

cinema



* A still from *Chakravayuh*.

Naxalism rolls out of Prakash Jha's film

A deeply touching story of two friends, *Chakravayuh* analyses the movement with amazing details. **By Gautaman Bhaskaran**

In the early 1970s Kolkata – when it was still Calcutta with its languorous pace of life and rattling slow tramcars – a violent movement shook the once Second City of the Empire out of its inertia and slumber. In May 1967, Charu Mazumdar, Kanu Sanyal and others initiated an armed struggle in a non-descript village called Naxalbari, close to Kolkata, to redistribute land to the landless.

The movement of Mazumdar and his team, a group which broke away from the Communist Party of India-Marxists, soon spread to West Bengal's capital city. Although Mazumdar's brigade, calling itself as the Communist Party of India-Marxist-Leninist or popularly nicknamed Naxalites, succeeded in firing the imagination of not just the landless poor and the downtrodden, but also highly intelligent students, hundreds of whom gave up their education and promising futures to join the "war against class enemies"; the fight began to lose popular sympathy when innocent and

equally impoverished policemen were killed.

Eventually in the mid-1970s, the then Congress regime in West Bengal smashed Mazumdar's efforts to annihilate "class enemies". The administration reportedly used questionable means like torture chambers (where young students were allegedly subjected to gruesome methods of interrogation and punishment). However, the movement did not die out, but continued to simmer, and surfaced some years ago – as India's rich became richer and its poor poorer. In today's vitiated climate of loot and plunder, graft and corruption, the landless and the poor – especially the Adivasis who live in forests and sustain themselves on the produce found there – are not just unhappy, but terribly angry.

And why not, asks filmmaker Prakash Jha, whose latest, *Chakravayuh*, has just hit the screens. A deeply touching story of two friends, one a police officer and the other, a rolling stone, *Chakravayuh*

analyses Naxalism. Jha said in a recent interview published in the *Teheka* magazine that in a country where 100 families "controlled" 25 per cent of the GDP and a whopping 75 per cent of the population lived on a measly Rs30 a day, violence was only to be expected. Such gross unfairness was the primary cause of the Naxalite movement. Those who supported this were "talking about a classless society, equal opportunities for all...India's democracy has stopped respecting (and caring) for the poor, and so it is definitely not democracy".

It merely follows, as the movie has it, that no-gooder Kabir (Abhay Deol), who offers to be cop Adil Khan's "Mata Hari" by infiltrating the Naxalite ranks, soon finds his loyalty shifting and under strain. When he finds love among the Naxalites in a hardcore but extremely attractive woman, Jui (Anjali Patil), Kabir begins to sympathise with their war in Nandighat led by Rajan (Manoj Bajpayee).

Interestingly, half way through the film, it seemed to me that even the audience sympathy could be wavering for a class of people which, unlike Mazumdar and other founders of Naxalism, believed that power did not flow from the barrel of a gun. *Chakravayuh* ends up sympathising with the brutally beaten and tortured souls termed India's Poor. We see in the movie how a rich Indian industrialist (played by Kabir Bedi) from London manipulates through veiled and not-so-veiled coercion the powerless Adivasis.

Promising to build a factory that will employ hundreds of Adivasis, the business tycoon says that "poverty elimination" is his only motive. What he does not divulge is that the Adivasi land is rich in mineral wealth which will help Bedi's character to make an attractive killing. When Rajan screams that this is but sheer plunder, the impoverished masses rise in revolt.

Chakravayuh is the story of such

an uprising, a story that now echoes and re-echoes through several Indian States where the Adivasi territory, rich in natural resources, is under attack from land grabbers and multinationals out to reap huge profits.

Interestingly, Jha who says that the incidents and the characters in the film "have all been drawn from real life", has inserted a disclaimer – not a disclaimer – just before the start of the movie. He affirms that he does not want to lie and that all his films right from *Mrityudand* have been based on life around.

This contrasts with the trend today. We see as a movie begins its runs a message flashing: Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental. Anurag Kashyap's *Gangs of Wasseypur* (Part One and Two), quips a lawyer friend of mine who grew up in Dhanbad watching the dirty politics of coalfields, could easily be traced to some of the incidents and people of the place. But Kashyap did acknowledge that.

Sometimes, such similitudes can be too obvious. Mani Ratnam's *Guru* is based on the life and tussle and success of the late Indian industrialist, Dhirubhai Ambani, the man who made millions and whose life began on the yards of cheap cloth he sold by the wayside. But Mr Ratnam never admitted that his film was even inspired by Ambani.

Jha must be congratulated on his honesty in a society where the very term has been lost in a marsh of mess, a sludge of scandals and a crisis of corruption. The director hopes that his work will bring the issue of Naxalites out in the open. "I have no solution, but I can clearly see the problem brought about by distrust...I am scared because this distrust is growing at an enormous pace...," Jha averred.

Jha, who has helmed powerful movies like *Raajneeti* (a thrilling story of political conspiracies) and *Aarakshan* (about the seeder aspects of caste-base reservations in educational institutions), was not exactly treading a virgin path when he set his sight on *Chakravayuh*. Dibankar Banerjee's *Shanghai* (also with Abhay Deol, but as an upright Indian bureaucrat here who thwarts the plans of the local Chief Minister to facilitate land grab by a top multinational firm) had also harped on the pressing problem of land sharks.

However, Jha's *Chakravayuh* is by far the boldest of the lot, and his emphasis on the rapid spread of Naxalism and its frightening ability to destroy life and property could not have been more apt now with the ultra-radicals on a bloody war with the Indian State.

(Gautaman Bhaskaran, who grew up in the Calcutta of the 1960s and 1970s and saw the terrifying Naxalite War of Annihilation, may be contacted at gautamanb@hotmail.com)