

BOOK EXCERPT

What Suchitra Mahato's story tells us about women Maoist revolutionaries

The remarkable confessions of those who have surrendered.

Swati Sengupta

Dec 21, 2016 · 08:30 am



Bastar police officials at the surrender of 43 alleged Maoists in Chintagufa, Sukma district

The name “Suchitra Mahato” was widely associated with the killing of policemen and political party functionaries in West Bengal’s Jangalmahal for ten years or so. It was bound to be treated with fear and awe.

It is said that Kishanji was killed in a major conspiracy and the death was in reality a fake encounter. The buzz was that he was killed despite being “caught alive” because his death would have been far more significant than an arrest. Suchitra had apparently betrayed Kishanji by leaving him in a forest he was unfamiliar with and some young boy had perhaps tipped off the police on being promised a huge sum of money.

Had Suchitra been trapped by the police? Had she in turn trapped Kishanji in collusion with the police and the ruling Trinamool Congress? Was it entirely a political gameplan executed to perfection where even some of the top police personnel were kept in the dark? None, apart from a few, can say for sure. All that the public saw was Suchitra standing by the side of West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee in March 2012 as a “surrendered Maoist” and that she had married a Trinamool Congress functionary named Prabir Garai.

Garai, a veterinary doctor, was associated with the CPI (Maoist) frontal organisation PCPA, when the Left Front was in power in West Bengal. With the change of guard in the state, Garai was given important charge of the Trinamool Congress in Jangalmahal and he also got married to Suchitra. She was earlier married to Sashadhar Mahato, a Maoist leader who had died in an encounter with a

combined Central and state government force in March 2011. After his marriage to Suchitra, Prabir has since discontinued his “practice” as a vet.

As we sat on a creaking charpai in her small room in Bankura, Suchitra caressed her long black tresses; she was preparing to shampoo them in the evening. But she eventually changed her mind and decided to put it off for later as she narrated stories of her work, her thoughts on life, and about people’s attempts to tarnish her “character”.

In the ten years she worked as a Maoist, she would go into small, sleepy hamlets inside dense forests, her long, black hair tied into a thick plait, a rifle slung over her shoulder. “What kind of oil do you use for your hair? What is the secret? Please tell us!” the didis and mashis in the villages would gather around and ask her. “Nothing, just the usual brands of oil,” she would say, blushing. Suchitra was popular with the villagers. She had a casual air about her – friendly and approachable.

Yet, Suchitra Mahato is a mystery.

If you talk to her, you will perhaps never know which one of her various personae is real. Are they all real, or all fake? Perhaps it’s a mix of both.

Sitting there, she laughed at and mocked potential death threats. “I am told I will be killed because I got Kishanji killed.” There is a smirk playing on her lips. Does she admit it? No. Does she deny it? No.

But she was not afraid to die. “I don’t think I can be killed like this, all of a sudden without any hint of death coming. I know how Maoists kill their targets. I was also a Maoist, and we would always tell individuals the reason why they were being killed. Maoists – if they want to kill me – will first write a letter, telling me the reasons why they want to finish me off. And I haven’t got any letter. If death will come, let it come and embrace me. I am not afraid to die.”

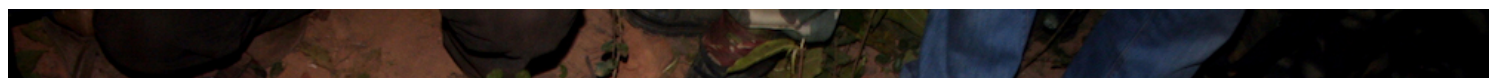
The next time I met her, she told me: “I didn’t kill Kishanji, nor got him killed. I even told that to the top officers in the state. They all know it. And even the Maoists know it. There was a young boy with us and we were all fleeing at the same time. So why should the Maoists kill me?”

“Moreover, if I wanted to get him arrested, I would have ensured he was alive. Even *I* was hit by bullets. Why should I deliberately sustain bullet injuries to make this appear more authentic? Look at my wounds. I could have died. The bullets were wedged by the side of my kidney.”

She was now a little harassed about the security bandobast around her and the repeated reminders from the state government authorities that the Maoists were after her life. Ten home guards were guarding her and Prabir’s Bankura home for months and the police had to spend Rs 2 lakh per month on this arrangement. She had also had to leave home and settle down elsewhere, at a place offered by the police which was less vulnerable to attacks.

What upset her, though, was the fact that people keep gossiping about her. She was well aware of the accusations. “Why do people keep saying all these things about Kishanji and me? Why am I accused of trapping men? Women are always seen as temptresses, as objects of lust and greed. As if, beyond this, she is nothing else. In the party (CPI-Maoist) too, people look at you with desire and lust and treat you as an object of sexuality. But thankfully, the party has strict rules on this. No one can get away with bad behaviour against a woman. He will definitely be punished.

“Women have to suffer right from childhood! I have seen a lot of women being tortured back in my village, including my mother. That made me want to fight back and protest from the time I was a child.”





arms and were part of operations – abducting, shooting and killing policemen and members of the ruling Left parties.

Before I go into the details of how her life changed completely after Kishanji's death and her "surrender", I want to first discuss here the role of women in this war in general and about Suchitra in particular.

How is she viewed by those she worked with?

When I asked one of her former colleagues if he knew Suchitra, the man (who was in his late 30s), smiled mischievously. "Yes, I know her, like a sister," he said. Another former colleague too had a similar expression on his face when I mentioned her. There were many smirks and sneers. A senior IPS officer, who has worked in Jangalmahal for years, told me how she managed to rise in the Maoist ranks "by being close to powerful men all the time". The same perception exists among journalists covering the Maoist movement in Bengal.

Her female colleagues, on the other hand, were angry that she remained in a "safe" and "domineering" position by choosing an influential leader as a spouse/partner. The fact that she instantly moved from being a Maoist to becoming the wife of an influential Trinamool Congress leader at a time when there was a change of guard in West Bengal, is seen as the result of her clever manoeuvring power.

Female Maoists have surrendered – just like their male comrades – when their career was either over or they were frustrated with some aspect of the movement. Some had been "intercepted" by the police, but their arrests were officially projected as "surrenders". Men too, have surrendered because they wanted to live peacefully with their partners and children, but the men were never branded by notoriety. It is deeply entrenched in our culture that a female soldier is never seen as a desexualized individual. On the contrary, she has always been viewed as possessing overwhelming sexual prowess – someone whose sexuality can be used or abused unless she is a mother and/or spouse of a senior leader.

Women are "affected" on both sides of this war – as soldiers and as ordinary village women who have not joined the war but are not outside the area of violence on account of that.



OUT OF WAR

Voices of
Surrendered Maoists

SWATI SENGUPTA 

More and more women are becoming part of the State versus Maoist war.

Currently women are said to be approximately 60 per cent of the total Maoist force according to Maoist and home ministry sources. There are many reasons behind this.

In the states where Maoists routinely visit villages looking for young recruits, little boys are often sent away from homes to live in boarding schools or at relatives' places. If they live in places where Maoists have no influence, the parents consider the boys 'safe'.

Therefore, back in the villages, it is mostly the girls that stay back with their parents. This has resulted in Maoist groups recruiting a larger number of girls than boys in recent years.

In the squads, women are used to deceive cops – a woman is far less suspect than a male cadre. Women foot-soldiers are also used as shields when major operations are carried out, as they raise less suspicion.

To the government, women's involvement poses a greater threat because it means "greater acceptability of the movement among communities", said an officer. Significantly, women have also played an important role in *making* top leaders surrender before the police. If the police get tip-offs about a top male cadre pondering surrender, they send feelers through the woman – his partner or spouse. "There are always concerns over family life and children. And it has always been the women who influenced the male leaders to give up the life of a soldier because it threatens the family life," the officer said.

At the outset – during the Naxalbari uprising – it was a movement for social and political equality for which the educated youth, both male and female, participated. It was idealism that swayed hundreds to give up their material comforts and fight the exploitative landlords and empower the poor for which men and women had fought together. But ironically, those who aspired to social equality had glossed over the relevance of gender inequality in the same war and women ended up as more or less invisible – made to do the cooking, or work as couriers and not easily allowed to rise up in the ranks.

In the Maoist microcosm of warfare, heroism remained in the masculine paradigm and the woman got the role she always had back home. There was no escape from the trappings of domesticity and her role in that sphere.

Those fighting the *class war* perhaps feel that it was a far more important issue than *gender*.

Kishanji, "who was looked up to as an elder brother figure by the women cadres", was approached several times with complaints of sexual violence from members of the teams he was leading. "But at the end of the day, there would be attempts to somehow sort out the issues of sexual violence and gender discrimination, and not get bogged down by these things because we were all fighting the greater war against the police and the ruling establishment," said a member of the team close to the deceased Naxal politburo leader.

Maoist soldiers – from foot-soldiers to senior cadres – understand that when women and men are fighting this war, "there will be such problems", and that the real war is not about gender equality, but "a much *bigger* social problem". This is where the fight against gender discrimination stops, this is where it fails. Even the top leaders of this movement have not considered gender equality important enough to practise in their own set-up.

So a woman became an important leader by being a senior leader's wife rather than by fighting the war with valour and grit.

Excerpted with permission from Out Of War: Voices of Surrendered Maoists, Swati Sengupta, Speaking Tiger.