

Naxalgia and “Madhu Chakra” in *Meghnadbodh Rohoshyo*: A Critical Review

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Abstract

This essay both pits Anik Datta’s movie *Meghnadbodh Rohoshyo* against other literary works dealing with the Naxal question and examines its intertextuality to understand the multifaceted theme of political betrayal that subsumes the armed insurgency. On May 25, 1967, a group of tribal sharecroppers in an Indian village called Naxalbari under the state of West Bengal resisted the landowners from getting their yield. The protest got 11 villagers killed, and spun off into a violent insurgency aimed at the annihilation of the people’s enemy, and eventually exposed the Marxist/Maoist divide in the Communist Party of India. Released on the fiftieth year of the Naxalbari Movement, Anik Datta’s movie tackles some of the unresolved conflicts of the past by giving them human faces. He uses the genre of mystery films to attempt an “objective” analysis of the nuanced truth behind one symbolic betrayal that failed the movement. Datta narrates the story of a defector who left his idealist activism to settle for a comfortable and successful life abroad. The protagonist’s defection serves as a parallel to the way the Bengali renaissance figure Michael Madhusudan Dutt left his religion, country, and language for Europe and wrote in English. Anik Datta, however, focuses on Madhusudan’s epic *Meghnadbodh Kabya* (*The Slaughter of Meghnadh*), where the heroic code of a warrior clan is betrayed, and uses it as a temporal frame to negotiate with the present. This article critiques the multiplicity of exchanges between Madhusudan’s epic and a contemporary tale of betrayal as found in Anik Datta’s film to comment on the cultural and political components of the Naxalite movement and the nostalgia associated with it.

Keywords: Naxalite, Naxalgia, Madhusudan Dutt, Maoism, Marxism, Communist Party of India, habitus, cultural capital

From Naxalbari to Naxalgia

Anik Datta’s 2017 movie *Meghnadbodh Rohoshyo* recontextualizes the politically charged situations of the Naxalite Movement and gives it a human face by probing into the shifting cultural paradigms of the Marxist-Maoist resurgence in the late sixties, which now resides in the public imagination either as an ideological drift or as an unfinished political business. The youthful exuberance with which progressive students joined the peasant movement to end class struggles was met with heavy-handed resistance by the establishment. Narratives of violence, brutality, extra-judicial killings, and ideological pitfalls still dominate the public imagination either to propagate what the ruling class thinks of the radical movement or what the radical

activists think of the ruling class. The prevailing discourse veers between the ruthless killing of the innocent citizens by the guerrilla activists and the brute force with which the State placated the rebellions. The investigative strategy of a “whodunnit” structure, however, promises an objective coverage of both sides of the story.

The release of the movie coincides with the fifty years of the beginning of the Naxalite Movement in a tribal village called Naxalbari in Darjeeling district of the state of West Bengal in India. From the beginning, the movement employed Marxist slogans of class war and revolution, aiming at a radical political transformation from a “class-in-itself” into a “class-for-itself.” Kanu Sanyal, a field activist of the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M); Charu Mazumdar, a supporter of Maoist strategies of armed resistance; and Jangal Santhal, a local tribal leader, were instrumental behind the peasant uprising. While the trio was mobilizing the peasants to protest against low wages, landlessness, bonded labor, high interest rates, caste system, and exploitation, a parallel movement started in Kolkata that had its roots in unemployment, dissatisfaction with party politics, and downward mobility. Aruna Krishnamurthy writes, “Naxalbari marked a crucial shift in goals, strategy, and constituency that sets it apart from a long history of peasant movements based on customary consciousness and economic exigencies” (136).

The Naxalites were inspired by the revolutionary zeal of China and felt that the parliamentary democracy sought by their party CPI was futile. Instead, they adopted Mao’s strategy “to lead an armed guerrilla war that, beginning in the countryside, would mobilize the peasantry and eventually encircle the cities in a bid to capture state power in the struggle for a communist society” (Shah and Jain 1166). Naxalbari thus turned out to be the battleground for the ideological struggles in the Indian communist movement and ended up splitting the once united Communist Party of India (CPI). John Harriss sums it up thus:

Those Marxist intellectuals who led a peasant uprising against landlords in the area of Naxalbari in northern West Bengal in 1967 argued against participation in parliamentary democracy and against mass organization, in favor of armed struggle. They sought to follow the example of the Chinese communists, led by Mao Zedong, in “liberating” rural areas and then encircling and taking the towns. Their actions sometimes degenerated into indiscriminate violence following from the injunction of Charu Mazumdar, who had emerged as the movement’s leader, to undertake “annihilation of class enemies.” (312-313)

Within two years of the movement, in 1969, the dissidents spread their activities under the banner of CPI (Marxist-Leninist) in the eastern zone (Mohan 1119). Led by the veteran communist party leader KPR Gopalan who left the CPM, the radical politics moved to the southern tip of Kerala, which made one character in the *Meghnadbodh Rohoshyo* claim that Kolkata and Kerala are united by 3 Ms: Marx, Movie and *Maach* (fish).

The offshoot branch stated Marxist-Leninist as its praxis. However, for many, such an ideology was nothing more than a “lapsed Marxism” (Mitra). The stated purpose of the Naxalite was to integrate three struggles against feudalism, imperialism, and comprador-bureaucrat capitalism, while their means to attain such goals remained violent. The red corridor, comprising eastern, central, and southern parts of India, soon became the loci of violence and was considered among the bloodiest of homegrown terrorism in India which led the government of India to outlaw the party.

The state’s retaliatory response, the ideologues’ failure to agree on their theoretical stance, the death of its main leader Charu Mazumdar inside jail, and the killing, maiming, or jailing of other leaders brought the initial Naxalite Movement to an end in 1972. However, different Maoist factions continued an underground insurgency, known among them as the “people’s war,” and in 2009, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh termed Naxalism “the greatest internal security threat to our country” (Gaikwad).

Although fallen out of favor, the movement had its bright moments in the early seventies when communism seemed a viable option against feudalism, capitalism, and imperialism. The dominant discourse of such a narrative is to inspire new generations of youth in India with political imaginary – that of a society free of exploitation and injustice – outside the official discourse based on the development trajectory. The Naxalites fought not only for their own control over their means of subsistence but also for the dignity that has been denied to them for generations. Such longing is preserved in the writings of authors who witnessed the movement or by the popular imagination that is available in fiction or media.

A type of nostalgia over the Naxalite Movement, dubbed as Naxalgia, still persists in the memory of the generation that saw the uprising and its aftermath. Naxalgia is therefore characterized by both hope and its disenchantment, by courage and its betrayal. As Nandini Lal puts it, “The Naxalite insurgency that began in 1967 has held a snug purchase over West Bengal’s literary psyche. The tragedy of state jackboots crushing idealistic students smitten with communism weighs heavily on the collective imagination.”

In 2016, the “West Bengal’s literary psyche” was revisited by three prominent writers, all well known for their literary accounts of the Naxalite period, who took part in a discussion titled “Naxalgia” at the Kolkata Literary Meet. Samaresh Majumdar’s *Kaalbela* trilogy, Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay’s *Brishtir Ghraan* and *Shaola*, and Kunal Basu’s *Rabi-Shankar* are some of the significant works in Bangla that keep the collective imagination on Naxalism alive in West Bengal’s literary psyche. During the discussion, Samaresh Majumdar pointed out how the failed revolutionaries felt exploited by writers like him who were profiting from writing on the Naxal issue; Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay highlighted the courage and hope that the young revolutionaries instilled in others; while Kunal Basu talked about

the urgency for a new Naxal narrative. Basu mentioned that his research on *Rabi-Shankar* led him to interview many of the surviving police officers who took part in the killing and torturing of the activists as well as talk to several silent supporters who wrote pamphlets or songs, or published in fringe magazines to argue that the Naxal question should be given new currency (“Shirshendu, Samaresh, Swapnamoy, Kunal”). It can be argued that Anik Datta’s movie attempts a metanarrative that deals with the issues broached by the panelists. *Meghnadbodh Rohoshya* involves the idea of exploitation and profiteering through writing; it recounts the tales of hope and disenchantment of participants and activists; and it aims at finding a new narrative.¹ Interestingly, the director has consciously distanced himself from sharing any political convictions, resulting in a value-neutral space where mostly the aesthetic side of the Naxalite Movement is foregrounded. At the same time, the movie maintains the disillusionment and trauma of the urban educated class and the familial structure of most of the Naxalite literature. It superficially glosses over the class question or the subaltern group with whom the movement originated. However, before I critically examine *Meghnadbodh Rohoshya*, let me briefly reflect on the literary tradition against which Anik Datta’s work can be judged.

Naxalite Literature

A character in Anik Datta’s film asks the protagonist Asimava Bose why he does not write about the Naxalite Movement in which he was involved. Implying that the tales of terror unleashed by the leftists sell well in the West, the character then quips that one such opportunist writer has recently got shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize. The reference to Neel Mukherjee’s 2014 novel *The Lives of Others* is obvious. Mukherjee weaves a story in which the peasants are reduced to nothing, hope for any societal change is gone, and normal democratic solutions to the moral question is non-existent. The readers are posed with the option of siding with the rebel Supratik who finds enough anomalies in the system to legitimize violence.

This novel is the latest in the books on the Naxalite written in English. Earlier, Rohinton Mistry’s *A Fine Balance*, Upamanyu Chatterjee’s *English, August*, Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger*, and Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Lowland* have tried to encapsulate the Naxal issue for an Anglophone audience (Martyris).

Jhumpa Lahiri uses the plot of *The Lowland* (2013) to capture the nationalist/internationalist dimension of the Naxal issue. Udayan, a young man reads about the Naxalbari incident and its Chinese endorsement in the newspaper: “The spark in Darjeeling will start a prairie fire and will certainly set the vast expanses of India ablaze” (23). He argues with his father, who used to be a Marxist, saying, “Your generation didn’t solve anything” (23). The novel goes on to show Udayan and his brother bifurcate in their attitudes towards political reforms.

1 I would not be surprised to learn that the filmmaker Kunal Sen in the movie was modeled after Kunal Basu. In his movie review published in *Kaahon*, Samajdar, however, hints at the possibility that the name Kunal Sen could allude to Mrinal Sen’s son bearing the same name who is also a filmmaker in real life.

The plot to see the political rift through the two brothers is a reminder of Satyajit Ray's film *The Adversary*. Based on Sunil Gangopadhyay's story, "Pratidwandi," Ray uses a family structure where the younger brother chides his older brother for losing his revolutionary path. The older brother, a drop-out medical student, witnesses the moral debauchery of his time, yet does nothing to stem the rot.

In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy uses the barbaric killing of the untouchable Naxal sympathizer Velutha to expose the hypocrisy of the Communist leaders in Kerala. Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* reminds readers that the victimization of the subaltern group – the Madari people, the Muslims and the beggars – is not unique; their fate is handcuffed to any other Indian in a state that patronizes violence.

Conversely, Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* employs the metaphor of a rooster coop for Indian democracy in which the urge to free oneself is compromised. Balram kills his master and becomes a type of Naxalite knowing very well that his action will cause his family members to be hunted, beaten, and burned alive by the masters. The novels in English try to show the world in monolithic categories or Manichean binaries of right or wrong, big or small, good or evil to make local stories global.

The Naxalite narrative in Bangla does not have the added pressure of explaining the cultural referents. Mahasweta Devi is one of the first to write on this issue. She discussed her artistic duty to respond to the history that she was witnessing in an interview, where she said, "I thought I saw history in the making, and decided that as a writer it would be my mission to document it" ("In Conversation"). The result was a series of short stories: "Jalasatra," "Pindadan," "Kanai Bairagir Ma'in," and "Draupadi." Her novella *Hajar Churashir Ma* (made into a Hindi film titled *Hazaar Chaurasi Ki Maa*) is probably the most famous depiction of the tragic side of this movement. It is about a mother's search for the dead body of her son, a suspected terrorist, who was killed in a police encounter. She wrote this novella upon the request of a young revolutionary who asked her not to talk about the movement as a rural episode, but also as something urban. In response, she ended up writing *Hajar Churashir Ma*. In her interview, Devi said:

I wrote *Hajar Churashir Ma* in *Prasad*, a film-magazine. I was never associated directly with that movement. So I wrote about an apolitical mother, whose generation was in complete darkness about their next generation. Children of so-called leftist parents also went to the streets, rejecting their parents' leftism as spurious. I found idealism in the selfless sacrifice and absence of greed in them. I was moved. Somehow *Prasad* found its way into the jails. Naxalite prisoners read it, started to consider me as their kin. (167)

One of the most powerful short stories by Mahasweta Devi dealing with the Naxal question is "Draupadi" where the female protagonist Dopdi uses her raped black body to confront the anti-Naxal strategist Senanayak.

Samaresh Basu's *Mahakaler Rather Ghora* is another instance of using a tribal protagonist. Ruhiton returns from his imprisonment for his involvement in the Naxalite Movement and finds everything else has returned to its pre-revolutionary normalcy. He carries a fever inside like the nightly stallion of time that represents destruction.

Anik Datta's movie is alive to the subaltern origin of the Naxalite Movement. He brings in the indigenous issue by presenting Janaki as a tribal Naxal with a mythical name. But he does not portray her as defiant as Dopdi or Ruhiton. Even though Janaki wants revenge for the wrong done to her Naxalite father, she does not directly talk about political resistance as she seems too focused on her personal revenge mission. The other tribal members in the movie are the stereotypical Maoist rebels who terrorize the system as arms-carrying masked inhabitants of the jungle. However, they remain as stock characters devoid of any elaboration.

By the same token, the story of Datta lacks the political depth of Samaresh Majumdar who in his Animesh quartet – *Uttoradhikar*, *Kaalbela*, *Kaalpurush*, and *Madhabilata* – brilliantly brought out the Naxalite period through human interactions. In the Kolkata Literary Meet, Majumdar, however, recalled his discomfort in meeting a former Naxalite rebel living in the US who accused him of making money out of their ideology. This issue of commodification is also pertinent to Datta's film, and reminds us of the habitus where aesthetic and ideological fields play subservient to financial capital. The movie is released by *Netflix* for a global audience, and is very conscious of representing the urban Kolkata as a westernized city. With this let me now unravel the mystery (Rohoshyo) surrounding a contemporary story and its epic counterpart of betrayal.

The “Madhu Chakra” in *Meghnadbodh Rohoshyo*

To say Anik Datta's *Meghnadbodh Rohoshyo* is a clever movie is an understatement. At times the mystery movie is too clever in playing with words and ideas while presenting them as a jigsaw puzzle to live up to its subgenre claim as a “whodunnit? howdunnit? whydunnit?” The dialogues are replete with various rhetorical devices. For instance, the central character, sci-fi writer Asimava Bose's first name is an unmistakable echo of Isaac Asimov; the mysterious Janaki's name is a pun on *Jano Ki* (Do you know?); and the police officer Sunu Guha Thakurta's name offers a slight twist to the real-life notorious encounter specialist Runu Guha Neogi. If verbal clues are not enough, shots are carefully choreographed to provide visual clues. Asimava's departure from Marxist ideology, for instance, is comically represented through a Marxism poster featuring the American comedian Groucho Marx with a cigar.

The title-cards of the movie run alongside a contemporary dance performance based on Michael Madhusudan Dutt's *Meghnadbodh Kabya* (*The Slaughter of Meghnadh*). Lines from the poem are carefully chosen to use the epic invocation as an entry to the “madhu chakra” (the circle based on Madhu – the nickname of the poet) as well as to grasp betrayal as the leitmotif. In his secondary epic, Madhusudan twisted the

plot of *The Ramayana* to glorify Ravana’s son Meghnad who was betrayed by his uncle and unceremoniously killed by Lakshman. “Madhu chakra” is a circle that studies the textual intrigue and betrayal. Literally, however, “madhu chakra” refers to a beehive, which stands for the Romantic notion of authorship as a site where bees gather nectar from different flowers to create their honey.²

Anik Datta employs frame-narrative to depict “*bibhishan Bibhishan*” – the horrendous treachery of Bibhishan – from a myriad of perspectives. He uses three preambles as a temporal amalgamation to set the narrative tone. The first scene depicts a police raid killing a *swadeshi* activist at Birbhum in 1936. The frame shifts to Oxford, set in 2016, where someone opens a parcel containing a copy of Madhusudan Dutt’s *Meghnadbodh Kabya*. Some jump cuts are used in the next few scenes to present the essence of *Meghnadbodh Kabya* dance-drama performed by Gautam Halder in a Kolkata theater. As the movie progresses, these three interludes are woven into an intertwining narrative of betrayal. By the end of the movie, we come full circle as we identify the first scene in colonial India in 1936 as a fictional confession of the protagonist; the second one is a bait to catch the conscience of someone who betrayed his friend in 1970 during the Naxalite insurgence; and the present day performance is an invitation to join the “madhu chakra” to witness the unfolding of the mystery. Such over-determination makes Arup Ratan Samajdar review the movie for *Kaahon* with a damning titular verdict: “Meghnad Badh Rahasya: Buried Beneath its Own Weight.”

The apolitical nature of the film is due to the larger popular global audience that the director probably had in mind, and is evident in its availability on the popular streaming service *Netflix*. Hence the director felt obligated to explain every euphemism, allusion, or cultural reference, making some dialogues redundant and pedantic for the local audience. Instead of taking any strong political position, the movie uses symbols and songs to keep the conclusion open-ended. Two dominant narratives on the Naxalite Movement are placed side by side for the viewer’s consumption. The state version demonizes the radical activists by focusing on the killing of the innocence and the causing of civil disobedience, while the popular version romanticizes those who dreamt of political reformation and emancipation of the people. The movie, however, ends with the director’s alter ego Kunal Sen saying that he will use Asimava’s confessional script to make a film set in the 1970s. We therefore come to a full “Madhu Circle” as in the end we have the potential of a new beginning. The movie thus offers many interpretations, without failing to change them (notwithstanding Marx’s Eleven Theses on Feuerbach). The futility is symptomatic of the stalemate that left politics is experiencing in a post-Soviet world, and in the film dialectical materialism is reduced to textual dialectics.

2. Andrew Cooper in his essay, “The Apian Way: Virgil’s Bees and Keats’s Honeyed Verse” traces the idea back to Virgil. The idea that a creative writer is like a bee while the critic is like a spider was expounded by Matthew Arnold in his “Sweetness and Light.”

The director of *Meghnadbodh Rohoshyo* is very careful in presenting the dilemma of the plot through a set of binaries. The plot thus assumes a dialectical proportion as everything happens twice in the movie. There are two of everything. The central character Asimava has two wives. He has two children: one biological son Rick from his previous marriage and one step-daughter from his present spouse. The former wife is paralyzed and wheelchair-bound, while the current wife Indrani is a film actress who shot to fame through a film directed by Kunal titled *Shiri* (*The Staircase*); the contrast between the wheelchair and the stairs is obvious.

Asimava is guilty of betraying his comrades in the 1970s to secure safe passage to England. To give his side of the story, he writes his confession (albeit under compulsion) admittedly in an old-fashioned prose that resembles the diction of Bankimchandra Chatterjee, the famed Bengali novelist who served as a civil servant under the British rule. Through his fictional narrative, Asimava explains how in the 1930s, Marx's *Das Kapital* was becoming popular among the young students who sought new modes of engagement with their colonial master. Marx's understanding of history based on class struggles contradicted Asimava's understanding of social reality that he gleaned through the novels of Charles Dickens for that matter. He asked his comrades, "Aren't novels history?" (01:44:52) to echo Georg Lukac's position as stated in *The Historical Novel* to remind us that the novel as a genre could be socially and politically critical as well as psychologically insightful. His comrades dismissed his apolitical assessment, and it became evident that Asimava was a misfit among his peers.

Asimava's involvement in the Naxalite Movement is shown from two stances: the time it actually took place and the retelling of the event while giving an interview to his book's translator, Elena Majumder. In the first instance, we find Asimava's civil servant father using his influence to strike a deal with the police to get him out of the torture cell by forcing him to give away the details of his friend's hideout. In the second instance, we find him trying to avoid the issue altogether in his interview with Elena. He quoted a popular Bangla song "*Amake amar moto thakte dao*" ("Let me be me") to suggest that his presently recomposed life had no room for the revolutionary figure that he used to be. He downplayed his past involvement saying, "At that time everyone got a little involved" (00:18:12).

At present, Asimava Bose resides in Oxford. He is the recipient of the Arthur C. Clarke Award for his novel *The Big Bong Theory* (a title that alludes to Stephen Hawkins while using a derogatory term for the Bengali). Asimava has come to Kolkata to attend the launch of his book's Bangla translation held in Oxford University Press's (OUP) bookstore. The two locations – Oxford and OUP – create a field for the engagement of different classes, entities, tendencies, and propensities. We thereby enter what Pierre Bourdieu would call *habitus*, a coordinated space for both symbolic and cultural capital. Bourdieu in *The Rules of Art* erases the boundary between elite and mass cultures. He is more interested in the field in

which these classes or their agencies operate to secure or maintain their capital (cited in Groden et al. 69).

The book-launch is a polyphonic and polysemic ensemble participated in by different agents. The cultural capital is evident in the sophisticated urban "elite" audience. Members of the audience whisper to compliment the attractive figure of the author's actress wife Indrani. The program moderator uses hyperbole as a sales pitch, turning Asimava into a commodity before the book signing. Indrani is a perfect hostess, managing PR and family alike. Asimava's musician son is running late because he is busy sharing weed with his girlfriend. Asimava's caretaker (who represents the masses alongside the waiters, cameraman, mic-man, and readers) is busy munching free sandwiches, while the star of the show takes his time out to describe mutton chops to a foreign guest. During the Q&A, one old comrade of Asimava shows up with a difficult question much to the chagrin of the author. Sirajul asks why the writer sets his stories in a futuristic Kolkata of 2050 and avoids dealing with the Kolkata he grew up in. Asimava's casual answer that a writer must not differentiate between the past and the future sounded more like a hollow "excuse" to Sirajul (00:12:38).

Sirajul represents a class, an idealist past that Asimava has long left behind. He has moved on to be back to the upper class in which he was born. The secret is revealed by Asimava's caretaker Bulu. While the upper class was drinking at an after party in Asimava's mansion in Kolkata, the working class, comprising the caretaker and the cook, secretly drank stolen whiskey on the roof. A drunk Bulu told Shombhu that Asimava's father had snatched 8 *bighas* of his father's land, which gave the Bose family its landed aristocracy.

Bulu, deprived of his land, is degraded, and even dehumanized as Asimava calls him "bloody parasites." Bulu's degeneration is noticed in his clandestine role as a pimp who rents out the house to secret lovers when Asimava goes back to England every summer. Bulu has also taken an advance from a non-Bengali businessman, promising to arrange a sale of Asimava's property. The other broker in the movie, Nikhilesh, uses his public profile as an art connoisseur to smuggle national treasures out of the country. Both Bulu and Nikhilesh are therefore brokers of different breeds.

There are two types of policemen: the present day detectives are verbose and run around the town in search of a missing Asimava like the comical Thomson twins from *Tintin*. Then there is the action-oriented previous generation of police officers who, we are told, were divided on the Naxalite question. While the popular notion involves police brutality, there were few officers who were sympathetic to the rebels.

Everyone in the movie has secrets. Shombhu and Bulu have a homosexual relationship. Both of Asimava's children want to exploit their father: Rick wants his father's money, while Buli wants Asimava's recommendation to go abroad. Rick has an illicit affair with the married Elena, while Kunal is infatuated with Indrani. Badal

Bose and Janaki live double lives. Then there are the political activists who roam the jungle plotting terrorist attacks and the retired police officers who turned out to be either socialites or Naxal sympathizers.

Only Asimava's secret is developed in the course of action. The transformation of the firebrand "leftist leftie" into an urban socialite is a secret. In his confession, he revealed that the "third degree police torture" had damaged his left arm for good and made him give up his comrade. With his damaged left side, he became a right-handed writer. The intertextuality with Samaresh Majumdar's most popular novel on the Naxalite period, *Kaalbela*, is obvious as Animesh the protagonist too faces a similar fate of being paralyzed. Yet, compared to Animesh, Asimava is a coward. As Sirajul puts it, while talking to Indrani and Kunal, Asimava was nothing more than "a political hobbyist" who had a romantic notion of the Marxist revolution (01:51:50).

The damaged left-side is the political baggage that he carries. Sitting on a park bench, Asimava sees the news of an attack on a police car by Maoist rebels. The fear of his own past gets hold of him. Through the use of pathetic fallacy, the director makes the exterior project the interior. His shame coincided with the loud laughter of a group of old men having their morning therapy. The kitsch is used to slight the political intensity.

Asimava's guilt is carefully brought to the surface by an intricate scheme of Janaki, the daughter of his betrayed comrade. She stalked him on Facebook and sent copies of *Meghnadbodh Kabya* to prick his conscience before finally confronting him. Asimava's ignorance about Indranil's daughter who was born to a Santal mother added to the mystery. Janaki vows to avenge her father's murder after learning about Asimava's betrayal from her foster father. Instead of admitting his guilt, Asimava runs away one more time, and only Janaki holds the key to the Meghnadbodh Rohoshyo, the mystery of the copy of the *Meghnadbodh Kabya*. Janaki in *The Ramayana* is another name given to Sita, who was wronged by the monster Ravana. Anik Datta's reconfiguration of Michael Madhusudan Dutt's epic *Meghnadbodh Kabya* locates the story of betrayal in not only colonial India but also mythical India. The movie poster uses the deconstructive tool of "writing under erasure" (Fr. *sous rature*) to cross out "kabya" in order to replace it with "Rohoshyo." Derrida used this technique of Heidegger's to write over words that are "inadequate yet necessary" (xiv). The title as a signifier therefore illustrates the inadequacy of "narrative," i.e., *Kabya* or epic, as a trope with reference to Michael Madhusudan Dutt's poem, and supplants it with the genre of the mystery novel.

The epic form, by design, is a high art that celebrates the action of a hero with certain moral attributes. Conversely, the "whodunnit? whydunnit? howdunnit?" is a subgenre of detective fiction popularized by Agatha Christie among others. The juxtaposition of high culture and popular culture is done as a postmodern pastiche

where genre categories are eroded. However, the movie did little to address the class categories apart from glossing over them superficially.

The underground rebel figures who blow up the police van remain as shadowy as ever. They are not given any voice in the movie. We see them as masked terrorists in the forests, expressed through mine traps or explosions. They are featured in newspapers for their terroristic action. They are aided by educated intellectuals such as the little magazine editor Badal Bose or a social activist like Janaki who attended Jadavpur University and JNU. We see who they are, but we are not given any reason to understand why and how they are doing the resistance movement. It seems that Anik Datta is careful not to give the violent side of the underground politics any undue attention.

Asimava’s terming of the half-Santal Janaki as “Woman Friday,” name-calling of Bulu as “bloody parasites,” near manhandling of Shombhu, or discomfort at dealing with people like Sirajul or Badal Bose go on to show his superiority complex and class consciousness. Even in his book, *The Big Bong Theory*, he shows disdain for his compatriots. One excerpt read out at the launch parodies Newton’s Second Law of Motion to ridicule the laziness of his people. It reads, “Every bong continues in its state of state of rest or uniformed motion unless compelled by some external force to act otherwise” (00:08:30).

Although Asimava’s name literally means “the infinite,” he remains a narrow human being who has failed to free himself from his own complexities. His involvement in the Naxalite Movement is a historical accident, which can also be deemed as a reason for the failure of the movement in general. Asimava later observes in his confession that true freedom was not attained. Neither he, living in a foreign country, nor his friends, living in an independent country, were free: “We who had united to break the shackles are now living in our own solitudes” (01:13:12).

Conclusion

I started this essay by saying that *Meghnadbodh Rohoshyo* is a clever movie. Perhaps the movie is too clever in its analysis of a historical phenomenon by what K. Balagopal calls “reducing an ideology to its material base” to create a type of “politically debilitating agnosticism” (1727). The movie follows the popular fashionable trend of presenting ideology as a discursive practice that approaches reality from multiple frameworks. Put bluntly, the film-maker’s avoidance in dealing with the Marxist issue from a Marxist perspective ends up diluting the value and truth behind the Naxalite Movement. The film-maker fails to uphold his political conviction. To quote Balagopal again, “All frameworks of consciousness are not equally valid, equally honest or equally fruitful. The capacity of a given cognitive structure to reveal the truth depends on which social practice has generated it” (1727). What Balagopal says about the Telegu Film *People’s Encounter* is equally valid for Anik Datta’s film: “Unless the philosophical project ceases to be purely analytical and actually becomes political, we cannot rid ourselves of this crippling agnosticism that

crops up again and again, in ever new and seemingly radical and intellectually very fashionable forms" (1727).

In the final count, *Meghnadbodh Rohoshyo* is an aesthetic attempt to understand the Naxalite question. It lacks the sincerity to negotiate with the Marxist issues involving class struggles and the historical necessities for adopting to a Maoist proposition. It uses the mystery motif to deal with the conscience of an upper-class elite, Asimava Bose, who has a momentary correspondence with an ideological issue. Asimava's betrayal has been largely forgotten and forgiven, which is symptomatic of agnosticism while Janaki tries to evoke some questions that resonate with the final revolutionary song that asks whether we are asleep or awake.

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