

## THE EVERYDAY LIFE OF THE REVOLUTION: GENDER, VIOLENCE AND MEMORY

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The ‘heroic life’ or the life of the revolutionary is one that resists or even seeks to transcend the everyday and the ordinary. The ‘banal’ vulnerabilities of everyday life, however, continue to constitute the unseen, often unspoken background of such a heroic life. This article turns to women’s memories of everyday life spent ‘underground’ in the context of the late 1960s radical left Naxalbari movement of Bengal. Drawing upon recent published memoirs and my own field interviews with middle class female (and male) activists, I outline the ways in which revolutionary femininity was imagined and lived in the everyday life of this political movement. I focus, in particular, on the gendered and classed nature of political labour, the gendering of revolutionary space, and finally, the extent to which everyday life in the ‘underground’ was a site of vulnerability and powerlessness, especially for women. I also signal how these memories of interpersonal conflict and everyday violence tend to remain buried under a collective mythicisation of the ‘heroic life’.

**KEYWORDS:** Bengal, everyday life, gender, ‘heroic life’, Naxalbari, politics of memory, revolutionary cultures, violence

[...] When that smell comes to me, I feel like I’m away. The moment I close my eyes I feel that I’ve gone there – to another life, a previous birth; it feels like a dream. Now it seems like a ‘cinema’ to me, which one can re-wind and see.<sup>1</sup>

Supriya’s recollection of her time spent ‘underground’ as a political rebel in the sixties Bengal expresses beautifully the cinematic and dreamlike quality that Passerini (1992: 170) has detected in the narratives of the 1968 student activists in Italy. The dreamlike character of these memories reveals, she argues, certain aspects of the terrorist phenomenon, such as the illusion of a free and adventurous life – of an everyday life that is intense and spectacular, on the fringes of the law, or outside it. Such a conception of everyday life is in sharp opposition to the qualities usually associated with the everyday, that of mundane routine, habitualness, and the ordinary or the taken-for-granted (Lefebvre, 1968). On the contrary, these memories seemingly fulfill the criteria of a ‘heroic life’, one that seeks to transcend the everyday for the sake of a higher cause (Featherstone, 1992: 160).

Indeed, the hero (or the revolutionary) leaves behind the sphere of the ordinary, that of women and domesticity (Featherstone, 1992; Dawson, 1994), in order to fulfil his historic task in an

‘extraordinary’ situation. However, in the political upheaval that characterised the 1960s world (and certainly predating it), ordinary women, too, left the sphere of the everyday, going ‘underground’ to lead fugitive lives, participating in the highly male culture of the New Left. They led exalted lives of courage and adventure while still performing the everyday labour of care and feminised domesticity. The ‘banal’ vulnerabilities of daily life continued to constitute the unseen, often unspoken backgrounds of such a ‘heroic life’.

In this article, I consider women’s memories of being ‘underground’ at the time of the radical left Naxalbari movement of Bengal. Drawing upon recent published memoirs and my own field interviews with middle class women activists, I outline the ways in which revolutionary femininity was imagined and lived in the everyday life of this political movement. I begin by outlining the gendered division of political labour and the gendering of political space before moving on to a discussion of the forms of vulnerability that women faced within the ‘safe’ spaces of the ‘underground’ and the ‘shelter’. Women’s discussions of their political labour not only voice a critique of radical politics but also complicate our understanding of the way in which femininity is performed in the domain of the political. Besides pointing to the gendered and classed economies of this performance, they alert us to the politics of their marginalisation from key revolutionary activities. These are especially significant for what they suggest about the division of political space effected through the Party’s protectionist logic. Intrinsic to this spatial imagery was the construal (especially for women) of the space of the underground (and the shelter) as one of ‘safety’, and of what lay outside its bounds as a zone of danger. Women’s narratives overturn normative conceptions of these spaces as free from danger by pointing instead to the ways in which acts of interpersonal aggression and vulnerability configured the experience of the everyday, *for women*, within the movement. These everyday forms of violence also constitute, I suggest, risky memories that are not easily avowed or testified to. Instead, they remain hidden beneath a mythicisation of the ‘underground’ (together with the ‘shelter’) as a repository of heroic life. I end this article by tentatively exploring the relationship between these collective modes of mythicisation and personal memories of the everyday as a site of (gendered) vulnerability.

## **Naxalbari, Gender and the Everyday**

The Naxalbari *andolan* (movement) began as a peasant uprising in northern West Bengal in 1967 led by a dissident group of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) who, together with their sympathizers, came to be known as Naxalites. The Naxalites declared a ‘people’s war’ against the Indian state structured on the Maoist model of protracted armed struggle. Armed with a copy of Mao’s *Little Red Book*, middle-class students, who formed a wide base for the movement, left urban areas (including Kolkata) in order to ‘integrate’ with the peasantry as part of the *gram bhlalab* (village revolution). The political line of *khatam* or the individual annihilation of ‘class enemies’, first instigated against landowners in rural areas, escalated into what has often been referred to as an orgy of violence. Small guerrilla units, primarily of men, indiscriminately killed anyone from traffic policemen to local schoolteachers as representatives of the state. The state responded with a brutal offensive that marked the most violent period in the history of postcolonial Bengal. Stories of young idealist men being brutally tortured and shot by the police have become the most sustained component of the Naxalbari legacy.

The movement was not exceptional for its lack of reflection on the ‘woman question’ or for subscribing to a form of ‘Left traditionalism’ (Brown, 2003), particularly in the realm of sexual politics. The forms of ‘patriarchal containment’ that women encountered within the purview of this political movement in relation to childbirth, marriage, and the gender division of political labour have been noted of progressive left-wing movements in general (Custers, 1987; Stree, 1989; Kannabiran and Lalitha, 1989; Vindhya, 2000; Kannabiran and Kannabiran, 2002). Much of this work (which is also fairly dated) is largely limited to the documentation (and critique) of the underlying patriarchal ideologies of the left through a focus on its sexual politics. Sarkar’s (1999: 5) argument, that this ‘stream of writing now is noticeably running dry, without producing new research or fresh reflections on the problems and questions that it had thrown up in the first phase’, could not be truer of present times. A major limitation that these histories suffer is that they tend to isolate women’s politicisation from ‘the larger contexts of her forms of labour, her domestic norms, her kinship patterns and class and caste situations’ (Sarkar, 1999: 5), thus reinstating the public-private division besides reiterating a dogmatic view of male containment of female agency.

The women’s narratives that I privilege in my study of revolutionary Naxalbari offer a nuanced account of the construction and negotiation (or even manipulation) of gender identities, both in terms of women’s political labour and the division of (and male control over) political

space. Discourses and practices of gender are inextricably linked to those of class and sexuality in these accounts. By privileging the category of the everyday, this article explores the ‘seen but unnoticed’ (Featherstone, 1992: 159) and rarely theorised aspects of political life. The everyday assumes particular relevance in a feminist perspective since it is often a feminised domain, and ‘it is here, above all, that gender hierarchy is reproduced invisibly, pervasively and over time’ (Felski, 1999/2000: 30; see also Smith, 1988). In most mainstream histories of radical movements, the everyday world forms the humdrum background or the ‘private’ (and most strikingly gendered) dimensions of an exalted heroic life. There is thus some urgency to interrogate the concept of the everyday in relation to revolutionary movements in ways that would help us rethink the distinctions between the public and the private, the subversive and the hegemonic, the heroic and everyday life. My discussion turns toward an identification of the violence of everyday life in an attempt to recognise the quotidian life of violence, and equally towards an understanding of the everyday as a site other than that of the mundane or the taken for granted.<sup>2</sup> Focusing on acts of interpersonal aggression at the micro-level that are gendered but not always sexualised, I also suggest the need for an expansion of the category of gendered violence in the context of revolutionary politics.

The material forming the basis of this article came from in-depth, qualitative interviews with thirty-six male and female activists in Kolkata, conducted between 2003-04. The interviews were mostly conducted in Bengali, intermingled to various degrees with the English language. A majority of my interviewees can be identified as lower middle-class or *nimno moddhobitto*, several of whom were refugees from the Bengal Partition. The movement itself had a largely lower middle-class character, dominated by a vernacular intelligentsia antagonistic towards the English speaking elite (Ray, 1988). Most women joined the *andolan* while students, often through their prior association with student politics or through their politically active brothers and (male) friends. A few came from political, even communist families. Several of these women are currently involved in some degree or the other with people’s movements in Kolkata, such as the women’s movement or the civil rights movement. Some (like Rajashri and Krishna cited in this article) have emerged as fairly prominent figures within the autonomous women’s movement in Kolkata and the political-intellectual life of the city more generally. Others like Supriya and Lina, today salaried professionals, are relatively unknown.

The project also relied on popular/'official' representations of the movement that are of a historical, documentary or literary nature. Recent writings by women, largely autobiographical, provide a valuable source for interrogating the gendered politics of the movement, especially in the face of the silencing of gender in mainstream historiography (Banerjee, 1984; Ray, 1988). These include short memoirs published in non-mainstream Bengali journals (Bandyopadhyay, 2001; Sanyal, 2001). I draw upon both in my discussion in this article.

### **Political Labour and Gender Performance**

Like their male counterparts, women revolutionaries left the sphere of the habitual and the ordinary as a first step into radical politics. Apart from a small number of anti-colonial 'terrorist' women (Mukherjee, 1999), this was the first time that young, married and unmarried middle-class women entirely left the confines of the domestic sphere and the regulatory control of the family to freely move across the rural/urban landscape. They assumed alternative identities and led new lifestyles. These years spent 'underground' away from home irrevocably changed (as most women strongly emphasize) their lives and sense of themselves.

Once in the Party, for which no formal membership was required, middle-class women, like their male comrades, were organisationally divided into those who did 'technical' jobs and those who did organisational work at a higher political echelon. In general, female cadres were employed to do '*tek kaaj*' (technical work) mostly courier work, including the transportation of papers, arms and information. Few did organisational work, recruiting people to the Party, campaigning and forming squads. Fewer women were on local committees, and none were in senior positions of leadership. To be sure, women did participate in semi-terrorist forms of 'action' such as providing logistic support to large-scale robberies, stealing arms, desecrating public institutions, disrupting classes and examinations, and throwing bombs. As the logic of annihilation deepened and state repression grew, a few were involved in the creation of squads for the murder of 'class enemies' and participated in armed jailbreaks.

Although responses to the question of political activity differ, several women articulate a gendered critique of the Party and of male ideologues who confined them to subsidiary roles, and marginalised them from the revolutionary culture within the movement. Women often assert that they were 'dumped' with politically marginalised technical jobs, besides having to perform the everyday drudgery work. Rajashri, for instance, voices a particularly strong internal critique of

the Party when she comments that the ‘dominant thinking’ within the Party was that women could not carry out *sangothon kaaj* (organisational work). Her discussion also points to the different sources of recognition that mediated political identity for women. Class was one such crucial source:

[...] I remember having great fights especially with one chap who was there; I used to have fights with him always. There was very condescending attitude he particularly had, and by him I don’t want to generalise but he also reflected a dominant position in the Party and in the organisation, [a] very condescending attitude towards women, you know, and that too don’t forget, I came from a very bourgeois background [...] there was less of a condescending attitude towards the men. [...] It was very ironical. I tell my friends, nobody took me seriously until I got arrested!<sup>3</sup>

Rajashri’s narrative underscores the disadvantaged position that middle-class women in particular had within the Party by virtue of both gender and class. Women of elite, upper middle-class backgrounds like herself were very differently located in the discursive space of the movement than men of the same class and subaltern women. Rajashri became embroiled in radical left politics through her first husband (who died at the hands of the police) while Mimlu, another upper middle-class woman was involved in the *andolan* together with her brother. He found ready acceptance in the Party, while Mimlu remained ‘extremely isolated’ right from the beginning because of her privileged class status and of the way she ‘looked’ (‘westernised’). Given that the movement as a whole had a strongly lower middle-class character, she found very little acceptance among the women as well. This also indicates that the femininity that women were expected to perform within the political domain was overwhelmingly a lower middle-class one. Mimlu’s *tek naam* (technical name, activist pseudonym) was ‘memsahib’ reminiscent of the nineteenth century stereotype of the *mem* who was the butt of much popular satire and farce (Sarkar, 2001).

A second point of interest raised in Rajashri’s narrative is the relationship between political identity and the experience of incarceration. Imprisonment (and torture) was central to female political identity, given that women had at their disposal fewer modes of political subjectivity than men. When Rajashri says that she was only taken ‘seriously’ once she was arrested, she

draws attention to a politics of memory that commemorates women only as victims of state-inflicted violence, erasing all other modes of subjectivity.

Recognition in the political sphere was also governed by women's marital status. As wives and widows of prominent male Naxalites, women were often afforded positions of privilege in the movement. In her published memoir, Krishna (2001: 94), a prominent activist, draws attention to the politics of recognition afforded to women in these instances:

At that time my work was to inspire other comrades as the widow of a martyr. Dron's death seemed to bring me a different kind of 'respect' within the Party. And it created an imposition on me to maintain him as the only adored man in my life. Nobody could accept my second relationship. (Translation from the Bengali is mine).

Political widowhood carries with it a public ownership of the female body (Ramphela, 1997: 110) that now functions metonymically to inspire and instigate. Her metonymical function is, as Das (2000: 221) observes, 'the only *acknowledged* aspect of her being'. This sense of public ownership over the body of the widow can also transpire as a regulatory force. Other women, like Krishna, found it hard to win 'approval' for their future relationships. Women were often objects of male scrutiny and derision in matters of divorce and remarriage. The irony of course is that within the radical redefinition of marriage in the movement, the labels of 'wife' and 'widow' were largely rendered redundant (Roy, 2006). Yet, as 'wives' and 'widows', women were made to perform symbolic (and actual) roles that effectively renewed middle-class codes and expectations of femininity in the political domain.

Let me end this section with a word on courier work, the predominant form of political labour that women performed in this *andolan* and in 'terrorist' organisations more generally (Cunningham, 2003). While femininity tends to be normative even in the revolutionary domain, courier work mobilises such a normative feminine identity as a political resource. Naxalite women were able to exploit normative gender codes and expectations in the political performance of their femininity. They actively deployed the female body in order to exploit the cultural meanings that this body signifies. Mothers deliberately carried their children with them while transporting arms or to infiltrate police patrolled areas. Lina, interviewed in July 2003, provides one such scenario:

We heard ‘halt halt’ from the back. There was a lorry full of CRP [Central Reserve Police] men with guns yelling ‘halt’ from behind. I got off [the rickshaw] and ran into that house (my daughter had been there earlier). I opened my hair, wore *sindoor* (vermillion worn by married Hindu women) in a few seconds. The incident was in the morning. I went downstairs and started to wash dishes. The police came. [...] They went up to the roof to search. One policeman even came and spoke to me [laughs]. Then they left [...]. Why would they pick on me amongst the other wives? If I was wearing a sari and sitting on the bed then they might have asked who’s this?<sup>4</sup>

In Lina’s case, the femininity that she performs is not only domesticated but also classed in particular ways. She roots the success of her hoodwink in a domesticated, *lower* middle-class femininity that materialises in hard work as opposed to idle leisure, a luxury that elite Bengali women have traditionally enjoyed. It is because her performance exposes the naturalness of a lower middle-class femininity that it is so convincing. The street, the shelter, and the *para* (neighbourhood) – these were some of the spatial locations in which an accentuated form of femininity was publicly performed. In such acts, women, it can be said, parodied the icons of femininity and motherhood that the movement itself propagated. To this extent, these can perhaps be thought of as ‘subversive performances’ that expose the constructed character of all gender identities (Butler, 1990).

The use of femininity by women does not, however, have the same pay-offs as the use of gender or classed identity for men (Skeggs, 2004). This discrepancy is especially obvious within a political economy where women were expected to be feminine. Situated in this larger context, courier work was less likely to be perceived as a ‘mobile resource’ for women than as an extension of an embodied gender identity.<sup>5</sup> In the political performance of certain feminine acts, these become fixed upon the body. In contrast, middle-class men could freely employ class characteristics (in the political ritual of becoming ‘de-classed’) without becoming symbolically fixed or read as subaltern.<sup>6</sup> As wives, widows, couriers and revolutionaries, women, on the other hand, embodied fixed points of identifications that could not be ‘used’ as a political resource. In what follows, we see how the naturalness of sexual difference further contributed to the marginalisation of women from crucial revolutionary tasks.



## **The Politics of Space**

While a few middle-class women participated in the political campaign in the countryside (Bandyopadhyay, 2001), women were, in general, discouraged by the Party from doing so. The lead ideologue of Naxalbari, Charu Mazumdar, himself wrote that squads should not be made up only of women 'because women need a place to stay at least for the night' (Mazumdar, 2001: 101). Some of the men (and women) I interviewed evoked biological differences between the sexes to explain women's marginalisation from the countryside. Questions of security, appearance, and even the lack of toilet facilities to fulfill women's 'natural' needs were some of the problems they cited.

Women's marginalisation from the rural domain needs to be situated within a larger realm of ambiguity that structured women's entry into the Party. Some women went so far as to suggest that the Party made no explicit effort to recruit women and was less than enthusiastic about accepting women 'full-timers' who had left home. From the mid-1970s, the Party, it seems, began to actively discourage women from leaving home since they could not 'accommodate' them in the face of severe state repression. The lack of shelters, in the face of massive police raids and 'combing operations' was a large part of the explanation. Women like Supriya who had gone through an arduous process of soul-searching before making the decision to enter radical left politics were suddenly told that there was no space for them in the underground. Others were asked to go back to their natal homes when state repression accelerated.<sup>7</sup>

The limitations posed on women's mobility within the rural domain and later in the urban context are significant for what they tell us about the organisation of space within the movement. As with the division of political labour, the separation of political space was both gendered and an effective process of gendering. One such pattern of imprinting gender onto women was formalised in their isolation from the countryside on the grounds of biological difference. In both male and female accounts, the female body is discursively constructed as a locus of biological differences and thus as an impediment for true revolutionary action. Female subjectivity itself is reduced to the body, a 'problem' that must be overcome for participation in the political domain (Gedalof, 1999). The division of political space (along with that of political labour) was an act of 'irreducible essentialism' that clearly marked the female as 'other' (Spivak and Rooney, 1994).

Political space was also divided into zones of safety and zones of danger. Women were excluded from certain spaces on grounds of ‘security’. While the question of security is implicit in the problematic of shelters in the countryside, it becomes far more explicit in the context of the urban battle against the state. Women required protection as potential victims of sexual violence at the hands of the state although, as I have argued elsewhere, the vulnerability of women to sexual violence *within* the movement was not always obvious (Roy, 2006). Yet this vulnerability also served strategic purposes. In this case, the Party constitutes women as ‘objects of violence and subjects of fear’ (Marcus, 1992: 394) and draws them within its protective, paternalistic care. Such a protective logic manifests itself in a gendered division of political space, which takes the form of restricting women’s mobility. Women activists were, in fact, largely resistant to a protectionist discourse that intended to restore them to their homes, conceived as a space of safety from a dangerous public domain. In women’s narratives, in contrast, it is often the private sphere of the home or the ‘shelter’ that is a zone of danger, of conflict, and even violence.

### **Everyday Violence in the Underground**

Everyday life in the underground, whether in rural areas or urban industrial belts, is often remembered as a space outside the realm of normalcy, as being ‘another life’. It constituted a space where conventional norms were broken or turned upside down. Thus, hunger was cultivated and food (or rather, the lack of it) became key to a daily ritual of political initiation; the body (clothes, posture, speech) as the custodian of middle class values had to be continually ‘de-classed’ through daily gestures like the relinquishing of soap or a wristwatch. Indeed, life as a political outlaw with its attendant risks and thrills transformed the everyday into the ‘extraordinary’.

For women who were not part of the rural struggle, ‘integration’ with the working-class in urban industrial belts provided an opportunity for political presence. Women often recall this period of political work with fondness, a sense of freedom and fearlessness, and even nostalgia. In Rajashri’s memory of being ‘underground’ as a factory-worker, it is her relationship with other women workers that is foregrounded.

Um, I was working in a *bustee* (slum) for a few months ... I was working in a leather factory, you know, they produce those Shantineketan bags. That was a hilarious

experience I had, but it was very nice, very nice. I was staying with a family [...] with a different name. My name was Aparna. I worked with a whole lot of girls and they were all fond of me [...] I said I had run away from Assam because there were problems for Bengalis and all that; tried to ‘de-classify’ myself by wearing a simple *sari*, no make-up, but still, you stand out like a sore thumb ... our middle-class upbringing, our posture everything shows, however much you ‘declass’. [...] They used to call me Aparna with a lot of respect – I was the *Aparnadi* of that factory. I would earn 45 rupees a month for working from morning to night. ... I was very close to them ... on a personal level [...].

The bonds of friendship and camaraderie that punctuate these memories tend to minimise the extent to which everyday life in the movement was constituted in ‘anticipation of violence’ (Jeganathan, 2002). The underground in both male and female recollections functions as the fulcrum of the revolutionary’s grand utopic world, an unseen protective ring of confidence that nurtured their deepest beliefs and cajoled their fantasies; a sanctuary amidst an ongoing war. As the repository of a heroic life, the underground acquires a mythic quality in narrative re-tellings. This mythicisation of underground life along with the ‘shelter’ as a space of freedom, thrill but *not* violence is central to the fashioning of a shared world within which interviewees give themselves a place, and attribute meaning to their actions.

In this section and the one that follows, I pay particular attention to the ways in which everyday life in the underground was radically altered in the face of violence. Violence itself, as Das and Kleinman (2000) suggest, demands a different sense of the everyday other than being the site of the ordinary. From my interviews with male and female activists, it was possible to map a broad taxonomy of violence and vulnerability - everyday, political, sexual, ‘public’ and ‘private’ - as structuring the everyday life of activists within the movement, especially in the space of the underground where the revolutionaries took ‘shelter’. It was within such a space of refuge and safety that female activists, in particular, faced multiple forms of threat, and *not* at the hands of the enemy alone. These ranged from routinised acts of interpersonal aggression experienced in the shelter to acts of male sexual violence at the hands of one’s comrades to the political betrayals that contributed, in no small measure, to the eventual dissolution of the movement.<sup>8</sup>

The narratives that I now turn to are not ones of heroic defiance in the face of brutal state repression. The ‘heroic life’ recedes in the face of a daily and gendered battle for survival, suggesting how hard it was, at least for women, to transcend the cruel banalities of the everyday, as per the demands of revolutionary identity.

Lina, who is now a teacher and has largely withdrawn from active politics, has a particularly revealing story to tell. She worked in a factory at Dum Dum for two rupees a day from seven in the morning to seven at night, with almost no break. For her, it was a good opportunity to meet the workers and to possibly create a squad. Her daily diet consisted of ‘*chattu*’ (gram flour) and tea. Lina would leave her daughter, still a child, at a political shelter in south Kolkata where she stayed. Invariably, she would come home to find that her child had been unfed almost all day. So she began to buy a quarter piece of bread, which she would mix with some water and feed the child, reserving the burnt part for herself. Party comrades accused her of prioritising her daughter, a complaint she had to repeatedly hear. Lina was subsequently able to fix up another shelter where she could leave her daughter and visit her occasionally. When I asked how she could have possibly left her only child with strangers, she replied: ‘My work is bigger’. She was eventually fired from the factory job, given that she had previously resisted the manager’s advances. Seven women workers had already been impregnated there.

The multi-sided character of violence is obvious from Lina’s experience as a factory worker, a political activist, and simultaneously, as a mother. Lina’s story as a whole foregrounds the daily battle for survival rather than a stand-off between the movement and the state. Her narrative moves incessantly from one shelter to another, from middle-class families who almost threw her out to the homes of local anti-socials who threatened her. In poorer homes and neighbourhoods, the everyday violence of poverty and deprivation forms the routinised backdrop against which Lina attempts to create a ‘base’ for herself and a home for her child. Lina’s husband was in prison for most of this period. By the time he was released, they had already separated. What perhaps constitutes the leitmotif of Lina’s life-story, as a whole, is her estrangement from her natal home and her in-laws. Much of her movement-story can be read as an attempt to acquire for herself and her child a modicum of security in the face of the complete failure of the wider kinship network to do so. The lower middle-class family had very little sympathy or resources to offer a daughter who had been abandoned by her husband and her in-laws, the true custodians of her person. In

her narrative, the exceptionality of 'Naxalbari' recedes in the face of the symbolic violence that structured the everyday life of an estranged, unemployed single mother.

Together with the family, the experience of betrayal at the hands of the Party assumes a predominant role in Lina's life-story. Begetting a child was a crime, Lina told me, given that the movement was not supposed to be a place to set up a household. While male comrades were rarely discouraged from engaging in romantic liaisons and the practice of 'marriage' flourished, the consequences of conjugality such as the begetting of children were largely ignored. Women like Lina who married fellow comrades and ended up having children faced no support from the Party. On the contrary, male Party ideologues continuously proclaimed her maternal feelings to be 'counterrevolutionary'. In the tradition of Telangana and other armed struggles, a true revolutionary consciousness meant the ability to sacrifice your child for the sake of a 'just' cause (Kannabiran and Lalitha, 1989). Glorificatory histories of Naxalbari (such as Sen, 2001) are replete with images of women who left their children or even lost them to the revolutionary cause as exemplary of a heroic femininity.

Interestingly enough it is this discourse of heroic femininity that subordinates motherhood to the goals of the revolution that governs Lina's self-perception as a mother. In saying that 'my work is bigger', Lina makes it clear that she has rejected the conventional world of maternal identities, and embraced a language of militancy that takes precedence over all 'natural', 'maternal' or 'familial' ties (De Mel, 2001; Kannabiran and Lalitha, 1989). In negotiating perhaps what is the most contentious part of her past, motherhood, Lina constitutes her self-identity through a heroic, sacrificial femininity that was made available by the movement's discursive repertoire. Such a model of 'revolutionary femininity' introduces an element of choice into her narrative. It transforms her decision to leave her child into an agential act, rather than one that was predetermined by her very limited survival options as a single mother who was also a political outlaw. In fact, Lina's political behaviour was, at least after the birth of her child, less an act of independent choice than one of necessity, indeed a survival strategy. Discursive renditions of heroic femininity mitigate this sense of powerlessness associated with single motherhood by transforming personal struggle into sacrifice for the cause.

Beneath Lina's narrative of a heroic femininity lies a more vulnerable self that is disavowed just as a mythicisation of the 'underground' is sustained through the foreclosure of the (gendered)

relations of power that structured it. The romanticisation of the political shelter in collective memory rests, as we shall see, upon similar strategies of denial.

### **Interpersonal Violence in the Shelter**

Pivotal to the memory of the underground is, as suggested in the preceding discussion, the place occupied by the political shelter. In the city or the *gram* (village), activists were provided shelter by peasants, labourers, or by middle-class households who were either sympathisers or families of political activists themselves. Outside the ‘battle zone’, the shelter was conceived of as a place of sanctuary, trust and renewal, often guarded by older female members of the household.<sup>9</sup> Within the gendered division of political space, the shelter emerged as a zone of safety, especially for women whose very entry into the political domain often hinged on the availability of shelters. While the preceding discussion considered some of the everyday and gendered forms of vulnerability in underground existence, this section queries the nature of the shelter as a refuge from violence, especially for women.

As with Lina, everyday life in the ‘underground’ is punctuated in Supriya’s case with endless calamities. Supriya, too, is no longer involved in any form of organisational politics, and is much less visible than some of the other well-known ‘Naxalite women’ in Kolkata. In her story, the state recedes as the sole source of violence even though Supriya joined at a time when its presence was most felt. Sexual violence structures almost the entirety of her experience in political shelters (Sanyal, 2001). There is the concomitant fear of bodily harm by local goons and moneylenders, resentment by women workers, hostility by female members of political shelters, and the everyday drudgery of voluntary poverty and uprootedness. Supriya lived in two colliery *bustees*. She was literally chased out of the first one by local goons, and the constant threat of moneylenders pervaded her second political ‘base’. In her stories, a peculiar pattern of dependency emerges between the female revolutionary and other members of the shelter.

Supriya details her experience in various political shelters, contrasting middle-class homes with working class families. While she was treated with respect and affection in the latter, there were times when she was simply abandoned by her ‘sister-workers’ in the face of threatening goons and moneylenders. On at least two separate occasions, she was left stranded in the middle of the night in areas well known for assaults and robberies. In middle-class homes, on the other hand, the women of the household treated her as a free, full-time domestic servant in ways that

infringed upon her political activities. At other times, she was accused of having an affair with the patriarch of the house. In one particular middle-class family, such a situation took an extreme turn when the wife actually threw her out in the early hours of the morning.

What is significant in Supriya's narrative and finds resonance in other accounts of underground life is the relationship between women, especially between the woman activist and women of the household. In the last shelter that Supriya writes of, the mother of the household sets down certain conditions for her to follow in order to continue living there. Supriya recounts this incident in her short published memoir:

“First, she [Supriya] cannot leave for anywhere on the spur of the moment. If she has a programme or wishes to stay away even for a night she has to inform me beforehand. Second she has to enroll herself in a college, although I have come to know that she studied science once, I don't think it's feasible anymore. She has to study Humanities...”. I don't remember what else *mashima* [aunty] said except for these that left a deep impact on my mind. Her monologue disturbed me greatly. One year has passed and now the issue of respecting the discipline of the household is raised? Am I still an under-age girl? [...] (Sanyal, 2001: 30, translation is mine).

At this juncture when the movement had all but dissolved, the political shelter is reinstated as the household, and women are meant to resume their former roles as 'daughters' and 'wives' that politicisation had only temporarily disbanded. One needs to question whether the shelter ever functioned as anything other than a household in relation to women. The figure of '*mashima*' is the clearest instance of the blurring of the boundaries between the public and the private in the space of the shelter. For male activists the shelter was a refuge from 'outside' terror in which they enjoyed the nurturance of women. For women, on the other hand, it functioned unfailingly as a domestic space that enforced regulatory control through the authority of the family. Their security often hinged upon submission to the values of family and domesticity. As the only 'safe' space for women within the movement, the shelter often reinforced women's total dependence upon the protection of the family.

While Supriya's narrative bears testimony to the forms of interpersonal aggression that women were vulnerable to within the shelter, it equally idealises this space. In the account of her time

spent ‘sheltered’ in an industrial area, Supriya denies the harsh aspects of underground life and posits, instead, a degree of heroic stoicism with respect to the everyday:

... I visited Kalipahari [colliery] for the second time. It was the summer of 1973. An extended family offered me shelter. ... I lived there in a room which was supposed to be haunted. Thus no stranger ever approached it. There was a tattered mattress and bric-a-brac strewn all over. ... In order that he [the moneylender] has no inkling of my presence I was forbidden to move around while living in that room. ... While living there, I never once saw daylight, never stopped outside the house even for my basic needs. I would suffocate in the room. At times, one of the wives would enter with a tray of food. ... Under the patriarch’s strict supervision the women of the family would draw water from the well for my bath. I would bathe at night under their watchful eyes. I had long hair and would spread it, fan like, on the pillow to dry. Rats would tug at my hair at night. I was always terrified of roaches and rats but I had no option. *The entire family took such wonderful care of me that I never felt the least discomfort.* (Sanyal, 2001: 25, emphasis and translation mine).

Supriya’s written text conforms to a discourse that frames other movement-stories as well, a discourse that mythicises the underground and idealises the shelter. Such a discourse is not very removed from one that idealises childhood poverty, what Hollway and Jefferson (2000: 56) call a ‘we were poor but we were happy’ discourse, and one that is not absent from childhood memories of lower middle-class Naxalite activists. In Supriya’s narrative, it is the working-class household that is the repository of projected idealised values. This is hardly surprising given that the ability to live, eat, and become ‘one’ with peasants/workers was pivotal to one’s membership to the revolutionary community. A triumphalist fantasy of fugitive life is accompanied, within Supriya, by the inability to acknowledge its trauma or to re-cast it in a heroic light. The self is written as heroic (‘I never felt the least discomfort’), and vulnerability remains embedded in the ‘normal’ patterns of revolutionary life. In adopting contrasting points of view (‘I would suffocate in the room’ ... ‘I never felt the least discomfort’), Supriya seems unable to acknowledge more vulnerable aspects of herself and her past. These potentially troubling memories are split off and



separated from positive, idealised ones in ways that resonate with Lina's evocation of a militant femininity against the vulnerabilities of single motherhood.

Kalpana similarly talks of the transformation of the lower middle-class household, in this case, her own, through its use as a shelter in the course of the movement:

My house had a certain picture. My *baba* (father) was an engineer, *dada* (elder brother) was studying and so on ... but suddenly the house became different. We didn't eat at home but food was cooked for 10/12 people a day. At the end, *ma* (mother) started to sell things to support so many people eating in the house. One kettle was always on the stove. [You didn't have a problem with this?] No, I liked it very much because ... I would tell *ma* that this has to be done. *Ma* had understood as well ... *ma* was very happy. There's a long history of my house.

'Ma' in Kalpana's narrative continues the long tradition of mothers who fought unwilling husbands to shelter fugitive revolutionaries at the risk of their own safety and at the cost of the household. These women epitomise the sacrifice of the entire household and the community for the sake of a higher, worthier cause. Romanticisation of this sort leads to a forgetting of the darker aspects of this history such as the draining of the family's resources, the threat that male comrades often were to younger female members of the household, and the infinite police raids that havocked the *bari* (home) leaving it desolate and its women members entirely alone (Bandyopadhyay, 2000: 27). As with Supriya, risky and painful aspects of the past are repudiated, leaving Kalpana with one-sided memories of how happy life was in the 'communist commune'.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Women's discussions of their labour and status within the Party suggest a containment of their agency in ways that reproduced their fixity in a political economy of sexual difference. The naturalisation of gender served to marginalise women from crucial revolutionary tasks (such as the rural campaign) just as it accentuated their political utility in acts like couriering. The division of political labour along with that of space was, I have argued, both gendered as well as a process of gendering. Women activists were confined to certain 'safe' zones such as the political shelter

and ‘protected’ from unsafe ones. In my discussion of women’s reflections on the daily rituals and struggles of underground existence, I have pointed to those invisible, seemingly banal forms of gendered violence and vulnerability that structured the everyday experience of such ‘safe’ zones. This turn to the micropolitics of everyday life is especially significant in the context of revolutionary politics where an understanding of violence as ‘spectacular’ tends to minimise the ‘cruel but not unusual’ (Berlant, 2000: 43) forms of injury that remain embedded in everyday life, and to which women are especially vulnerable.

Memories of the revolutionary everyday are not easy to revisit. I have noted a relative domestication of the ‘little’ violences of everyday life in personal narratives that evoke repertoires of heroism and self-sacrifice. These seem to be abjected from the collective mythicisation of the underground (and the shelter) as a repository of freedom and adventure, key features of a heroic life that seeks to transgress the everyday and the ordinary. The privileging of such a heroic life seems to foreclose the possibility of identifying acts of betrayal and vulnerability that structured the quotidian life of the movement. Such practices of memory, resting on an elision (and normalisation) of the local life of power and violence, are in no way exclusive to Naxalbari. The relationship between personal memory and collective (often hegemonic) practices of remembering becomes in this context particularly vexed, raising serious questions about the possibility of witnessing the ‘everydayness’ of violence.

**Notes** will be here

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<sup>1</sup> This quote is from my interview with Supriya (self-appointed pseudonym).

<sup>2</sup> To this extent, this article forms part of an emergent body of work that explores the everyday life of revolutionary movements, paying particular attention to quotidian practices of vulnerability and violence at the micro-level (e.g. Bourgois, 2001; De Mel, 2001; Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois, 2004; Manchanda, 2004; Pettigrew and Shneiderman, 2004; Silber, 2005).

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<sup>3</sup> The respondents, Rajashri and Mimlu can be identified as members of the English speaking elite in Kolkata. Their children, who are my peers, have studied at elite institutions both in India and abroad. Their interviews were conducted almost entirely in English.

<sup>4</sup> For all interviews conducted in Bengali, words give in single quotation marks were originally said in English.

<sup>5</sup> My argument here draws on Skegg's (2004: 292) conceptualisation of gender and sexuality not as objects or properties belonging to an individual, but as resources which one has access to or not, and can employ in various ways 'to realise value in the "self"'. She argues that (white, middle-class) men are able to employ gender as mobile cultural or economic resources in ways that women and men of minority groups cannot, given the latter's fixity in symbolic systems.

<sup>6</sup> The idea of 'declassing' the self in order to revoke the ideological distance between the 'intellectual' and the masses has a long-standing tradition in middle-class Bengali Marxist politics. Becoming 'de-classed' meant, for the *bhadralok* Marxist, the sacrifice of customary material privileges and aspirations, beginning with the abandonment of domestic life and responsibilities (Dasgupta, 2003). *Bhadralok* is literally a 'gentleman', but more generally, the Bengali middle-class (*madhyabitta*) that originally located itself below the aristocracy and above the labouring classes in the nineteenth century. The *bhadralok madhyabitta* has thereafter come to signify a heterogeneous middle-class in Bengal with culture and education as its primary social capital.

<sup>7</sup> The absurdity of this argument lies in the Party's limited understanding of the reality of middle-class women's lives, caught between irresolvable familial tensions and the individual desire for social/political change. They could hardly leave and return to their families at will. See also Stree Shakti Sanghatana (1989: 264) on the experience of the Telengana struggle where the Party found it difficult to welcome women who were seen as burdensome, because they were physically 'weak', and a risk to the Party's reputation.

<sup>8</sup> In this paper, I focus on the forms and expressions of gendered vulnerability that women faced in the underground, reserving a full discussion on the lived experience of sexual violence elsewhere.

<sup>9</sup> I have detailed the politics of the 'shelter' and of 'sheltering' women activists elsewhere.