

The Story Of A Naxalite

R.N.S.

HIS appearance is not as impressive as that of Che's. A young man of about 20 or 22, he is unusually polite and docile for his age and except for two bright eyes set in a pale pockmarked face there is very little to note about him. But it is his words, his stories, his experience which impress.

This is the story he told me : Tripura is very poor. In comparison to Assam or West Bengal it is much smaller and has no important natural resources. The economy is based on agriculture. There are many vital problems. The first is scarcity of cultivable land. In 1952 the population was about 600,000. The pressure on land was the least at that time. But trouble started from the late fifties when thousands of refugees from East Pakistan began to cross over into the State. Most of them have settled down permanently. This influx resulted in two things : a rapid bulge in the population and heavy pressure on land. Recently more refugees have come following the army crack-down in East Pakistan. Approximately the local inhabitants (tribals and refugees who came after March 1971) number 15.56 lakhs, while refugees (who came after March 1971) number about 12 lakhs. As a result of the increasing pressure on land there is continuous fragmentation of farm holdings and increase in the number of landless peasants. At present about 50% of the agricultural population are landless and about 75% possess are less than 5 kanis of land on an average (2½ kanis are equivalent to one acre). The land itself is

also not very fertile. The maximum output per acre (in the best fields) is 15 maunds whereas in West Bengal the average per acre output from ordinary land is 25 maunds. But in contrast to the latter, the peasants in Tripura have to pay 1½ times more land revenue. Between 1960 and 1970 there was an unprecedented increase in land revenue—per kani it went up from 75 paise to Rs 3.50. This affected the poor peasantry very badly.

Tripura has not succeeded in coming out of its semi-feudal embryo. Owing to inadequate communications a large number of essential commodities have to be imported and their prices keep rising. Most of the villages remain isolated from one another, so there is no proper distribution of the local merchandise. To take one can of kerosene oil to Raima, a village 100 miles from Agartala, one has to pay Rs 18 ; per litre the price is Rs 2.00. Salt is one rupee a kilo there, whereas near Agartala kerosene per litre costs 50 paise and salt 45 paise. At Kanchanpur Dasda, 130 miles from Agartala, rice is 75 paise a kilo but in the capital and nearby areas it is Rs 2.00 and more.

It is the poor peasants who suffer most. There is no hope in Tripura of an industrial build-up—whatever it had in the name of industry besides tea,—footwear and match-factory—have been abandoned thanks to the inefficiency of the State's bureaucrats. This together with the pressure on land has made the problem

of unemployment acute.

The Government has totally failed to tackle the situation. It has practically done nothing to ease the lot of the people. The present Government, to speak frankly, is a zamindari of the Chief Minister, Mr Sachindralal Singh. He is endowed with all the qualities of a typical Indian parliamentarian. His efficiency has often been seen in groupism, in the traditional Indian politics of divide and rule; in that sphere he is unrivalled. It is his autocratic rule that split the Congress. In his personal life, well, he is sometimes called Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde. There is however nothing hopeful about the rebel Congress either. Its leaders accuse Mr Singh of highhandedness but they themselves have so long connived at his misdeeds.

What about the other political parties? The CPI(M), although it has a very good organization and in power-politics its position is next to that of the ruling Congress, in practice thinks little of the common man.

In the circumstances, when the country's economy is in an extremely adverse situation and the parliamentary parties are making things worse, intervention from radical leftists is not only logical but also a necessity. We, the Naxalites, therefore came on the scene. The big factor which inspired us to take active part in politics was the peasant uprising in Naxalbari and the Naxalite activities in different parts of West Bengal since then. It is true that at the beginning we had not any direct link with anybody in Calcutta who could send us precise information about the Naxalites and it was only through the bourgeois press that we tried to piece together the happenings in West Bengal. Whenever we read the news of the murder of landlords and moneylenders in those papers we appreciated it, because we believed that the end is sacred, it does not matter what means are adopted. By that time we had already been convinced that no change would be possible without bloodshed. Revolution needs blood, not only of the enemy, but also of us,

Visit to Calcutta

It was just before Durga Puja in 1969 that I had a chance to go to Calcutta. I was then connected with a local newspaper which was ideologically more radical than others. We used to send the copies of this paper regularly to some students of a well-known college in Calcutta. I took some copies of our paper with me. I had another thing in my mind, to make friends with them.

The very moment I reached Calcutta I noticed Naxalite slogans on the walls and I was so impressed that I wrote them down in my notebook. Then one day I took copies of our paper and went to see students of the particular college at their hostel. As I stepped into their room I heard them talking about politics, Naxalbari and Charu Mazumdar. I produced my press credentials and handed over the newspapers. They were satisfied and began to talk to me. One of them proposed that the occasion should be celebrated, called a bearer and asked for tea and biscuits. Within a few minutes the atmosphere became so friendly that I forgot that I was a stranger.

My friends asked me about my political affiliations. I said I had none. They again asked me whether I had any interest in the stories of Naxalbari and Srikakulam. I said we were eager to know about all those. For about four and a half hours they talked about, among other things, the peasant struggles in Andhra, Kerkdip and Naxalbari, about the greatness of Chairman Mao and the beloved old man, Charu Mazumdar, the historic Long March by the Communist Party of China, the role of the Chinese mandarins and the similarity of the revolutionary situation in India and China. I once asked them to explain the inner meaning of one of their favourite slogans—China's Chairman is our Chairman, China's path is our path. One of them said that by China they never meant a mere country, but something more. They tried to put her before our eyes as the ultimate goal of an ideal communist. The entire Chinese nation was

to them the ideal communist community with Comrade Mao Tse-tung at the top. As the Indian communists (Naxalites) wanted to set up the same type of communist society in this country they should follow the Chinese line and in doing so they must accept Mao as their Chairman, because it was he who showed them the way of revolution. Moreover, Mao was the true representative of the downtrodden Asians wherever they may be while the leaders in this country were agents of vested interests and neo-colonial forces.

It was about 7-30 or 8 p.m. I left the hostel. My friends gave me some pamphlets to read, including the Communist Manifesto, some selected writings of Lenin and Mao, the stories of Mushahari, the Tarai Report of Kanu Sanyal and a handwritten biography of Babul Biswakarma (who was killed during the Naxalbari movement).

I stayed at Calcutta for about 45 days, and met my friends several times. Whenever we met, we discussed the general political situation in the country, the international situation, activities of the communists in the Third World, and other subjects. One evening I myself talked about the political situation in Tripura. My friends liked it and joined the discussion. Before I left Calcutta, I promised to organize the Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist) in Tripura.

II

AGARTALA is a small town. I was born and brought up here and am still studying in a local college. Naturally a large number of young boys of my age were known to me, some of them intimately I decided to talk to them about the problem. When I talked to them, to my great astonishment I discovered that they were also thinking in the same way, about the same thing. I was delighted. All of them were students and there was every reason for their being dissatisfied with the existing set-up. The students' out-

burst is not an isolated event but an eloquent reflection of the national condition. One of my friends who joined the local CPI(ML) told me why. When he sees at home how hard up his parents are now—even a few years ago men lived more comfortably here—it is impossible for him not to take part in the politics of his country. My friend was right. We took part in politics not for any self-interest but for the poor people who were being bled white by their exploiters.

About a month after my return to Agartala I received a letter from my Naxalite friends saying that they were sending a representative to Tripura in order to organize the CPI(ML) and start class struggle against class enemies. Within a few days the man came. He was an economist and used to teach in a college somewhere in West Bengal. Soon after this two more young men came and joined us. Both of them were engineers, but unemployed.

We organized the TOC or the Town Organization Committee [of the CPI (ML)]. It always remained underground. The screening for enrolment in the TOC was very strict. Only 30 boys were selected as office-bearers but that too not at a time. At first only five boys were selected. After a few weeks more were taken in. During the third screening 10 more were admitted. In this way the figure finally reached 30. These 30 boys were the initiators of all operations. Within a short time after the arrival of the three leaders from Calcutta we had about 1,000 active sympathisers in and around Agartala.

The leaders first decided to teach the TOC members the basic principles of Marxism-Leninism, growth of capitalism, feudalism, the utility of class struggle, its ways, definition of class enemies etc. The responsibility of arranging the theoretical classes was entrusted to me.

These classes used to be held somewhere in the town. The TOC members were very regular and sel-

dom failed to attend. Sometimes they seemed to be much more zealous than their teachers and organized group discussions on different subjects. The next thing the teachers asked us to do was to write slogans on the walls. They said that these slogans would make the people conscious of their suffering. They would also know that the CPI(ML) had emerged to protect their interests.

The notebook in which I had taken down the Naxalite slogans in Calcutta were now very useful. I carefully read the slogans and selected some of them. The slogans you have seen on the school, college and government buildings in Agartala are from my notebook. One thing, for slogans we also used the Red Book Chairman Mao.

After the wall-writings we turned our attention to the peasantry because the main aim of the CPI(ML) is to organize and mobilise the poor peasants against the landlords, money-lenders and other agents of feudal exploitation. In the course of their struggle the peasants will join the working class in the cities. Anyway, we began to think of our next mission—operations in rural Tripura. I have already told you that the economy of Tripura is based on agriculture. The local tribal people are the oldest inhabitants and also the oldest agriculturists, suffering from inhuman feudal exploitation. Many promises were made to them since independence by the local and Central governments but none of those was fulfilled. On the contrary a very severe restriction was put on them in 1960 when a Bill was passed by the Tripura Government to put an end to the tribals' age-old method of cultivation, "Zum-chash", on the plea that it would lead to deforestation. It is true that "Zum" type cultivation generally takes place on forested slopes of mountains. The tribals or "Zum" cultivators destroy these forests by setting them on fire and use the ashes of the burnt trees as fertilizers. Naturally this means deforestation ultimately leading to erosion of soil and affecting regular rain-

fall. But the government, thought it passed the anti-Zum Act did nothing concrete to compensate the tribals. On the contrary they had to face additional pressure when refugees began to cross over into the State from East Pakistan. Most of the fertile land, especially in the plains passed into the hands of these refugees. In some cases the newcomers who were much more affluent than the poor tribals bought land directly from the latter, and sometimes the great Sachindralal Sinha illegally distributed thousands of kanis of fertile land among the refugees. This is one of his election strategies. Under these extremely adverse circumstances when their roads were blocked on both sides the tribals found no alternative but to step further down the economic ladder. They began to work as agricultural labourers in fields which were even a few years ago their own.

With all these things in our minds we prepared our next programme. There were among our sympathisers some tribal students. They were exceptionally rich among their people but they had also a genuine love for us. We asked them to take us to their villages. They agreed.

Generally, the average villager is very suspicious owing to his ignorance and isolation. He will not talk intimately to any townsman, he may even inform the local landlord or his agents about any newcomer. The villagers however do it out of fear. These complications can be avoided if the outsider gets shelter with a local man. Then the villagers may treat him as a less dangerous fellow, if not as a friend. All of the TOC boys followed this policy, they contacted their tribal friends and with them went to their villages. They then mixed with the tribal peasants and tried to win them over to their side.

The Will of God

The conversations between a TOC boy and tribal peasants used to be like this:

The TOC boy: Hello, brothers, how do you do?

The peasants : Well. Aren't you the guest of our Bachudhan Babu ?

TOC Boy : Oh yes. Aren't you Dabua whose father Maju Rieng was a big farmer of this village ? I know all of your friends.

Dabua : Yes, my father was a landlord but his son is now a labourer and in the same farm.

Other peasants : We too had our own land but God has deprived us of it.

TOC boy : God or the present landlord ? Bachudhan Tripuri says that you were evicted by somebody of this village. Isn't it a fact ?

The peasants : Yes, Bachudhan is right, but nothing can happen without the will of God.

So it was the ghost of God who often prevented us from proceeding further. The tribals believed that their poverty was due to the will of God, their sufferings too were due to the will of God. So to move against the landlord or moneylender is to rebel against God. For instance, one of the TOC boys working in a village at Khoai once asked the local peasants whether they had made up their minds to kill the landlord as they had said they would on the previous night. The peasants said they knew he was there to help them. But it was useless to kill that man. "You know that God has written on our foreheads that we will have to suffer and starve. So what's the use of this murder ?"

In some cases there was no God, nor his spectre, but mutual interest between the landlord and the peasants which defeated our programmes. For instance the TOC boy said if the peasants realized that they were being exploited by that man, why did they not kill him ?

The peasants said it was true that he exploited them but he also helped them in distress. In lean times they could borrow money and paddy from him. If they killed him who would help them ?

Yet, we succeeded at some other places. There we could have killed all the class enemies had not circumstances betrayed us at the ele-

venth hour. We however succeeded in beheading two villagers, one of them a landlord and the other an agent. The former was a nightmare to the people of Maharani, a village about 40 miles from Agartala. He had illegally in his possession more than 100 kanis of land, besides being a moneylender who used to charge a very high rate of interest. Conrary to our bitter experiences at other places, we got a satisfactory response to our call from the local peasants of Maharani. Actually there the TOC boys worked only for about a month and succeeded in convincing the peasants of the necessity of class struggle and annihilation of the local moneylenders, landlords and their agents. It was most probably in March, 1970, that the peasant guerillas of Maharani killed that landlord. The TOC boys themselves conducted the operation but the actual killing was done by the local peasants. This is how it went :

The Operation

At about 2 a.m. the guerillas slipped into the house, found the man in his bedroom sleeping on his cot. One of the guerillas took out a knife and stabbed him on the head, chest and stomach. He died instantaneously. The guerillas then slipped out as silently as they had entered a few minutes ago.

But in the second case, we made a big mistake. Instead of killing the landlord we killed his servant. It happened this way. The man came to know of our plan much before our TOC boys could reach his village. So on the particular night he went to sleep in another room while the poor servant was ordered to sleep on his master's cot. Our guerillas were equally deceived. They could not recognise in the dark whom they were killing. The next morning when they saw the landlord proudly stepping out of his house a shiver went down their spines, many hurriedly left the village but on their way to Agartala some of them were arrested by the police.

Along with our activities in rural

areas we aimed at the destruction of all the machinery of imperialism in towns. First of all we decided to blow up the system of education which since the 19th century has been producing agents of imperialism. We used to attack schools during the day, often during the recess. We used to carry with us highly explosive bombs, pipe-guns, knives and petrol. Generally our targets of attack were the library, the office and the room of the headmaster. After receiving an "all clear sign" from our sympathisers we entered the school and divided into four different groups : one to attack the room of the headmaster, to cut the telephone wire in his room and destroy all his valuable office files ; another group to enter the library and set the books on fire, another to enter the office to destroy everything including the money, and the fourth group to guard the school entrance and watch the movements of the students and teachers. This group used to have many bombs and pipe-guns, while the others carried petrol and knives.

In this way we raided a large number of schools, including the Pragati School, the Prachya Bharati School, Avaynagar Higher Secondary School and the Vodhjang High School. As for the Avaynagar School not a single sheet of paper was left in the office room, every thing was burnt to ashes. Wherever we went, neither the students nor the teachers ever dared make any protest. We fell upon them like a tiger on a herd of sheep. Nowhere did we experience any resistance except some feeble protests from the old headmasters. Those bloody goody goody men used to say : *Babara kena esob kordaha ? Agun lagie ki hobe* etc. (My boys! What are you doing? What will you gain by setting everything on fire ?)

Similar was the fate of the colleges in Agartala. For about six months everything was at our mercy. Classes were postponed, examinations held up and the stupid teachers were always seen inside their houses. But we did not kill any of them. Here

of course we definitely deviated from the line of our comrades in West Bengal.

Days were rolling on and we were becoming more and more powerful. On the last birthday of Comrade Mao Tse-tung we organised a procession. Carrying placards and pictures of Mao, Lenin and Charu Mazumder we walked along the different streets of the town. The pedestrians looked on but made no remark; even the police who were following us from a safe distance did not dare to come out of their four-wheeled cages. At about 9 p.m. we dispersed in the darkness near Gangerpar. About ten minutes later the police reached the spot, got down from their vans and raised a "halla" (noise).

Clashes with CPM

This single incident proves our strength and stamina. Really, unlike all other political parties the CPI (ML) grew with unprecedented rapidity. And this involved us in clashes with the CPI(M). It is true we had genuine hatred for Congress but our hatred of the CPI(M) was unlimited. It was because they speak of revolution but sit in parliament. There is a party of economism, agitating for some economic demands and concessions. They try to excite the middle-class Bengalis in the name of revolution and thus keep the starving people far away from actual class struggle. The leaders of the CPI(M) are from typical middle-class stock sharing all the vices and shortcomings of that class. They know it well that if there is a revolution they will be its first victims because their sole aim is self-enrichment at the cost of the toiling millions. That is why we made the CPI(M) our main political enemy. We first attacked the party's student front. In one operation, for instance, we severely beat up the leader of the students' union in our college. That fellow was an out and out CPI(M) supporter and he used to spread all sorts of rumours against us. One day we entered the college, dragged him out of the class room and gave him a good beating. As

one of the TOC boys took out a knife to stab him, he began to run. Somebody among us threw a small bomb and the boy was injured. He was bleeding profusely. But we failed to catch him, he ran away.

After this incident, everyone of the CPI(M) became very panicky. We erased their slogans from the walls and wrote our own; nobody came forward to challenge us. In fact, we did what we liked during those months. One thing, however, we did not do. We did not kill anyone of our political enemies. Not only that, we believed in the basic identities between the hard core cadres of the CPI(ML) and the CPI(M), but the situation was not very helpful. Unlike Calcutta, Agartala is a much smaller place and most of us, I mean the political workers and leaders, were known to each other intimately. Besides, there was less sophistication in our politics. So we could beat somebody up, but could not think of killing him. That does not mean that we ever compromised with our class enemies.

But our fall was as meteoric as our rise. The moment we reached the peak we came to learn that we had among us many spies. We tried to be more alert but it was too late. Towards the end of 1970 some of our TOC boys were arrested. We therefore left our homes, shifted our office and "school" to a safer place somewhere outside the town. Long before this, we had been sleeping elsewhere at night to avoid the police. After those unexpected setbacks we changed our shelters. But all these proved fruitless. Almost every alternate night some TOC boys and active sympathisers were caught and jailed. Then one day came my turn. Like other TOC boys I also did not sleep in my house. My widowed mother who did not like these things from the beginning became very unhappy. She often said that I could do whatever I liked but I should remember that I was her only son, and should not die. "My son do not sleep outside at night." On the occasion of a festival I agreed to spend

the night at home. At about 3 a.m. I woke up at a loud noise outside the gate. I left the bed, looked through the peephole of the door and found two truckloads of the CRP and Tripura Police. I still pity them! Though they encircled the house they did not dare come inside for they feared that I might throw bombs. So the OC began to shout: "Sudhir Babu, I ask you to surrender, do not try to run away or throw bombs, my men are ready with their guns." He repeated this warning but none of his men came in. Meanwhile my mother also woke up and began to weep. I therefore decided to surrender. I opened the door and said "Yes, now you can come in. Look! I am unarmed." The OC was to take me in his jeep but my mother rushed out and said that they must call somebody as witness, otherwise they might kill her only son and deny that they had arrested him. The OC agreed and my mother called in our next-door neighbour, a headmaster whose school we once raided. I was surprised when I heard the headmaster say that I was an extremely polite and innocent boy, that whatever I did, I did it for the people and with an open mind. Another surprise was that for one man there came at least 60 armed policemen! These demons are always afraid of death.

The lock-up was dark most of the time, the floor was wet with urine, the walls were plastered with excrement. I was given two bricks so that my feet did not get wet. For seven days I sat on the bricks. The food served in the evening was smelly and full of stone chips. The six or seven convicts with whom I shared the lock-out used to tell me that the food was so prepared that it would spoil my liver for ever. Whatever be the truth, my liver has been damaged.

Reasons for Failure

The failure of our movement was mainly due to two important factors—absence of mass support and internal conflict. I admit that wherever the people allowed us a free hand in our

operations, they did it out of fear and not out of love or sympathy. We wrote slogans on the walls but seldom tried to make the people understand our theory. Middle-class people are basically opportunist and timid. Though sometimes they cry for a change, basically they prefer the status quo. That is why they support the CPI(M). They know that the CPI(M) will not turn over the system, but help it to run, it will moreover secure for them some concessions. Naturally, when we raided the schools, burnt books or beat up CPI(M) students people began to doubt our sincerity. I often heard whisperings behind me among the students in my college that what Sudhir had been doing was not good. It has been said earlier that many TOC boys and sympathisers were arrested while asleep. Those who gave them shelter themselves betrayed those boys. They would not have done so had they any loyalty to the party. A large number of boys are still rotting in jails. Nobody cares for their release. From my experience I can say that revolution depends on the participation of the people. Basically the people do not take any initiative. This initiative should come from a revolutionary. He will create a situation favourable for people's participation. For this however he should have patience and farsightedness. All these we ignored from the start.

Another thing that weakened us was internal conflict and for this the ultimate responsibility lies with the "Big Three" of our party who came from Calcutta. Whatever they did, they did according to their whims and

as per the written instructions from headquarters. It was we the local TOC boys who built up the party in Tripura but our service was not sufficiently taken into account. The leaders seldom asked us to take part in the screening committee for admission. As a result a large number of spies entered the party and sabotaged our operations. By the beginning of 1971 many efficient and trusted workers had been arrested and imprisoned. Inside the TOC we had a genuine feeling of brotherhood. We were ready to die for one another. But this relationship did not last long because of the tactics of the three leaders. Finally, they themselves were arrested. They were let down by the same people whom they had trusted more than they did us.

Since my release I have left the party and decided to complete my studies. Besides, I shall look after our small grocery—the only means of our livelihood. But don't think that I have betrayed the party. I have not and I must not. The only thing I want to say is that for the time being West Bengal and Tripura have no bright future. West Bengal in particular will see bigger tragedies. Only the CPI(ML) can save her from ruination but it should remember that it will have to take the people by its side. 'People' is not a myth, it is a reality. However, because of indiscriminate murder of individuals whoever they may be—a teacher, a middle peasant or a policeman—and because of the so-called cultural revolution, people had not come forward for their defence.

I ask my friends to watch the war of Bangladesh. It is not yet a class struggle but a mere clash of interests between two groups of colonial people. But there may emerge a third group—the real revolutionaries who will crush the first two. Look and learn. Here in India also there are two groups of hypocrites: the rightists and the so-called leftists. So think of your next step. You have already made your path slippery.

For FRONTIER contact

S. P. CHATTERJEE

Statesman Office

Steel Market

Durgapur-4