now called a traitor. This stigma haunted him for many years, even when years later the movie was screened in the Universities in United States and Germany, pro-Left students jeered him. The absence of self criticism and the prevalent self-complacency in the ruling Left, confused Sen. He often questioned himself 'Am I going in the right direction?' (Mrinal) According to him, radicalism demands going

against the flow, against the authority, be it in West Bengal, or in India, or anywhere around the world. This was all that Sen was trying to stand up for, and he did it in his own way.

Raghav Bandopadhyay's *Communis* too, did not meet with acceptance and positive criticism.

It was an elegy to the glorious urge for revolution that had churned the whole society out of its inertia, but could not manage more. It is not pessimistic in its world view, but it offers a reality check to the leaders and their political parties. Bandopadhyay wrote this novel, after serving three years in jail. Being an enthusiastic youth, he too had plunged into the movement, imbibed with its revolutionary ideology. A firsthand experience of the movement, and contemplation during his imprisonment, gave him the opportunity to analyse the various dimensions of the truth. So, *Communis*, *Shoishob*, and *Journal 70*, written at various times in his career, explore the multifaceted nature of identity, ideology and its subversion. Anirban Das while writing the introduction to *1970*, containing both *Communis* and *Journal 70*, asserts, that Bandopadhyay establishes how the revolutionary project had seized to be different from the oppressive and dehumanizing structures that it had set out to fight. Bandopadhyay tries to situate the movement in the world Marxist Movement with its dogmatic doctrine and the immediate strategy of dominance.

The purpose of this paper is to study impartially the narratives of the various sides involved in the social movement that both Sen and Bandopadhyay take up. I would be discussing the spatial, gender, and subaltern narratives amidst the framed narrative of movement. The borders between these narratives diffuse easily into each other creating a fictional record of a real world, in both these works.

Revolutions liberate men, not just from social, economic and political dominance, but by creating a consciousness of the oppressive reality in which they exist. This consciousness is a cultural and historical process which is called 'conscientization' (Paulo). India developed a

conscientization, during the freedom movement. However, the 'comprador bureaucrat capitalist' (Banerjee)<sup>i</sup>, after ascension, fearing a subordination reinstated a culture of silence. The nation-wide crisis that followed was a transitional period, where the manipulative leaders, mobilized the mass against the capitalist. From a small group of intellectuals, this fragmented awareness seeped into the masses through various apparatuses. This awareness driven methodology is also manipulative in nature, creating a false consciousness.

Revolutionary agenda often becomes inconsistent, compromising its purpose when it becomes a victim of a fatalist concept of history. It tries to manipulate mechanically the 'cannon fodder' (Chatterjee) to a future 'that the leadership knows a priori, but which it thinks the people are incapable of knowing' (Friere) Revolutionary leadership starts becoming that which it had set out to subordinate. It starts denouncing whoever denounces it and proclaims the superiority of its ideology. The project which aimed at creating an alternative reality settles into the existent inertia. Revolutionary movements, like reformists, cannot be static, for the dynamism in it is liberating, and it is life giving and life changing. Practicing a methodology akin to the reformists, subordinates the whole purpose of it. This reduces the movement to anarchy and a mad scramble for power and dominance. The idea of conscientization is to connect with the people, to exhibit love, confidence, and faith with the mass. Che Guevara like Camilo Torres became a guerrilla 'not out of desperation, but out of love for people' (Friere). He proposes a path which is inclusive, involving patience and belief, those who are still in their 'semi-intransitive or naive transitive state of consciousness' (Friere). By this, the revolutionaries would also be able to establish a radical difference with the reactionaries.

The reformists prefer the dead to the living, the future as a repetition of the past than engineering a new beginning, the frigid schematization rather than the emotion of living,

pathological forms of love than real love, and slogans rather than challenges. (Friere) However, the Naxalite Movement, like most Marxist movement in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, could not become the utopic biophilia<sup>ii</sup> that a revolutionary project should be; it ended up becoming necrophilic with its rigidity as the leaders became bureaucratic. Ashim Chatterjee asked in July, 1971: “Sacrifice of lives in battles is inevitable. But why wouldn’t we have the courage to seriously reconsider whether it was necessary, to sacrifice all the lives of heroes in Calcutta? (A. Chatterjee)”

### **Calcutta-A Problem City**

Sen starts the movie with a quote both critiquing and eulogising his city-

Every time I return to Calcutta, I feel it must be surely impossible that it can continue much longer than this. Yet it always does. An interval of a year makes the visual impact more painful, the squalor more squalid, the poverty more militant, the despair more desperate. Every time I return to Calcutta, I find it an intimidating and even infernal city, unredeemed and probably doomed (Cameron)

Both Sen and Bandopadhyay introduce their protagonists in their narratives as they narrowly escape their enemies. Through vivid imagery Bandopadhyay then creates the claustrophobic world of subalternity, while sometimes sunlight is considered ‘untouchable’ and ‘anaemic’ (Bandopadhyay); at other times the hovels in a slum are compared to pieces of meat in a ‘kebab’ (Bandopadhyay) which later we see is the food of the comrades in hiding. Sen, uses the interesting imagery of a clock, which functions only when kept facing down, analogous to the social structure. Sumit, the protagonist of Sen’s movie is sheltered in a multi-storeyed building, in Park Street, decorated with tasteful paintings, exotic masks, money plants. Sumit calls this a ‘fancy hell’ (D. Chatterjee). The characters of Bandopadhyay’s novel too take shelter in the third floor of the ‘building’ which is actually the CIT building, located in

Belehata. The CIT Building is far away from the populous slums, where the only sound that one can hear is the mechanical noise of buses passing-by in day, and alcoholics singing at night. These high-rise shelters are also escapes from the problems of the city, which allows the protagonists to think out loud in sleepless nights, or sitting in an overflowing bath tub.

The Police operations in 1970 divided the city into four zones of guerrilla operations. The North and Central Calcutta with intricate and inaccessible lanes, by-lanes and blind-lanes were called 'liberated zones' or *muktanchal*. Here they employed the local lumpenproletariat to hunt down the Naxalites. The Eastern suburb along the railway canals were prone to smuggling, wagon breaking and other extra-legal activities also became a breeding ground for the Naxalites. The industrial area too, with working class slums was a haven for the guerrillas. The Southern part of the city was home to jobless and unsettled refugees from East Bengal, who were keen for a militant political action, hence was also a shelter for the activists. (Banerjee) Gora, Bandopadhyay's protagonist, walks us through all these parts of the city, during his actions and errands.

The three primary crises which the revolutionary student youth movement identified in *Deshabrati*, published on 20<sup>th</sup> February, 1969, were- "food, employment, education and culture (Banerjee)". It is against these issues that the urban youth declared a war. Sen at the onset itself lists the crisis that gulfed the city in particular and the nation in general. 'Kerosene disappears from market, Thousands of ghost ration cards seized by police, Death by starvation, Exams disrupted, Rival Unions Clash in labour belts... Government pledged to restore law and order' (Sen). A baby food advertisement that Shilpi designs addresses issues like starvation and adulteration of food materials. It is highly ironical how a capitalist company owner uses prevalent social issues to sell their product, and it is designed by a party sympathiser. It is not possible for someone who cannot afford a square meal to buy baby

foods, but the images of malnourished babies and their concerned mothers is used to play on the sympathy of the middle-class buyers. There was scarcity of fuel and energy, resulting in price rise; but words, promises, tea and cigarettes became cheaper. Walls were filled with graffiti, with ideologies overlapping each other and white paint always trying to subordinate the other. Political gatherings promised food, which attracted people from far and near, but that lead to nothing but noise pollution. Tea stalls became the popular place for political deliberations where thoughts and cigarettes were smoked up in the air, as factories and industries were shut down in every corners of the city.

The prevailing education system in India in the seventies was essentially colonial in nature, constructed to offer jobs, avoid class struggles or prevent any revolutionary war. A non-violent picture of the independent movement was painted before the students through school, college and university curriculum. Also every attempt was made to keep alive the class and caste hegemony, making right use of opportunity to increase the gulf between the city and the village. The war cry by Charu Mazumdar pleaded the students to ‘integrate themselves with the workers and poor and landless peasants’ (Lenin), but most often the iconoclastic students ignored this advice. The students instead of trying to reform the educational and cultural setup misdirected their violence. While, breaking statues of bourgeois political and social reformers do send a message of revolution, but more often than not, it was misdirected, and lacked ideological motive. The images of ‘action’ terrorised the masses and created ‘Naxalphobia’ (Banerjee). The party initially supported this manifestation of iconoclasm but with time, there was growing scepticism among party leaders about the fruitfulness of such mass destruction. Montu and Shona among others, of *Communis* debate over whether it is justified to destroy libraries, schools and other bourgeois educational setups. One major question that rose about the motive of majority of iconoclasts of Calcutta in 1970 was,

whether it was intense class hatred, born of years of oppression, sustained by deep-rooted anger, and directed against symbols of political, social and economic oppression, as was with the peasants? Or was it a sense of insecurity with the lack of jobs and futile university certificates that made schools, colleges and exams a soft target of their violence? (Banerjee) . There was no violence aimed against the clubs, bars, restaurants and discotheques of Park Street and Chowringhee. We cannot miss the amazement in the eyes of Sumit and Biman as they step into the fancy world of Mrs. Mitra even though they apparently criticise it.

### **To be a ‘Communis’**

‘Communis’ is the subaltern mispronunciation of the word ‘Communist’. By the end of the 1970, the police had already categorised the urban guerrillas into three groups. Firstly, the completely criminal lumpenproletariat; secondly students and working class, who were not politically furnished but jumped into the movement out of frustration or for the zest of revolution and lastly the ideologically equipped petty bourgeois, who posed the real threat. So in *Communis*, Shona, Montu, Biru, Nibaron, Shuku, Bijoy and Buro belong to the second category along with Biman from *Padatik*, they were the canon fodder, without the ability to think independently and question the ideology and its subversion by the leadership. Gora, AB, Narayan in *Communis* and Sumit and Nikhil are of the third category. Nibaron, Buro, and Bijoy are expelled workers of locked down factories and more valuable to the party than the petty bourgeoisies.

Shona, Montu and Biru are reckless, independent, bright students, with varying degrees of passion and consciousness about the struggle. They are not the monstrous criminals that police or media represented them to be; they are dreamers on a revolutionary mission. Slogans from their pen ended up being songs and poems. They are consumed by the passion of the revolution; they sincerely felt that violence, terror and annihilation could subordinate

the administration and bring about the desired change. Nibaron, Buro, and Bijoy had faced the class enemy from close quarters; their frustration, did not allow them the patience to reconsider the misdirectedness of their violence. Blindly, they follow the leader who promised them if not a job, but a revenge for their sufferings. Sumit says that he too was like Biman at a time, unable to think and criticise, but with time he had learnt to generate his individual line of thoughts. But at the canon-fodder level, any form of questions is considered as a result of frustration or defeatism. Also, any questions raised by them are not entertained by the leaders at every level, destroying the very possibility of consciousness raising. It is only when he is cut off from the party that Sumit learns to think clearly. It is also interesting to note, that in the movie, Nikhil the party leader, employs two workers for printing the party pamphlets; his behaviour with them and their deplorable work condition and extreme work hours that reduce them to a machine is no different from the capitalist land owners or industrialists.

A binding thought of these revolutionaries was the glory of martyrdom. Exterminated comrades were celebrated through 'actions' (Bandopadhyay) in the locality. There was also a strict guideline to be followed in the jail. To be a communist in jail is not to take any help from the parliamentary laws and lawyers, nor avail the privileges of a political prisoner, in order to distinguish themselves from the revisionists. Jail breaks was considered the most glorious of acts.

### **Gendered Perspective**

In the attitude survey conducted by Shilpi Mitra in *Padatik*, she tries to find out, with the change in social and political sphere, if there was any change in the relationship between men and women. Her target population were middle class educated and working women, directly or indirectly related to various political movements. All of them agreed, like the social and

political arena there was no revolutionary change in the position of women. There was a certain degree of liberty in the fields of education and career, but that was essentially under some male supervision, be it the father, husband or even the son. More women participated in public activities; they could be seen in public transport, political gatherings, theatres, and hospitals. There was a consciousness among women from different walks about the inconsistency in the gender positions and roles, thereby cultivating in them a sense of self respect. They were no more the 'privileged' Nora of *A Doll's House*. There was also a realisation, that once a woman entered the labour market she would be commodified, following a change in her identity. In the capitalist society, the ideas of the ruling class are the ruling ideas, women being the second sex, thus always assumed the position of the dominated.

Another interesting aspect that comes up in this survey is how women participate in political activities. A widowed woman can participate in movements with much more enthusiasm, than a woman under the supervision of a male member. In the novel we see Minu actively joining the movement only after Shona dies, Shilpi Mitra in the movie, though a distant sympathiser of the movement is a divorcee. Gora wonders whether Minu joins the movement to escape the grief of losing Shona, or is it a genuine revolutionary zeal. Mrs. Mitra had lost her brother in the movement, which had drawn her into the movement, even though she belonged to the upper class bourgeoisie. Other woman characters in the novel like Bijoy's wife or Minati, Narayan's wife too participate in the movement only in the absence of their husband.

When Minu comes to Gora and AB, she is compared to Comrade Nirmala and her strength and sincerity is questioned. The Movement was essentially masculine in nature. Women were accommodated in it only when there were not enough men to continue the struggle. Women

too were expected to adhere to the norms of hegemonic masculinity. Male members were measured against the concept of hegemonic revolutionary masculinity- reckless, independent, and bright. The characters of Sen and Bandopadhyay are in this sense stereotypical and hegemonic, even the absent brother whom Shilpi admiringly and lovingly recalls is sketched likewise.

The Mother plays a very important role in the course of action. The police take away Gora's mother and torture her to force him into confession and thereby surrender. However, Gora escapes, hearing the news. Sumit on the other hand returns home on hearing the news of his mother's death, risking his life. It is only after the death of his wife and losing his job that Sumit's father reunite with his son. Minu becomes a mother figure once she joins Gora and his group in their hiding, so does other female characters that the comrades live with, in their shelters.

### **The Unanswered Questions**

Biman asks Sumit, why it is that Sumit's father who was a revolutionary leader during India's freedom movement, is so opposed to Sumit's participation in the movement. Sumit asks to Nikhil in particular and the party in general, who their enemies and friends are, for whom and with whom is the movement. If it is for the workers, peasants, and middle-class have they successfully been able to involve them- not out of fear, but out of concern. The party not only refuses to answer the questions raised by Sumit, but also interrogates his integrity and expels him. Gora too questions the leadership, not just their ideology but also their nature. While AB with rising power had become fascist by nature, Narayan had continued being the friend, philosopher and guide. Comparing both of them, Gora questions whether it is necessary to be dictatorial with increasing power or there is an alternative. These questions hang in the 'vacuum' (D. Chatterjee) like the movement itself.

Sumit's father was a freedom fighter, one who had been to jail. In his youth he had been invigorated by the accounts of the Bolshevik Revolution and fought against a foreign rule to free his motherland; it was respectable to do so. In an independent state, challenging governmental structures is considered anti-national, an act of betrayal, which he was not ready to commit as long as he had a respectable job. It was difficult for him to accept that a peaceful transition of Winter Palace could not be possible. But Sumit and Gora had been born and brought up in the era of revolutions. There's was a generation which refused to cooperate with the faded dream of the revisionists.

“Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun!” (Tse-tung) Without any clear political agenda, the class enemy could not be precisely defined. So, the red terror was directed indiscriminately against traffic constables, plain-clothes policemen, police officers, personnel of Para-military forces, small shopkeepers, other businessmen, doctors and teachers. The counter-offensive too killed many innocent youths. The message of defying death and embracing martyrdom, though very romantic, was in no sense advisable for the movement, at such an initial stage. The number of annihilation had reached almost 200, in West Bengal alone, in 1970, but the number of martyrs among the revolutionaries was much higher (Banerjee). Another debate that was equally important was, the revolutionaries were expecting too much in too short time; they had not done enough to develop a base among the working class or political consciousness among the peasants. So, a uniform action would not have been accepted uniformly at all places. The comrades themselves became sceptical about the future of the movement.

A revolution is a critical and a continuous process. It does not end with a huge gathering, where the party flag proudly flutters in the air and people lives happily ever after that, as the comrades fantasise. Revolution is an amalgamation of action and reflection. It is a journey

towards the 'heaven of freedom' (Tagore) . The movement of 1970-s failed because it could not radically distinguish itself from the reformist course of action. Sen and Bandopadhyay, both have been criticised for having washed their dirty laundry in the public. It is only when we look back, we realise that they had done exactly what the leaders of the movements should have done then. An objective evaluation of the movement would have in no way put it in crisis; rather a lack of it did.

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<sup>i</sup> "A comprador big bourgeoisie is a class which directly serves the capitalist countries and is nurtured by them: countless ties link it closely with the feudal forces in the countryside" –Tsetung, Mao. *The Chinese Revolution and the Chinese Communist Party*. Volume 2. Peking, 1968, 320.

<sup>ii</sup> Erich Fromm uses the terms 'biophilia' and 'necrophilia' to distinguish between Revolutionary and Rightist ideology respectively. (Fromm)