

Echoes of Resistance: Revisiting Sumanta Bandyopadhyay's Naxalite Translations as Postcolonial Experience Amidst the Waves of Indian Capitalism

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Abstract: In South Asian culture, the term “postcolonial” remains a multifaceted concept. Across the Indian subcontinent, Marxism continues to exert a subdued yet persistent influence on democratic culture. Although the radical political tides of the 1970s have largely receded amid the rise of capitalist dominance, academia continues to serve as a vital sanctuary. Within this space, scholars and critics reflect on radical undercurrents emphasizing the necessity of preserving traditions of alterity and dissent to ensure a healthy functioning Indian democracy.

This paper revisits a selection of forgotten Bengali Naxalite poems, translated and compiled by Sumanta Bandyopadhyay to address three central questions:

- First: What lessons and legacies do these literary works offer modern readers and how do they remain relevant in present social context while the eponymous cultural movement has collapsed?
- Second: Do these verses provide meaningful perspectives on the enduring traditions of radical critique in India and how do these persistent currents help us understand contemporary democratic politics?
- Third: Why must we engage with Naxalite poetry today long after the physical collapse of the political movement?

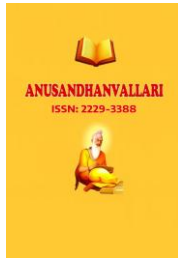
By examining these poetic works, the paper argues that engaging with historical voices of resistance is essential for understanding the ongoing negotiations among the axis of state power, emerging cultures of dissent and ever-evolving political identity in 21st century postcolonial India.

Keywords: Naxalite Poetry, Postcolonial Experience, Literary Counter-Archive, Cultures of Dissent, Marxist Cultural History

Introduction

The clarion rise of revolutionary Marxism in Bengal during the 1930s, its high incidence during the 1960s and its tragic ebb in 1975 traces some wondrous years in the cultural history of Bengal. To certain dreamers, and especially the young minds, who grew up in the immediate years following Naxalite rebellion, the decade signified a magical time (referred generally as the ‘decade of liberation’). Yet, to others who suffered and sacrificed in the process, the whole experience became an act of choice and assertion, and an urge to stand up against all forces of social repression and odds. Mallarika Singha Roy identifies this idealist position and its dream aptly as she points out that, “experiences of violence and repression—are intertwined with visions of emancipation”; Persecution, pain and tribulation are as much part of [this] magic as wonder, surprise and hope; and muses on its many contradictions, thus:

...was it a period that shared the objective situation of radical leftist upsurges in different corners of the world; was it an episode of critical self-reflection for postcolonial Indian democracy; or, was it an event—the rite of passage—of the proverbial ‘coming of age’ for postcolonial India that had its own unique, distinguishing elements but becomes singular only through repeating itself, as the resurgence of Maoism in contemporary India indicates?¹ (Mallarika Singha Roy, Preface, xi, ix)



In fact, the decease of these magical moments has led to many romantic nostalgias and performances by eminent Bengali intelligentsia who have tried to recapture the visionary and rebellious spirit of the late 1960s to mid-1970s. A very recent nostalgic song performed by Kabir Suman catches well the rebellious ethos and idealism of the Bengali rebels as the composer tributes an ode to the Bengali revolutionary spirit that has become dormant currently but may rise any moment from its own ashes alike a rejuvenated Phoenix:

...Our liplocks and poems, O beloved, fashions barricade in millions

Each of our passionate love kisses together demands new rebellions.

You incessantly dream of me in your infinite incarnations:

In every eon, I was the man of your desire, your revolt and your scream,

We re-united whenever you recalled me in your sorrow and your dream.

In each of your births, I was your home and your man

Each time I became a father, you mothered our clan

Our progenies still burn, O beloved, our pyres each upcoming morn.

Our pair re-incarnates everlastingly through cycles of birth and death

We remain paired entwined to this lovely earth decreed by fate.²

This assertion and its romantic nostalgia, however, cannot cancel out the fact that the career of Marxist idealism in Bengal has always been an uneasy one. To borrow from Raja Rao a phrase that is used in another context, the tryst of Marxism with the Indian spirit and its subsequent “telling has not been easy”³. The expression of the relationship of Marxist revolutionary spirit has been ‘uneasy’ because its presence in the Indian postcolonial setup has culminated in many fault-lines and fissures of Indian cultural history that lie today enclosed in the confidential files of the Indian government as the latter has very successfully controlled the revolutionary urge of its rebel subjects and especially arrested its younger section that aimed to reframe the social system anew.

The Poetics of Resistance: Literature as an Alternative Archive

This small musing on Naxalite ideology is enough to make us wonder about whether we still need to study the Naxalite productions anymore as it has substantially waned away from the Bengali, and by extension, Indian cultural front. The question that looms is quite straight: Is there any relevance of Naxalism still in the current setup? If yes, can it give us any purposeful insight regarding our current living. The famed journalist author of *In the Wake of Naxalbari*, Sumanta Banerjee, reasons that Naxalite musings are still relevant as they are “a violent tribute to the Indian state’s perpetuation of the inequitable socio-economic power structure”. As a collector of Naxalite collectibles, he informs the reader in his Preface to *Thema Book of Naxalite Poetry*:

...most of the poems and songs... sound like echoes of what is happening today in the villages of Jharkhand, Chattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh and other parts of India. The hopes and fears expressed [mirror both] their positive efforts to eradicate inequality in their zones of influence... [and] their cruel misdeeds that violate humanitarian values and bewilder and alienate their sympathizers.⁴

The present paper does not muse on whether revolutionary politics practiced by the rebels were justified or not; neither does it philosophically delve into the principles of revolutionary Marxism. It rather tries to only read and analyse some of the long-forgotten Naxalite poems to stage them as apt records of Bengal’s forgotten but oft-referred, cultural history that is currently neglected in the modern academic curricula due to bureaucratic diplomacy and negligence. Equally, the paper focuses on a single language community, the Bengalis while Banerjee’s book offers a wide variety of readings spread across all over the Indian peninsula wherever Naxalite

upheaval or its influence spread. I restrict my observations to the Bengali community because the scope and diversity of Banerjee's varied Indian cultural artefacts are too vast for a single paper. Another point regarding Banerjee's expertise needs to be noted before analytically surveying the readings. One must emphasize the fact that Banerjee's knowledge on Naxals come from his deep engagement with them: he collected and compiled the pieces included in his published volume during his field trips for bites on existing Naxalite production and memorabilia from the various spheres of social strata spread across the whole Indian territory affected by Naxalism. Moreover, when Banerjee conducted fieldwork for his compilation of Naxalite poetry and folksongs collecting these pieces meant rebellion against the State and invited punishments, harassments and widespread suspicions of national sedition.

In evaluating the cultural history of radical political movements in the Indian Subcontinent, scholars are frequently confronted with the problem of historical durability. When an armed insurrection or revolutionary movement collapses under the crushing weight of state suppression, the dominant historical narrative is invariably penned by the victors—the state apparatus and its institutional mechanisms. This epistemological problem brings us to a fundamental question within postcolonial Marxist literary studies: how does a crushed movement preserve its ideological essence, its human experience and its ethical imperative when official histories seek to erase or demonize it?

It is precisely within this vacuum of institutional memory that literature transforms from a mere aesthetic pursuit into an irreplaceable archive of dissent. Historical records, register dates, casualties, administrative measures and official declarations of counter-insurgency; they rarely capture the interiority of the rebel, the existential angst of marginalized collectives or the moral rationale driving individuals toward seemingly doomed struggles. While empirical historiography records the formal end of an event, the literary artifact preserves its living ethos. In the context of the Naxalite movement of 1970s Bengal, poetry emerged not as a passive reflection of political reality, but as a dynamic medium through which revolutionary consciousness was forged, transmitted and sustained across generations.

The Problem of Historical Durability in Radical Subaltern Movements

When assessing the cultural and political trajectories of radical political movements across the Indian subcontinent, historians and cultural theorists inevitably encounter a profound historiographical dilemma: the issue of historical durability. Armed insurrections, peasant uprisings and revolutionary underground movements operate under conditions of extreme precarity. When these radical movements are dismantled or suppressed by state counter-insurgency apparatuses, the official record of their existence is captured almost exclusively through institutional frameworks.

Following the collapse of a revolutionary struggle, the dominant narrative is codified by the victors. The state machinery, backed by legislative bodies, law enforcement archives, judicial records and mainstream media apparatuses, establishes an official memory of the conflict. In these state-sanctioned accounts, revolutionary movements are consistently framed through the vocabulary of criminality, societal disruption, terrorism or ideological madness. This structural bias poses a fundamental epistemological challenge within postcolonial critique, subaltern studies and Marxist literary analysis: How does a defeated revolutionary movement preserve its core ideological principles, its subjective human realities and its ethical motivations when official state historiography actively works to sanitize, demonize or erase its memory?

Empirical Historiography versus The Interiority of the Rebel

The answer to this epistemological crisis lies in the distinct functional boundaries between conventional empirical historiography and literary production. State-sponsored or purely empirical historical documentation inherently prioritizes external quantifiable data. Official archives record specific dates of engagements and operational timelines, body counts, arrest tallies and casualty figures, legislative decrees, emergency measures

and counter-insurgency tactics or institutional assessments of territorial control and pacification. While these records provide a logistical outline of a movement's decline, they suffer from a structural blindness. Empirical archives are structurally equipped to document the mechanical collapse of an insurrection but they are fundamentally incapable of registering its human interiority. They cannot capture the psychological weight of state oppression, the shared existential anxiety of marginalized collectives or the subjective moral logic that compels individuals to pledge themselves to struggles against overwhelming odds.

Where empirical historiography records the formal physical termination of a movement, creative literature acts as a repository for its living ethos. Within the vacuum created by suppressed institutional memory, literature shifts from a mere decorative or aesthetic enterprise into an active irreplaceable archive of dissent. Creative writing—and poetry in particular—operates as a counter-archive that records the emotional, philosophical and moral dimensions of political resistance that official records systematically exclude.

Poetic Mediums and Revolutionary Consciousness in 1970s Bengal

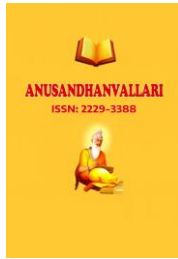
This dynamic is clearly demonstrated in the context of the Naxalite movement that swept through West Bengal during the late 1960s and 1970s. As the Indian state launched extensive paramilitary and police operations to suppress the insurrection, standard channels of political communication, organizing and publication were dismantled. Under conditions of strict surveillance and extrajudicial suppression, traditional political pamphlets and formal theoretical treatises faced severe distribution bottlenecks. In this environment, poetry emerged as a primary vehicle for radical cultural expression. Far from being a passive background reflection of political events, Bengali revolutionary verse functioned as an active agile medium for ideological transmission. Poetry possessed structural advantages that formal prose lacked and one may detect certain literary attributes within these radical poems. The table attested below try to give the reader an idea of the politically animated verse that form the core of our present analysis:

Attributes of Political Verse	Functional Advantage in Counter-Insurgency Contexts
Brevity and Mobility	Poems could be easily memorized, recited orally, scribbled on street walls or printed on clandestine handbills.
Metaphoric Flexibility	Coded allegories allowed poets to critique state power and subvert censorship mechanisms.
Affective Power	Verse directly targeted the emotional and moral sensibilities of students, workers and peasants.

Through the works of militant poets and activists, poetry became a generative space where revolutionary consciousness was forged, preserved and circulated. It provided a platform where the subaltern subject could articulate a counter-narrative to state violence transforming personal and collective trauma into political critique.

Literature as an Enduring Counter-Archive

Ultimately, the study of revolutionary poetry from defeated movements reveals that a political struggle does not terminate merely because its organizational structures have been dismantled. While the state can dismantle armed cadres and reclaim physical territory, it cannot easily eradicate the cultural artifacts produced during the height of political contestation. By preserving the ethical imperatives and lived experiences of political dissidents, literary works ensure that the spirit of critique remains accessible to subsequent generations. In postcolonial Indian democracy where state narratives continually seek to synthesize diverse political identities into a unified market-oriented order, these poetic fragments stand as persistent reminders of unfulfilled social



promises and lingering structural inequalities. Literature, therefore, performs the vital function of keeping the archive of dissent open ensuring that the history of radical resistance is remembered not merely as a police statistic but as a significant chapter in the ongoing struggle for social justice.

Another reason why this paper selects a certain language group and its rebel spirit is due to its philosophic concentration on the theoretical question, why should one study Marxist cultural history, still, when the movement seems almost crushed and vanished in the present scenario? One may also feel that literatures seldom could replace the factual concerns of historiography. Yet, Marxist idealism placed much emphasis on its literary proclamations as they proved diplomatic devices that eased awareness among the educated youth and the unruly masses. Hence, during 1970s poetry became an active weapon to propagate Marxist ideals and pro-action revolutionary propaganda. As history was construed by the Indian government against which Naxals fought, literature became the only repertoire through which messages of rebellion flowed widely among the initiates. Hence, Saroj Dutta seems to have an answer as to why one should rebel against stronger forces like the officiating government while knowing well that the rebel is doomed, especially as the State manipulates history-writing:

How often have I swayed my entranced hood

To the tune of their flutes.

How often have I sought for a pit to hide

My tired self.

How often have I roared in dumb rage,

Lashed out with my useless fangs,

Pounded my head against the earth!

They merely watched amused, and laughed.

In every marrow of my being today

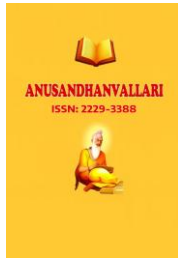
A deep pain runs.

...And in the revelry of their games

They have forgotten—

My sack of venom is full tonight.⁵

The poet here atones himself with a venomous snake, probably cobra and state his disregard that humans have disregarded the snake of its selfhood. This, in turn, has denied the snake either its freedom or security or both making it a plaything for the humankind. The poet stress that the snake too has a marrow, a self-respect of its own and so will bite as it has no recourse than to fight and that is its last and only possible recourse. While the metaphoric imagery of the poem hints at the Snake's supposed subjugation and helplessness, the being's assertive nature and its indomitable urge to fight its foe in any way left to it, talks of a positive resistance that adds both self-respect and courage to the diminished reptile figure. Hence, Dutta in this metaphoric poem very suitably shows that repression and its oppressive mechanism is bound to generate rebelliousness to counterbalance the existing social power-imbalance. While the alert reader undeniably can trace the impact of the Miltonic Snake-rebel-doomed leader⁶ equation in these lines, dehumanization of the poet shows that even a prolonged era of decadence fails to extinguish the courageous spirit of an alert being. One however, is shocked at the negativity of words expressed and used for penning the poem. While the fiery nature of the Naxalite context and the narrative of violence intertwined in the piece astonish us, Singha Roy's quote above grounds us



back to the fact that the ethos in which this poem is crafted is indeed one of the darkest eras in the whole history of Indian democracy till date. The only positivity expressed is nevertheless the will to offer clash amidst odds. Similarly, the pronoun 'their' and the phrase 'tune of their flutes' hints at the art of history/fact-manipulation as the State owns the power to process, initiate, write, manipulate or propagate the various mechanisms that were connected to the existing systems of knowledge and so consequently, the State controls the means of knowledge production cum circulation among the civilized populace.

Epistemic Hegemony and the Poetic Counter-Attack

Expanding upon Dutta's metaphor, the image of the snake charmer and the captive serpent provides a striking allegory for the relationship between the postcolonial State and the marginalized political subject. The "tune of their flutes" represents what Antonio Gramsci famously termed *hegemony*—the manufacturing of consent through cultural, ideological and institutional persuasion. The state does not operate merely through brute force; it operates by dictating the narrative rhythm to which society is expected to dance. When the state controls educational curricula, public archives, state media and legal frameworks, it effectively monopolizes the "flute" conditioning the populace to accept existing hierarchies as natural, inevitable and permanent. However, as Dutta's lines dramatically demonstrate, *hegemony* is never total or absolute. Beneath the performative submission of the "entranced hood" lies accumulating reservoir of systemic pain and suppressed agency. The transition from passive captivity to active threat ("My sack of venom is full tonight") highlights a critical psychological turn in anti-colonial and postcolonial theory: the realization that when institutional avenues for dignity and survival are systematically blocked, violent resistance becomes the subaltern's final instrument of self-assertion.

Furthermore, the literary choice to employ a dehumanized, reptilian self-figure reflects the profound alienating effects of state-sponsored brutality during the 1970s in Bengal. During this turbulent decade, counter-insurgency operations, extrajudicial actions and widespread incarceration created an atmosphere of existential terror. In such a climate, conventional humanistic vocabulary often proved inadequate to express the raw brutality of the conflict. By assuming the persona of a hunted, mocked yet lethal serpent, the poet rejects the patronizing civility of bourgeois politics. The poem insists that even when reduced to the absolute margins of existence, the oppressed subject retains the capacity to disrupt the apparatus of control. Ultimately, studying Marxist cultural history and revolutionary verse like Saroj Dutta's is not an exercise in romanticizing past violence or advocating for failed political strategies. Rather, it is an essential academic and political project aimed at interrogating how power operates in postcolonial democracies. By analyzing these poetic texts alongside official histories, scholars uncover the alternative memories, suppressed grievances and persistent desires for alterity that continue to shape the political landscape of contemporary India.

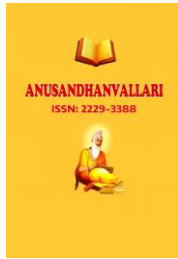
The first instance quoted therefore talk of a contest that needs to be fought for self-respect and faith against opposing oppressive forces, no matter what should be the result. Yet, un-mindfulness is not the reason or cause of Naxalite assertion, rather over-alertness and conscious will to resist social obstacles seem to vitiate the mind of the educated Naxal visionary. How alert is the rebel Naxal when he asserts his bovine desire to strive amidst difficulties? Bipul Chakravarty works wonders in this regard as the author plays with the very visual graphics of a captivated rebel's eyes as a perceiver moves closer to observe its intricacies:

One after another,

Eyes burn.

Watch them from far,

They look pale like the night stars.



Come closer,
Every eye looks larger than the Sun,
Each a ball of fire...⁷ (Burning Eyes, 54)

The very destabilization of the meaning of the scene perceived and the actual lesson learnt from the encounter may seem hedonistic and idealist primarily. Yet, on a deeper consideration, the poem is impregnated with the Naxalite vision to restructure a corrupt cum plagued society. It tries to answer the question as to why the Naxals recourse to the right to violence. Interestingly, most of the Naxalite pieces reverberate with the cue that the context of Naxalism has undergone a degeneration in terms of positive values: all positivity seems lost as the post-independent Indian setup underwent through a series of unwanted and irreconcilable negativities that almost verged on the level of betrayal for the constituent subject: freedom amidst partition, population explosion and consequent increase in poverty; price inflation; and corrupt black-marketizing—all created a collage of situations in which both the governmental apparatus and its subjects interchangeably became both victims and victimisers.

Another point must be made regarding the ideals of patriotism hinted in Naxalite poetry. Murari Mukhopadhyay argues quite blatantly in his poem that if one loves his/her nation or even possesses the power to reciprocate love to the land of one's nativity, one must become a patriotic rebel who will act akin to the fiery Sun, the thunder, the flooded river and the storm that aim to "destroy the palace of Sin". Mukhopadhyay further argues that to fight such an epic battle, one must abnegate the softer feelings of humaneness and embark the "fire" that aid the actions of a destroyer (54-5, Love)⁸. Indeed, the Naxalites were highly conscious to the sprite of widespread mass unrest that inundated the commoners and most specifically the rustic farmers who were exploited and betrayed at all levels of the civilized setup during the 1970s. Hence, a popular rural folksong refrains that some cultural saviour will emerge and resist the prevalent injustices:

Listen to the cry of victory
Of the poor clad in loin-cloth,
But shaking the earth to its foundations.
Can Krishna be held in the prison of Kamsa?⁹

While one may feel that we talk here of a distant past, the current parallels are too many to note. The continuous hike in global warming and consequent climate threats, the destruction of food crops, the high incidence of farmer-suicides, the tremendous rise of poverty and rich-poor imbalance, increasing market price and social inequities all suggest that the Naxalite rebellion situates well the question of postcolonial experience in which we presently live. This connection becomes most prominently visible when we consider the following fact brilliantly summed up by Abhijit Das in 2015:

I also wonder if on one hand a hundred millionaires in India hold assets worth 25% of our GDP, and on the other hand, 830 million live on less than Rs. 20 per day, then does not the Spectre of Karl Marx loom larger than ever in our existence?

...As the European State is cornered by one crisis after another, capitalism as a system is also throwing up its hands, faced with its duty to protect people or the environment.¹⁰

The Long Way Ahead: Legacy and Its Bearers

As the paper nears its end, the reader may stop the author here and ask if Marxist poetry seems to have an answer to the problems that caused its birth. Sadly, the paper seems to have no answer to the question of resolving problems or rectifying existent social anomalies. It fails to agree along the Naxalite line that armed



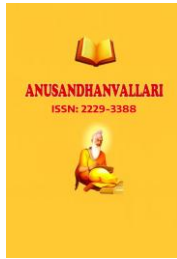
rebellion or techniques of mass violence to reorganize a corrupt social system is a justified line of thought or action that would resolve all existing conflicts. Equally, law preservation or policy framing lie beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, the study is a theoretical musing that tries to perplex the reader about the haunting parallels that unite Naxalite poems to the current situation: it stresses the fact that both history and literature offers important glimpses of social critique regarding our current concerns. It stresses on the art of social critique, legacy and insights inherent within Naxalite poetry and criticism. It argues that like a bridge spreading across decades, Naxalite poetry connects us to our earlier generation and make us aware of their thoughts on how to tackle grave social concerns, like inequity, injustice and corruption. The paper reads a select number of Naxalite poems to illustrate that the Naxalite concern initiated in partitioned West Bengal from the Bengali experience of homelessness soon evolved into a pan-Indian concern due to its wider appeal to the poverty-stricken Indian masses. The article also studies a few pieces penned by the Bengali intelligentsia to trace the philosophic concerns of the Naxalite poems and advocates that these poems are vital social documents that hoard in themselves a silenced chapter of Bengali cultural history during the tumultuous 1960s and 1970s. Finally, it stresses that these poems must be studied, reviewed and analysed in the light of current problems as many Naxalite social concerns have survived and continued into our own times.

To conclude, a few comments must be made on pro-action Naxalite idealism and its relationship with Naxalite poetry. The demise of pro-action Naxalite activism attests to the historical lesson that violence is a faulty measure against the social problems of a democratic setup that works on the twin principles of social consent and mutual respect regarding the plurality of opinions of its constituent subjects. The only way to alter social systems in such a setup lie in majoritarian public will that must be achieved on democratic grounds by constitutional means. The pro-rebellious nature of the 1960s and 1970s and their violent suppression by the government apparatus however have failed in twin manner. On the one hand, insurgency and terrorism have themselves become major players that aids dissent and inflict fear among the exploited masses. Alternately, on the other hand, Naxalite concerns and criticisms are currently becoming a food for further academic deliberation as certain similar problems like inequity, corruption, climate fluctuation cum devastation and social injustice plagues 21st century narratives of globalisation and human progression. It is under these pretexts that we need to learn Naxalite poetry. These poems remain an interesting storehouse of Bengal's silenced socio-cultural upheaval and their philosophic affinities to the radical cultures of dissent connect them to the wider radical spree that permeated the globe during the rebellious 1970s. I will end this article with an interesting brilliant observation penned by Sumanta Banerjee that not only evidence a strong line of connection between the 1970s and the present time but also arguably demonstrate that Maoist and government ideals may sometimes fuse and—mirror and/or contradict each other interchangeably:

Given the present situation, it behoves both the Indian State and its Maoist opponents to rethink their respective strategies and plans of action. The Indian State still refuses to recognize Maoism as a strong ideological force based on genuine popular grievances about economic inequity and social injustice. The Maoist objective of setting up a secular and socialist society (as outlined in the party programme issued by the CPI-Maoist on 9 September 2004) is more in consistency with the spirit of the Indian Constitution's commitment to that goal, than the programmes of the various terrorist outfits (with whom the Indian State brackets the Maoists)—which follow the design of dividing the Indian people along religious, regional and linguistic lines.¹¹

Notes:

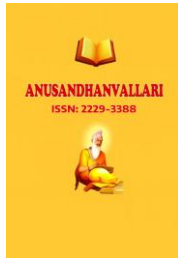
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3. Rao, Raja. "Foreword." *Kanthapura*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989 p. v.
4. Banerjee, Sumanta. "Preface." *Thema Book of Naxalite Poetry*, edited and translated by Sumanta Banerjee, Kolkata: Thema, 2012, p. viii.
5. Dutta, Saroj. "The Night of the Full Moon." *Thema Book of Naxalite Poetry*, edited and translated by Sumanta Banerjee, Kolkata: Thema, 2012, pp. 53-54.
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