

The Culture Of Patriarchy In The Naxal Insurgency: Multilayered Experience Of Surrendered Women Naxalites

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Abstract

The Naxal insurgency presents both security and developmental challenges for India. Although there is literature on Naxals, limited attention has been paid to women Naxalites. This article examines the issues and challenges faced by surrendered women Naxalites within the context of patriarchy. Applying a gender lens is pertinent to understanding women Naxal cadres, as their significant numbers do not correspond to representation in the senior hierarchy. This study used a qualitative research methodology, including case studies and narrative analysis, and also analysed autobiographies of ex-Naxals. Additionally, this article scrutinises the perspectives of women Naxalites under a feminist standpoint theoretical paradigm. Women in Naxal cadres undertake high-risk activities while facing concerns of law enforcement, though they frequently encounter gendered roles and assignments. Discriminatory practices are often concealed to avoid undermining morale. This paper highlights the challenges faced by Naxalite women during the insurgency and after surrender. A key focus is the governmental approach to Naxal rehabilitation, particularly the lack of attention to gender in the rehabilitation of women Naxalites. A people-centric approach is necessary to address the gaps in Naxal rehabilitation and to consider specific gender issues.

(Key words- Naxal, Insurgency, Gender, Patriarchy, Discrimination, Surrender, Rehabilitation, Cadre, Government)

Introduction

In the war and conflict-torn world, gender is always an important yet unsolved question. The nature of conflict, be it political or ethnic, women always turn out to be the worst victims, as control over the bodies of women has always been considered a sign of victory over the opposing side (Bandopadhyay, 2008). An example of the Rwandan civil war can be cited here, where at least 50,000 confirmed rape cases were found to be registered after the commencement of a year of ethnic violence (Kujur, 2011). The women in the conflict zone not only face violence, but also other types of discrimination, whether unleashed by insurgent groups or by the state. These anomalies are often not recognised or documented by either academia or policymakers. Naxalite insurgency in India comes under such a problem. Among the red corridors or belt, the Naxals are believed to be the saviour of the common people who will protect them against the tyrannical state, but for the Government of India, the Naxals happen to be the

biggest internal security threatⁱ. This dialectical approach and perspective have led to endless debates among the intellectual circle over the last 50 years. In the tiny village of Naxalbari in Siliguri district, West Bengal, the seeds of the Naxal movement were sown in the form of a tribal uprising. After this, this movement has gained the tempo and momentum of the pan-India Maoist movement. The terms "Maoism" and "Maoist movement" are also used to refer to the Naxal movement. For the present research paper, both words, i.e., Naxal and Maoist, are used alternatelyⁱⁱ. The devastating impact of the Naxal movement can be traced from the fact that within a span of forty years, this insurrection movement has felt its presence from Pashupati to Tirupati, involving widespread violence across India and its neighbouring country, Nepal (Sharma, 2016). In Nepal, on the flip side of the story, the Naxalites, after shedding violence, have come to power through democratic elections and have participated in government and decision-making

(Karmacharya, 2009). The scope of this research paper is limited to the Maoists in the Indian subcontinent. The Maoists in India have a distinct target of capturing power fully by 2025 and unfolding a classless communist society, and these could only be possible through violent insurgent struggles in conformity with Marxist and Leninist writings and Mao Zedong's actions (Harnetiaux, 2008).

However, the Indian Government, through various counter-offensive movements, has been able to repress and control the Naxal-led violence (MHA, 2025). But this so-called 'Stick and Carrot' policy, where tough security measures are adopted by using brute force to suppress the movement and simultaneously implementing developmental measures to reintegrate the people inhabiting these Naxal regions, the regions are often backward and lack development in a holistic sense. By adopting both rehabilitation and resettlement policies, the Naxals are encouraged to surrender before the administration, and then they are encouraged to come and lead a normal life in mainstream society. Gradually, the number of surrendered Naxals has been increasing year after year and specifically, MHA, after the most decisive Operation Black Forest, has set aside a deadline of complete elimination of Naxalism from Indian soil by 31st March 2026 (MHA, 2025). After taking into stock the personal anecdotes of surrendered Naxalites, the difference between Naxalism and other forms of insurgency in India can be demarcated, and the participation of women in huge numbers, along with the gendered contestations, including genderⁱⁱⁱ discrimination, is noteworthy (Mantraya, 2018).

Review of Literature

Mostly, the literature on the Naxalite movement was heavily inclined towards either class enemies or class consciousness, often neglecting the question of gender. The work of Charu Majumdar^{iv}, the founding father of the movement. In his seminal work, *Historic Eight Documents*. Majumdar has been very critical of women's participation in the Naxal movement, as he had found women's inability in combat roles for security purposes and belittled their role to sustain the insurgency movement for a longer period of time for various reasons. One instance of women insurgents and their limitations during the night was noted. At least during the night, they need shelter, and unlike their male counterparts, they cannot fight day and night, indicating the vulnerabilities of women.

Modern writings related to Naxal movements have romanticised women combatants in comparison with their male counterparts (Singh, 2015). When

the question comes to other stakeholders, there is a polarised view regarding the participation of women Naxal cadres. The Naxals and their sympathisers regard this movement as gender neutral, whereas the State focuses on the exploitation and discrimination of the women Naxals within their own group (Mantraya, 2018). As per the feminist literature, new perspectives and new insights are building inroads into the gender orientation of the Naxalite movement. Notable feminist poet of Andhra Pradesh, Jayaprabha, has criticised the Naxalite movement as a man's war reflected in a Telugu journal, i.e. Andhra Jyoti (Kannabiran et al 2004). For decades together, academia has also neglected the gender perspective within the Naxalite movement, and the Naxal cadre itself has also paid hardly any attention to the issues and challenges of the women Naxalites. The problem is serious and can be evident from the fact that there have been a limited number of academic writings focusing on the gender discourse in the Naxalite movement. A few of the available views are summarised below.

Naxal movement has undermined the role and position of women Naxal cadre by perpetuating gender discrimination and sexual violence, as found out by Parasar & Shah (2004). By adopting a post-colonial perspective, they have conducted their study. These cases often go unreported, casting doubt on the mainstream feminist movement in India's ability to address the issue. Raghavan & Balasubramaniam (2014) have analysed the role of women in various insurgencies worldwide, including the Indian Naxals, using cross-sectional data. As per them, women Naxals are assigned secondary and less important roles like logistics, and often they are utilised as propaganda machinery and mostly excluded from the decision-making process. Sebastian (2023) argues that, whether within or outside armed groups, despite their significant involvement in armed resistance, combat, and support roles, women insurgents have consistently been neglected by mainstream narratives, and patriarchal structures often sideline their contributions. Hence, among extremist groups and Naxal ideology, which talks about establishing a classless society and doing away with inequality, they themselves are patronising patriarchal ideology by devaluing women, their work and their dedication. In reflecting on gendered experiences, the author poignantly highlights the intersection of gender, violence, and political agency. Women insurgents are not mere victims nor passive supporters, but active agents who give a definite shape and contour to the armed resistance in India.

Kamra (2013), after analysing the memoirs of two former women Naxalites, found the imprints of abstract patriarchy practised within Naxal cadres. She has also pointed out the process of self-formation in relation to power and writing a memoir as an act of resistance against gender discrimination. Bandopadhyaya (2008) has narrated her own lived experiences as a woman Naxalite in the past. She highlighted her inclination to join the Naxal movement and the ideology which had driven her. She also documented how she faced gender discrimination during her involvement as a Naxal cadre. Narain (2017) explored the role of women in Naxalite movements overcoming from the binary perspective, i.e., victims or victimised. Moving beyond this dichotomy, she explains well the problems encountered by women Naxalites and the specific requirements of the women Naxals who surrender and the specific type of approach needed for the rehabilitation of the surrendered women Naxalites and reintegrating them with the mainstream society.

Kannbiran, Volga, and Kannabiran (2004), in their study of Andhra Pradesh, have expressed the urge to provide a feminist critique of the Naxalite movement, as Naxalites have consistently neglected their women combatants. They have tried to capture the responses of the Naxal leaders to these accusations labeled against them.

Roy (2006) tried to analyse the Naxal movement from a historical narrative and views that started as a peasant revolt from 1967-75, she orients her focus on contextualising gender relations within the framework of class, ethnicity, space and cultural environment. She highlights the much-neglected gender perspective in Naxal literature as well.

Asl (2018), adopting a similar perspective, has reviewed Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Low Land* on the backdrop of the Naxalite uprising. She has applied Michael Foucault's subjective knowledge paradigm to analyse the Naxalite movement, which has hitherto been dominated by middle-class, masculine, and urban narratives. The rural, feminine, and lower-class voices and narratives have been ignored in this movement. Maheswari (2018) gives deeper insights into the counter accusations by the State and Naxal groups on the issues of gender based exploitation and violence. She brings to the notice the lacunae of the rehabilitation strategy adopted by the state as an attempt to bring back the women Naxal cadres into the mainstream. Among the most recent works, Alhawat (2024) has pointed out the exploitation, violence, and coercion that female cadres face within militant structures. Despite various government interventions—especially blending security operations with developmental schemes—

the insurgency persists due to ongoing marginalisation and inadequate reforms. However, empowerment programs and symbolic political changes, such as appointing an Adivasi woman as President, have slightly diminished Naxal influence, but women's roles remain complex, reflecting both agency and continued vulnerability in the insurgency.

Though ample of works on Naxalism from the perspective of class analysis or the subaltern perspective are extensively available, very limited works have been done on the Gender perspective in Naxalite movement. Among the available literature on the plight of the Naxal women and the gender violence, but very few studies capture the narratives and lived experiences of the Naxal women themselves. The policy perspectives focusing on the rehabilitation of women Naxalites are also not satisfactory. Here, the researchers have attempted to document these perspectives in this article.

Aims and Methodology

Naxalism as a movement and ideology got some prominence in the circle of academicians, while the gender point of view within the Naxal movement has been neglected for a long time (Kamra, 2013). The article explores the relevance of patriarchy in the Naxalite movement through narratives of surrendered and former Naxals. Moreover, this article aims to capture, from a holistic perspective, the experience of women as Naxalite cadres and the gendered dimensions of their lives during their active participation in the Naxalite movement. Special emphasis has been placed on the causes of joining and leaving the movement. Besides the experience of former women Naxalites, the article has also covered the State's viewpoint and the Naxalite ideological foundations, drawing on existing literature. As a concluding remark, the article outlines measures the state can take to ensure gendered development in the hinterland, which serves as a breeding ground for insurgencies such as Naxalism.

Different methods have been triangulated to gather data both from the field and the literature. The methods include in-depth interviews and the case study method, and an attempt has been made to describe them in narrative form across different sections of this paper. Field observation and documentation have been augmented to capture data and information with greater precision. The primary source of data collection has been fieldwork conducted in various Naxal-affected districts of Odisha, including Kalahandi, Gajapati, Rayagada, Sundargarh, Kandhamal, and Malkangiri, from January 2021 to October 2022.

Here, the Researcher has conducted Case studies of twenty-seven surrendered Naxals, out of which seven were women. The researchers strictly adhered to ethical considerations for respondents, obtaining informed consent via audio recordings. The researchers have relied on a few personal narratives, in the form of media reports and autobiographies, which have been interpreted to deconstruct notions of self-identity, self-perception, and self-representation among women within the sphere of gendered power structures in the Naxalite movement. Further, secondary literature was cited to provide greater focus to the study. The secondary sources of literature include relevant journals, local newspapers, Government policies, books, and reports. The researcher, Dr Mohanty, specifically went to the field to conduct interviews with surrendered Naxalites in person, despite the district administration's caution to conduct interviews in situ, particularly at police stations, to ensure the researcher's safety. But researcher Dr Mohanty, to maintain objectivity and value neutrality throughout the research process, met with some respondents in person and also conducted a few telephonic interviews. For maintaining the privacy and protection of the surrendered Naxalites, pseudonyms have been used. In the same light, instead of the full address, only the native state to which the participants originally belong has been utilised in this article.

Theoretical Framework

Understanding the challenges and opportunities of conducting research on women in Naxalism, the researchers employ Feminist Standpoint Theory to inform their data collection and analysis methodology. Scholars like Gasztold (2020) have emphasised the demasculinisation of the methodology used to study terrorism and armed conflicts through the use of feminist theories, in order to broaden the scope of analysis of the origins, structure, function, and consequences of terrorism. These are shaped by socio-cultural and even biological factors that constitute social reality. The feminist methodology can be used to examine the gender dynamics that act as both ideological enablers and barriers for group members (Pehlan, 2020). It helps in interrogating the structure of patriarchy and gender identities. Moreover, a feminist approach enables a fuller analysis of the motives and methods underlying women's insurgency activities and demonstrates the specific nature of female insurgency. The dominant patriarchal views often reflect a male gaze that tends to objectify women, which eventually deprives them of creating their own narratives about themselves (Gasztold, 2017, & Tervooren, 2016). The experiences of the women Naxalites can

make us recognise the roles and potential agencies the women Naxalites possess, which is crucial to acknowledge that they can be the very real threat they pose to the State security. However, the academia was criticised for its privileging of male bias that excluded and marginalised women's perspectives, especially in insurgency movements (Matt, Weinstein et al 2009). It mainly highlights the conventional forms of knowledge production and the power imbalances that such methodological practices entail. Such practices had omitted women's experiences, downplayed their contributions, and overgeneralised from men's practices (Matt, Weinstein et al., 2009). Here, the researcher tried to liberate women's experience from Naxalite insurgency by liberating it from the bondage of patriarchal-induced masculine understanding. The researcher has followed Lenz's (2008) definition of the Outsider-Insider perspective to explain *Feminist Standpoint*. Among the two authors, the first author is a male, who conducted the fieldwork as an outsider to feminine experience, while as a field investigator, he is an Insider who gets firsthand experience of marginalised women naxals trapped and fighting against the double burden of Patriarchy and Naxal Insurgency. Besides, the second author, a female researcher, has designed the theoretical framework in the current article.

Ideological construct and tryst with Gender

Ideology is often cited as the strongest reason for the continuation of the Naxal movement. The Naxal movement emerged as an ideology to counter governmental apathy and the absence of welfare measures in India's hinterlands. To address the failure of the state machinery and to fulfil a promise to take up the cause of the people, this movement gathered momentum and left behind places where no trace of progress or development could reach. Naxalism is a left-wing extremist ideology based on a radical communist model (Singh, 2015). Since the movement's followers trace their ideological inspiration to Mao Zedong of China, they are often also called Maoists. Mao believed in 'People's revolution', which has violence in its main agenda, and this constitutes the core belief of the Naxals. The Maoists in India set the target of 2050 by which they aim at overthrowing the popular government and will establish their own rule as it happened in communist China under the leadership of Mao in 1949. The other ideological sources for the Maoists include Lenin, Stalin, Marx, Engels, and Mao (SBS Dataline, 2011). It could be said to be a communist ideology inspired by class struggle, which aims to eliminate the class enemies, including the state, to establish a classless society. Unlike class, gender

has not been adequately addressed in the Naxal movement (Kujur, 2018). Even when gender perspectives have been taken up, they have always been kept subservient to the notion of class (Kannabiran et al., 2004). Ironically, the flame of this movement began when Shanti Munda, a young tribal girl on 14th May 1967, shot the first arrow at the police with her 15-day-old daughter on her back. This began at the start of the movement, which later forgot the women who had sacrificed their lives for this ideology (Roy, 2009).

Joining Naxalism: The Intertwining of Push and Pull Factors

So far, there has been no exact count of Naxal cadres, and individual researchers also quote different numbers. The exact number of Naxal cadres is hardly recorded in any Government report, either.

Srivastava (2015) has found the estimated number of Naxals to be around. As per the Al Jajira Bureau (Kumar, 2011), there are around 11,500 Naxal cadres and around 32,000 village-level militia supporters. A more detailed assessment has been provided by Carnegie Endowment, which is a US think tank and as per its calculation, there are approximately 10,500 active Naxal cadres, 25000 militias, along with 50000 village level members and underground workers. Among all these, 40 per cent were found to be women by 2010, and it increased to 60 per cent by 2013 and kept on increasing after that (Srivastava, 2015, & Ramanna, 2022). High rate of women's participation in the Naxalite movement could reinforce the fact that Naxalism does not discriminate in recruiting women because of their physical strength, and picking up arms has been conventionally viewed as a masculine task (Narain, 2017). It is an exception in India, especially if we see deeply entrenched patriarchy in the traditions and practices in India.

Now, we will try to analyse the multifaceted causal factors behind the participation of women in the Naxalite movement. While analysing the factors responsible for bringing a common girl into the Naxal movement, the researchers have used Everett Lee's theory of migration to summarise push and pull factors. For the present paper, pull factors are like aiming for a better life, and those factors which force the person to escape the misery are the Push factors, and both these factors are of paramount importance. An appropriate example of a pull factor may be cited from the works of Deshpande (2007), which highlights the 'family background' of many women Naxalites, which forged a strong tie to get associated with the movement. Another important example is one of

the early female Naxals who surrendered, K. Ajitha. Since Ajitha's parents were communists, she developed a strong inclination towards the left wing from an early age (Ajitha, 2008). The upbringing and family environment were enough to stir her mind to join the Maoist movement. Another instance of Anuradha Ghandy, one of the only two female central committee members of the Maoists, also had parents who were communists, and later on, she was also married to a communist, Kobard Ghandhy (Pandita, 2009). Deshpande (2007) focuses on personal incidents that affected and motivated the women to join the Naxal movement. The personal incidents may be broadly categorised as push factors and include a wider scope.

Narain (2017) cites the reason of personal humiliation, which led to revenge. In society, if governance is not effective and administrative dysfunctions are coupled with an unproductive judiciary which can not address grievances within a stipulated time, in such situations, personal incidents of humiliation do not get addressed by the legal institution, which often compels the victim to join the Naxal movement. Such personal cases of revenge often trigger women to join Naxalism. Rebbacca, a girl belonging to the Scheduled Tribe from Chattishgarh, joined the Naxal movement along with her sister after their brother was killed in a police encounter (BBC Bureau, 2022). The researcher met with Sarita, who had faced harassment by a powerful faction in the village while she was a student. When her grievance remained unaddressed at the village level, she joined the Naxalite group.

Many times, Naxals arrange cultural programmes for villagers in the form of plays and dramas and mostly, women Naxals play a crucial role in these, and the themes shown in these programmes are contemporary issues where a revolutionary perspective is shown. This serves as propaganda machinery that sensitises people about government apathy, and it also serves as an important pull factor to attract the villagers to join Naxalism. All these factors contributed significantly to Naxalism spreading its roots in the underdeveloped and historically backward regions. Political apathy and failure of governance machinery also create disillusionment among the masses, for which they become easy prey for the Naxal movement (SBS Deadline, 2011). When poverty and relative deprivation get intertwined and the absence of administrative measures to save people, women like their male counterparts do get attracted towards Naxalism, and here this serves as a push factor. The researcher found out from the field that the women Naxals joined the movement

after getting fascinated by the cultural programmes coordinated by the Naxalites in their vicinity. Minati is one such example. Minati got influenced by the cultural programme played in her village, which had revolutionary content which depicted political apathy and bureaucratic loopholes in her region. For her, Naxals will be like the saviours who will save them from the corrupt bureaucracy and elected representatives, and with this conviction in her mind, she joined the movement. Similarly, another girl named Kalamati, whom the researcher had met, used to be an ex-Naxal who revealed that because of peer pressure, she went to attend a revolutionary play organised by Naxals in her village, and after the play was over, she got deeply influenced in her mind. A few days later, when her friend approached her to join the movement as an active cadre, she instantly agreed with a bigger dream of being a part of a larger cause to bring equality in society.

One of the most common pull factors that serves as a main motivator for joining Naxalism is the quest for identity in a patriarchal society, which often does not recognise the bravery of women. In a patriarchal society like India, fighting against police, picking up arms are exclusive male privileges, but Naxalism gives women an opportunity to break the stereotype and engage in work that has been historically denied to them. It gives the women a sense of recognition and boosts pride among the women cadres. Women get no special treatment, although Naxals undergo tough training, and the adverse environment of the forests can not be a deterrent to the women. Hence, an impression of equal treatment to both males and females among Naxals has been emphasised (Shekhawat & Saxena, 2015). Jamuni, a surrendered Naxalite from Odisha, narrates the account of her professional callousness as described by Narrain (2017):

'I led the group who killed a police informer in 2009. I was the one who shot him in full public view. Before killing him, we cut off his three fingers. He shouted, and I laughed, daring the people standing there to come forward to rescue him. You may call it cruelty, but it served a dual purpose: one for the movement and the other is personal'.

This cold-blooded murder and her chilling confession describe the importance of the quest for identity. This shows how an innocent rural girl was transformed into a brutal Naxalite and the joy of killing an unarmed person, which creates fear among the masses for going against the Naxals. It also serves a personal purpose of creating a fearsome identity for her before the public by

carrying forward a brutal murder, which is considered as a masculine job.

Life as Women Naxalites: Modes of Participation

The Naxals started recruiting women with an assurance of gender equality, though it was not their main agenda (Mantraya, 2018). Though women are recruited with a promise of equality and empowerment, they end up being the victims of violence, gender based exploitation and multiple forms of coercion within the militant structure (Alhawati, 2024). Women in the Naxal cadre are involved in various works, ranging from cooking, taking part in cultural programmes, to sticking pamphlets. They are engaged by local Naxal leaders in the collection of intelligence reports. All the Naxal women have shared almost the same schedule as a male Naxal, like participating in morning drill, weapon training in the morning and afternoon, ideological classes in the evening, three meals a day, occasional cultural programmes in villages and participation in those. Very few of them are allowed to engage in a combat role along with their male counterparts against the state's own security forces, and many women are given auxiliary jobs. The field anecdote reveals that Kalandi was engaged in counselling the village women regarding police oppression, Phulabati used to provide medical aid and organise cultural programmes. Minati was found to be engaged in cultural programmes. Lalita and Shravani revealed some combat experience, but it was limited to killing the villager who was suspected to be a police informer and conducting videography of armoury raids.

Some other reasons were there for recruiting women into the fold of Naxalism, and one of the very convincing reasons used by the Naxal leaders was that they wanted to convey a message to the people of normal society that they are liberal, respect women and believe in social equality. This serves well among the common public as well as the media. Through the women, they tried to reach the entire village. The women recruits are mostly aged between 16 and 20 years. The fighting abilities and body agility are as good as men's (Mantraya, 2018). The women Naxals are trained alongside men, and as the numerical strength of men declines, the commanders rely on the women fighters. Naxals most want their ideologies to be internalised by the marginalised sections of society, and hence they recruit tribal girls to publicise their propaganda. The popular media of entertainment, like dramas and street plays, are resorted to highlight the issues of the village, and later, after getting inspirations, these girls join as Naxals (Kannabiran et al 2004).

Some tactical reasons are behind the recruitment of women into the folds of the Naxal movement. There are very few chances of women being doubted, which leads to no threat of inspection and detection by the security personnel in comparison with men. With the presence of women and children, there have always been warnings from human rights watchdogs and media representatives, which always discourage the security forces from attacking places where women and children live, and thus the Naxal organisations ideally take advantage of this situation and utilise them as human shields (Singh, 2015).

Though women are well represented at the lowest level of recruitment, their number shrinks towards the top, which can be described as an unspoken, unwritten 'Glass Ceiling Effect' ^v within the Naxalite movement (Guha, 2007). As per the facts and reports, it is evident that within past few years after many male Naxals surrendered or were encountered, about 60% women cadres were recruited at lower ranks in Naxalite camps as compared to men, while it reduces to 50% in area committee and divisional committees and further diminish to 25% in zonal committees (Kulkarni, 2018). No woman Naxal till date has been represented in the Politburo, the highest decision-making body of Naxals. Only two women have been represented in the next body in the hierarchy of the Naxalite organisation, i.e. the Central Committee of C.P.I.(Maoist) in the history (Pandita, 2011). Even while signing a peace treaty with the Andhra Pradesh government, no woman Naxal has been entrusted with the task of representing Naxals (Sekhawat & Saxena, 2015).

Patriarchy within Naxalism: A Gendered Discourse

The imposition of binaries—exclusively as either 'perpetrators of violence' or 'victims of violence'—when examining the role of women in the Naxalite movement hinders the comprehension of the complex experiences of women involved in the movement. On one hand, the Naxal movement has allowed women from India's rural and tribal areas to do things that are usually seen as masculine, like carrying weapons. At the same time, sexual abuse, denial of seats on the highest decision-making body, and keeping women in gendered roles, like doing household chores, are all ways that patriarchal structures are recreated and reclaimed. In this article, we will talk about the patriarchy, which is a system of relationships, beliefs, and values that are built into political, social, and economic systems and cause men and women to be unequal (Narain, 2017). According to the International Journal of Human Geography (2020),

traits that are seen as "feminine" or related to women are not given enough value, while traits that are seen as "masculine" or related to men are given more value. within Naxalism and the viewpoint of female Naxalites regarding this matter. In this article, we will discuss the patriarchy^{vi} within Naxalism and the perspective of women Naxalites on this issue.

The Naxalite movement has a strong sense of masculinity, as shown by the fact that women are being recruited but are only given supporting roles like caregiver or organiser of cultural programmes. Men are given the main roles of combatant on the front line and negotiator at the back channel. Consequently, the Naxalite movement has failed to alter the existing sexual division of labour. Instead, the Naxals have followed it within their own ranks and files.

(Kannabiran et al 2004). Naxals inherit their outlook from the same patriarchal structures; therefore, the culture of sexism does not drastically disappear. Women Naxal cadres struggle extra hard to prove equal worth to their male counterparts in fighting spirit. Even after that, they have failed to get representation in top leadership, which has been highly skewed towards males (Sekhawat & Saxena, 2015). It can be viewed as a glass ceiling effect in Naxalite Organizations. Although there are exceptions like *Anuradha Gandhi*, who has risen to the position of central committee member. She was a Sociology Professor who worked as a Maoist ideologue from the middle class. Another One is *Narmada Akka*, wife of Polit Bureau member Sudhakar and was head of women cadres. But both of them are from influential communist family backgrounds (Pandita, 2009). However, for a rural tribal or Dalit girl joining the insurgency even at an early age, it is practically impossible to reach such a high position. Such women often confronted the patriarchal norms, left their homes and joined the guerrilla armies of the Naxalite. However, they often secured only politically subordinate jobs along with the daily drudgery work of domesticity. For instance, employed to do courier work, provide logistical support to raids, steal arms, participate in cultural programmes, etc. (Mantraya, 2018). They have been treated as a burden during encounters with security forces. Shravani narrated to the researcher how she had been sidelined during an attack on the G.Udayagiri Police station. Though she had trained as a combatant, she was denied a weapon during the raid; instead, she was tasked to videograph the whole event (Mohanty, 2025).

Maoists have always faced the paradox of declaring classlessness as the aim on one hand and

inculcating a patriarchal idea of treating female compatriots with a protective mindset on the other. It has created a burden as well as a superior complexity over male counterparts, as well as exposing the gender viewpoint of the insurgency (Mohanty, 2025). Naxalite women, whose husbands or male partners are killed by security forces, are expected to follow the high moral ground and behave as a widow of a martyr. There is an active pursuit to romanticise women as mothers, wives and widows of revolutionary men. In Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and Southern Odisha, they have been termed as *Veerapatni* and *Veeramata*, which are extremely sexist terms. The glorification of motherhood masks the active denial of entitlements and equal citizenship in practice, while idealising sacrifice, service and unquestioning surrender to the male members and the party (Kannabiran et al 2004). It can be considered as an unwritten code of conduct, which resembles the so-called conservative widow code of any patriarchal society. In case they develop a relationship with another man, then they will lose the high status, and the act will be considered as disrespect to the memory of a martyr. It is contrary to their literature, which condemns such acts as bourgeois propagation (Kannabiran et al 2004). Among the cases, one from the autobiography, *Krishna Bandhopadhyaya*, is a veteran former Naxal who joined the movement long back in the 1970s. In her memoir, she writes that when she was in love with another comrade, Dronacharya, her communist parents opposed it, as it might affect the movement and the determination of Drona. After Drona's death in a police encounter, she was forced by her fellow comrades to live her life with the martyr's memory rather than remarrying and starting a new life as she wished. Though this status gives her immense respect, it snatches her right over life just like any patriarchal society does (Bandopadhyay, 2008)

In another case, a former Naxalite, K. Ajitha, had lost her partner in the police captivity, but when she was released from jail, in a strange case, the Party tried to fix her marriage instead of giving her freedom to choose her own partner. Finally, she defied the command of the party and its cadres, and despite their resentment, she married another person of her choice. But it was possible, unlike the case of Krishna, only because Ajitha was not married to her earlier partner. Thus, she was not morally bound to preserve the memory of a martyr (Kamra, 2013). This account demonstrates how the patriarchal mindset of the male members and top leadership continued to stick to ideals of monogamous relationships and female chastity, irrespective of their propagation of freedom and liberty (Kamra, 2013). Thus, the Communist Party

of India (Maoist) has become the social self-consciousness of the collective, substituting for the morality and legality of middle-class society but unconsciously following the same path (Roy, 2015). There are again horrible cases of sexual abuse, physical torture and brutality of female cadres inside Maoist groups. Sobha Mandi, a surrendered woman Naxalite, has written an autobiography, *Ek Maowadi ki Dairy*, in this context (Mantraya, 2018). Here, she talks about some shocking things about Naxalites and how they treat women. She said that during her seven years as a Naxalite, she was raped and sexually abused on a regular basis. She was told to stay quiet even after she complained to the higher-ups. You have to put up with these things because they help the troops feel better (Mantraya, 2018). In the field, though the cases encountered by the researcher have not faced any sexual abuse, Phulabati had witnessed a sexual abuse case by her Divisional Commander, Azad, who compelled a girl for sexual relations (Mohanty, 2025). She observes:

'(Maoist) Party doesn't take any serious action against sexual abuse cases by senior officials. For Cadres, it is a maximum one-year suspension on the grounds of breaking discipline. The victim is looked down on by the cadres. So, in many cases, women remain silent or prefer to marry the abuser. It is up to the will of the abuser whether he wants to marry or face a one-year suspension.'

The skewed representation of women at the top leadership of the Maoist party may have a snowball effect on the prevailing sexual violence against female cadres at the ground level. Here, women are again forced to keep quiet and resolve the issue within the party command structure, so that it won't lead to diminishing morale of the cadres. In many cases, violators are ordered to leave the weapon for a few months, for grave cases like rape (Mohanty, 2025).

Another manifestation of patriarchy is the control over the reproductive rights of women under Naxal men, especially the leadership. Among the cases the researcher has met on the field, Sravani has also aborted once during her stint as a Naxalite. Her husband, who was a Divisional Commander, convinced her that a child might create a hurdle in their revolutionary life after the instruction from a senior leader. She narrates:

'I always had a dream to become a mother since my childhood. But they killed my child before it came to earth. I was reluctant to do so. Even during pregnancy, I went to the Astragara loot (Armoury Raid). But when they told me that, they would send me home without my husband, as with a child, I would become a burden, I agreed to an abortion. Now I have two daughters, but still, I miss that child.'

Patriarchy can also be witnessed when it comes to the issue of Land Rights. The Naxals' restructuring of land rights from Benami and government lands only applies to poor men without land, not women. Naxals talk a lot about fighting for fair land distribution, ending poverty, and ending widespread hunger and malnutrition. However, they never pay any attention to the demands for equal land distribution between men and women or the right of women to be co-owners of land inheritance (Narain, 2017). Moreover, the said goal of the Naxal insurgency is to establish a classless society. Here, they aim to shift power from the state to the community of people through class struggle. However, this transformation of power relationship is confined within class structure. Without touching the gender power relation between man and woman on the ground and maintaining a status quo in it (Kannabiran et al 2004).

Gender justice is often used as a justification to describe the rampant violence by the Maoists. For instance, Naxals have conducted an ambush attack on C.R.P.F. personnel, leading to the martyrdom of 25 jawans. Later, they justified this attack as a retaliation for the sexual exploitation by police in the tribal region (The Hindu Bureau, 2017). It can be clearly evident that both incidents have no interrelation, and the gender sensitivity and neutrality of the Maoists themselves are under question, but they use gender as the vindication for their violence. Instead of addressing the accusations of intra-organisational sexual violence and other plights of women cadre, this 'focus shifting policy' of Naxals has been condemned even by locals (Mohanty, 2025).

On the other hand, erstwhile Maoist groups like the People's War Group (PWG) ^{vii} had admitted the problem of gender inequality and under-representation of women in the party. Its spokesperson, Ramakrishna, observed, 'The internal structure of the party was reflecting the patriarchal orientation as the cadre is drawn from different sections of the same patriarchal society and consciousness backgrounds, which they intend to transform. Moreover, it is easier to gain political authority than it is to eliminate patriarchy. The People's War Group undertook a 'Diddubaatu Karyakramam' (rectification programme) to bring about awareness on issues of patriarchy and to eliminate it. The solution to the problem does not lie in the formalising of representation through reservations but by enhancing the capabilities of women at par with men'.

This explanation is intended to bring awareness regarding the presence of patriarchy and

ultimately abolishing it from the party structure, from leadership to the cadre level. Eliminating the patriarchal institution of 'family' would be the road to women's liberation, which is more challenging than establishing communist rule in India.

The perspective of Naxals on Feminism has been revealed from their literature seized from Bihar, titled '*Our Perspective on the Women Question*'. The booklet contains the quotes from Marx, Lenin and Mao to highlight the freedom for women as a prerequisite for the Proletariat Revolution. In other sections, it addresses patriarchy, economy, culture and politics. Here, the document criticises 'bourgeois feminism'^{viii} as a reform campaign by the capitalists, which acts as an opium to create delusion among the women to specify their pain and anger, ultimately obstructing total revolution. The focus of this literature is on working-class women who should be made aware of their exploitation at the hands of the state and the patriarchal culture. There are a multitude of such documents that the Maoists have published, especially in vernacular languages, for wide indoctrination among the cadres and masses, deeply theoretically engaged and informed by debates on feminist praxis ^{ix} (Parashar & Shah, 2016).

However, a close inspection of the chronology of Maoists can reveal that there is no concrete step on the ground on the Question of Women since then. These awareness programmes and progressive literature failed to alter the patriarchal division of labour even within the Maoist ranks and leadership; rather, they are used as information propaganda to attract more women to their fold (Singh, 2015). The insurgency has suppressed the violence against women under the larger shadow of violence of the revolution. The researcher has already demonstrated the internal inconsistencies on the gender question within the contemporary Maoist movement, hidden behind the secular progressive revolution to engender social and political transformation (Mohanty, 2025). While state violence against Maoists is well documented, Left political parties and left-leaning intellectuals continue to stay silent about the violence committed by Maoists against their own cadre (Parashar & Shah, 2016).

Leaving the Naxal Movement: Journey to rejoin the mainstream

The plight of women Naxalites does not end even after surrendering and joining the mainstream. Some turn out to be lucky like Minati, who not only got the government-announced rehabilitation package in the form of land and 3 lakhs rupees as a cash reward, which was deposited in her bank

account. She got accepted by her family and community members. Her life is settled and peaceful now. Kalandi, though, spent a very brief period of three months in the Naxal insurgent group. She also got a fixed deposit of 3 lakhs in her name. Along with it, she received training as a tailor, and all these came under the rehabilitation package. The district police has got her married to another surrendered Naxalite, and both of them are now leading a peaceful life and have a government quarter in the police barrack. But not all stories have a happy ending. All the surrendered Naxalites do not get a fair chance to start a new life with the government-introduced rehabilitation package.

Some problems like health deterioration, police oppression, are also being experienced by women Naxalites, other than patriarchy-induced discrimination. One example is of Phulabati, who joined the Naxal cadre during her teens. She was assigned the task of arranging and participating in cultural programmes, along with the task of being a porter. It led to physical strain because of lifting heavy weights on a daily basis, she has been suffering from back pain, ulcers, and reproductive tract infections. Because of these health problems, she had to leave her coolie job after surrender. She received a partial rehabilitation package in the form of a small patch of land to build a home and around 3 lakhs rupees, without skill-based training and employment opportunities. She could not lead a very good life after surrender, as her health does not allow her to be engaged in lifting heavy weights, and her husband gets seasonal employment.

The case of Sarita, whom the researcher had met during a field visit, also revealed that owing to health conditions, she had also left the movement. During her involvement as an active member of the Naxal cadre, she eloped with her lover, Chandra and surrendered after the onset of deteriorating health. After surrender, both of them got 10 lakhs rupees and 4 decimal land as a rehabilitation package, but they are struggling to get the land recorded in their name. In local terms, they are yet to find the *Jami patta* in their name. Sarita has now been engaged as an Anganwadi worker and leading a peaceful conjugal life, even though she has yet to receive the entitlement in the form of a registered land record.

The case of Sravani needs a special mention. She faced peculiar problems after her surrender. She was the commander of Mahila Morcha (Women Wing), and her husband was a divisional commander in the Maoist ranks. After the surrender, they got land in their joint name. Her husband got a job in a reputed educational institute as the district coordinator. Now her husband has

eloped with another woman, and she has no source of income to raise her two daughters. In her own narrative:

'I left home and joined Naxals for my husband, I fought by his side, I aborted a child on his instance. I persuaded him to surrender. Now I have only responsibility, pain and humiliation. When children ask where their father is, I can only cry in front of them. I don't know how to arrange the next meal for them. Hope the government will listen to us.'

Sometimes, instead of getting caught between getting or not getting a rehabilitation package, some of the Naxalites get entangled between Naxalites and security forces, as was found in the case of Sabita of Jogapur, Uttar Pradesh. The Naxals assured her that after her husband's death, if she joined the Naxal cadre, it would take care of her security. On the other hand, the police offered her a sum of fifty thousand if she would work as a police informer. Later on, on a fateful day, she was caught while mixing poison tablets in the food she was preparing for the Naxal cadres and was shot by Naxals in the outskirts of the forest (Narain, 2017). The researcher has met with Archita, another Naxalite who surrendered and hails from Jharkhand, but now lives in Sundargarh after getting a rehabilitation package. Her brother-in-law faced a Naxal attack in Ranchi.

Some surrendered Naxals like K. Ajitha and Krishna Bandopadhaya, after their jail sentence, have turned into authors and feminist activists, and this was possible because of their middle-class and educational background. Ajitha, though not much affected by the gendered discourse within the Maoist movement, left the movement and turned into a Marxist Feminist (Kamra, 2013). Her memoir got published in the Malayalam magazine "Kala Kumudi." Krishna, on the other hand, is more towards eliminating patriarchy than continuing with the class struggle, and she has edited the Bengali magazine "Khoj Ankhon" and turned into a feminist activist (Bandopadhyay, 2008).

Sometimes, re-assimilation with the mainstream society becomes a bitter experience for the surrendered Naxal women if they fall victim to sexual violence. Despite the fact that they dared to cross the gender stereotypes so as to fight for the rights of their communities, many times their own community shows apathy for accepting them because of the transgression of gendered boundaries. Although numerically, women constitute the majority among the Naxal cadres, their representation at the top hierarchy is a rare thing. Many times, they have to leave their home and settle in other places so as to start a new life (Shekhawat & Saxena, 2015).

There has been a noticeable contradiction between the life stories of subaltern participants and middle-class participants in Naxal movement (Kamra, 2013). The urban middle-class women Naxal surrender get opportunity to publish their memoirs and because of this, Naxal women's personal narratives and subjective experiences could reach the wider society (Jyoti & Nair, 2022). At the same time, for the tribal, rural, dalit and non-literate women, their stories have been forwarded by other scholars through oral histories (Kamra, 2013 & Roy, 2009). This is quite unjust as in the state of voicelessness, their grievance towards society has always been unanswered.

Concluding remark and Suggestive measures-

Though the Naxal movement envisioned creating a classless society, it has, in fact, encouraged multi-layered inequality on the basis of gender, diluting its core ideology. The push factors that prompted the women to join the Naxal movement are poverty, personal humiliation, political and administrative apathy, and pull factors like fascination with joining the Naxal cadre after being influenced by the revolutionary cultural programmes, taking up weapons, and crossing the gender limitations by participating in combat roles. But the irony lies in the fact that women are only assigned a secondary role, like organising cultural programmes, acting as messengers, and only very few are assigned with combat roles, and age and agility is strictly followed as a parameter for the combat participation. Women's representation at the top leadership position is abysmally low, which can be traced to the fact that, to date, since the inception of the Naxal movement, not a single woman has been given any role in the Politburo, which is the highest decision-making body among the Maoists. Even after surrender, women again have to face a patriarchal society, as there have been male-centric biases in the rehabilitation schemes. Seen from a feminist standpoint, women in the Naxal insurgency have created an alternative view to witness a fight for a classless society through the lens of gender. Here, the feminist standpoint is not just confined to a socio-historical position as a perspective of women but a moral and political struggle for representation and visibility within the Naxalite insurgency and in mainstream society after surrender (Rolin, 2009). The negligence of women and the feminist perspective by the Naxals has created a kind of gap, for which state machinery must take advantage of this situation and start regaining people's trust in the hinterland. It is important for the state to adopt a

gender-inclusive approach with a touch of humanitarianism for implementing development, especially while dealing with the surrenderees and other marginalised sections who have been compelled to take arms to retaliate against age-old negligence (Parashar, 2014). The role of the state is crucial for maintaining gender equality both in letter and spirit. Some of the commendable steps by the Government and suggestions in this regard are noted below.

The government has facilitated the recruitment of 33 per cent women on the basis of reservation and local representation, along with relaxation in height and weight in the recruitment process of the Bastariya Battalion of C.R.P.F. to fight against the Naxals (MHA, 2025). This will ensure more gender sensitisation among the security personnel while dealing with women and children. Some special schemes like *Roshni* have been implemented to provide skill training to youth belonging to the Naxal belt, including women, which will help them find employment opportunities and raise their income level (PIB Bureau, 2015). Measures like these will boost the acceptability of the police and the government among the local people. Additionally, the government should focus on creating more and more Self Help Groups (SHGs) for empowering the surrendered Naxals, with special focus on women. This inclusion through micro finance will truly make them part of neo-liberalism, and welfarism, and simultaneously pushing them away from radical left-wing extremism (Pourya Asl, 2018). Further, this will promote gender equality at the grassroots level in the hinterland by promoting financial empowerment and transforming gender relations. The election of Draupadi Murmu, a fellow tribal lady from the once naxal-intensified Mayurbhanj district of Odisha, serves as a ray of hope beyond symbolism to adhere to democracy for ultimate prosperity (Ahlawat, 2024). In the words of Sravani, the surrendered Naxal, who captures the essence of this scenario as:

"Jal, Jangle Jameen tharu Nari jeevana re samman besi zaruri"

(Respect for women's lives is more important than control over water, forest and land)

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ⁱ Dr. Manmohan Singh, Former Prime Minister of India, in the DG and IG conference, declared ‘*Maoists* as the greatest internal security challenge faced by the Indian Union’ in 2009 (Gaikward, 2021).

ⁱⁱ *Naxalism* is ‘an indigenous revolutionary movement started in India as a rural uprising against the police administration and zamindar nexus in Naxalbari village of West Bengal in 1967. But *Maoism* is a transnational movement by the left-wing extremists, who aim to topple the government and establish their rule through violent revolution. They have ideological inspiration from Mao Zedong and aspire to establish a communist nation in the line of the People’s Republic of China (Srivastava, 2015).

ⁱⁱⁱ ‘*Gender*’ refers to ‘people in a society who share particular qualities or ways of behaving that society associates with being male, female, or another identity, as per the Cambridge Dictionary.

^{iv} Charu Mazumdar was the leader of the Naxalbari uprising in 1967, often considered the founding father of the Maoist or Naxal movement in India. In 1972, he died in police custody under mysterious circumstances (Srivastava, 2015).

^v *Glass Ceiling Effect* is a concept in gender studies which indicates ‘the presence of invisible and informal hurdles on the path of professional career growth of women, which looks transparent like glass yet hinders the path’.

^{vi} *Patriarchy* is a ‘system of relationships, beliefs, and values embedded in political, social, and economic systems that structure gender inequality between men and women. Attributes seen as “feminine” or pertaining to women are undervalued, while attributes regarded as “masculine” or pertaining to men are privileged, as per the International Journal of Human Geography (2020).

^{vii} As per Ministry of Home Affairs, Govt. of India *People’s War Group* (P.W.G.) was the largest Maoist Insurgent group of South India. In 2004 it has merged with Maoist Communist

Centre for India (M.C.C.I.) to form the largest Maoist group of South Asia called Communist Party of India (Maoist).

^{viii} Social Research Glossary defines *Bourgeois Feminism* as ‘a label applied to a range of feminist writers who do not clearly fall into either the socialist or radical feminist camps. Basically, bourgeois feminists want equality for women within the existing social system. Marxists propagate bourgeois propaganda and create segmental division among women. They raise women’s issues in a reformist manner, so that the grievances of women will not percolate into revolution and transform the class relations.

^{ix} Liz Stanley (2013) defines *Feminist Praxis* as ‘the activism by feminists in combining theoretical discussion of feminist methodology with detailed accounts of practical research processes. This blend of the practical and the theoretical will make it an invaluable text for feminists carrying out research at all levels, and it will also appeal to those interested in the relationship between theory, method and feminist epistemology.

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