

## **POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS OF YOUTH IN PUNJAB: A FIELD SURVEY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

A void contains nothing at all. Cultural, social, political, and economic aspects are often neglected despite their centrality to understanding historical events. This chapter examines how these elements interacted in a dynamic process to develop the political consciousness of the youth and mobilize them to join the Naxalite Movement in the context of Punjab between 1967 and 1975. There has also been an effort to disentangle the specific influences that helped mold young people's political consciousness and motivate them to take up arms in defiance of the state.

**KEYWORDS:** Political Consciousness, Youth, Punjab, Cultural, social, political, economic aspects, Naxalite Movement.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Naxalite Movement, which began seriously in West Bengal, India, in 1967, was exceptional in that it introduced the masses to the weapon of armed revolution rather than the traditional way of agitation through the parliamentary system. The Movement first appeared in Punjab with some regional quirks. Though the Movement's ideas started gaining popularity in the state in 1967, it didn't become a major mass movement until 1968, after a series of meetings conducted in many villages of Punjab. The Movement began to fall apart in 1969 as divisions opened up among the activists. By 1972, the Movement had all but died out due to the State's brutal persecution and internal strife. The Naxalite rebellion was put to rest when Indira Gandhi's central government declared an Emergency in 1975.

### **Participation**

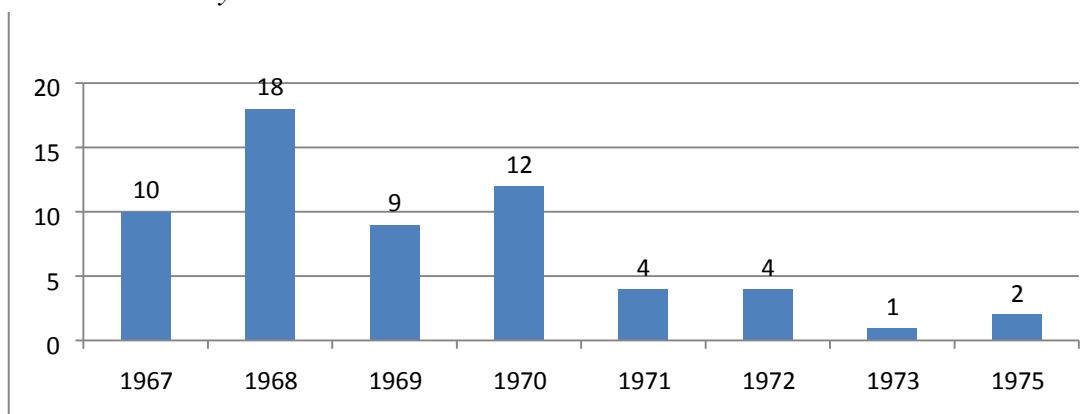
Sixty surviving members of the Movement who joined at various times between 1967 and 1975 were interviewed for this study (see Table 1 below). 16.67% of them joined in that year. The original members of the Naxalite Movement in Punjab were not greenhorns but rather longtime Communist Party of India members or sympathizers. They had already been sympathetic to Maoist ideas, therefore they stepped forward to help spread them and organize the masses. In addition, Judge notes that it was thanks to the efforts of such fervent communists that the Punjab Coordination Committee of Communist Revolutionaries (PCCCR) came into existence. Thirty percent of those surveyed became members of the Movement in 1968, helping to organize poor farmers and landless workers in support of the growing militant movement. Between the years 1969 and 1970, 15% and 20% of respondents joined the insurgency. During this time, Naxalite ideology shifted from one of mass mobilization to one of ruthless elimination of perceived class enemies. Similar percentages of responders (6.6% in 1971 and 6.6% in 1972) joined the Movement in each

year. Since the State cracked down so severely from 1973 to 1975, only a small percentage of people became involved in the armed conflict during that time (1.67 percent in 1973 and 3.33 percent in 1975).

**Table 1 Naxalite Movement Participation Rate**

Year	Number of respondents who joined	Percentage of total respondents
1967	10	16.6
1968	18	30.3
1969	9	15.0
1970	12	20.0
1971	4	6.6
1972	4	6.6
1973	1	1.6
1975	2	3.3
Total	60	100

Source: Field Survey.



**Figure 1 Naxalite Movement Participation Rate**

## Region

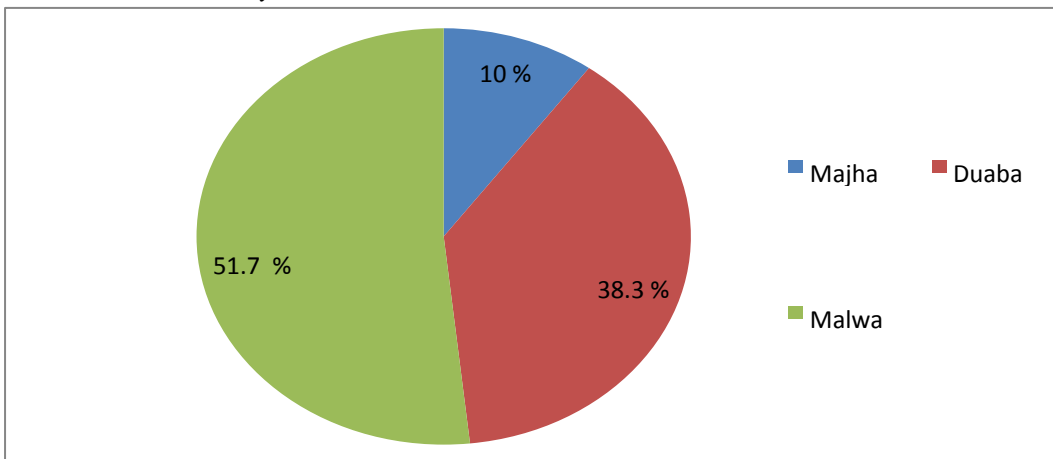
Understanding the social and cultural context in Punjab at the time is crucial for analyzing the elements that mobilized young people for the Movement. Each of the state's three major regions—Malwa, on the left bank of the Satluj River, Doaba in the valley between the Satluj and Beas Rivers, and Majha in the valley between the Beas and Ravi Rivers—has its own distinct cultural traditions. According to Table 2, which illustrates the distribution of respondents by region, 51.7% of the respondents are from Malwa. This is due to the fact that the region has historically had a communist heritage and, more importantly, is economically weaker than other regions of Punjab due to its load of relatively less productive land. Thus, young people from Malwa were the easiest to recruit for the Naxalite rebellion. Doaba, which likewise has a strong communist heritage and enthusiastically fought in the Indian freedom movement, accounted for the second-largest share of young responders (38.3 percent). Doaba was home to many of the Ghadar Party's independence fighters and had a

preexisting revolutionary spirit because of this. Majha only accounted for 10% of the total. Sikh religious values of peaceful cooperation and contentment led to a muted response to an armed anti-State revolutionary movement in Majha, a city with deep ties to the Sikh faith (most of the religion's shrines are located there).

**Table 2 Region-wise Distribution of Respondents**

Region	Number of respondents	Percentage of total respondents
Majha	6	10.0
Doaba	23	38.3
Malwa	31	51.7
Total	60	100

Source: Field Survey.



**Figure 2 Region-wise Distribution of Respondents**

### District

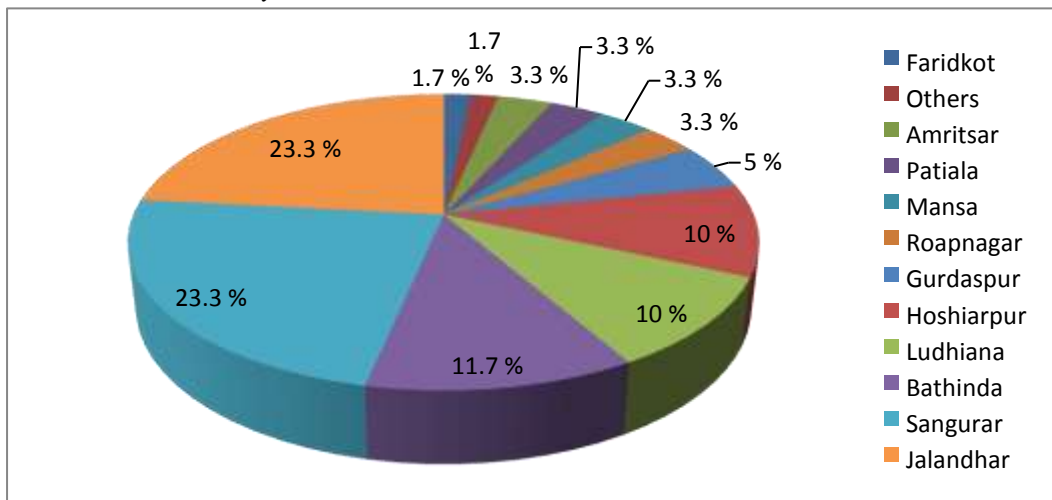
Most of those who participated in the interviews were from Malwa district. 23.3% of those who participated were from the Sangrur district, 11.8% from Bathinda, 10% from Ludhiana, 3.3% from Mansa, and 3.3% from Patiala. Of the total respondents in Majha, 3.3% were from the Amritsar district, while 5% were from the Gurdaspur district. 23.3% of the activists in the Doaba region were from the Jalandhar district, 10% were from the Hoshiarpur district, and 3.3% were from the Rupnagar district.

**Table 3 District-wise Distribution of Respondents**

Districts	Number of respondents	Percentage of total respondents
Amritsar	2	3.3
Patiala	2	3.3
Faridkot	1	1.7
Mansa	2	3.3
Bathinda	7	11.8

Sangrur	14	23.3
Rupnagar	2	3.3
Gurdaspur	3	5.0
Hoshiarpur	6	10.0
Ludhiana	6	10.0
Jalandhar	14	23.3
Others (Not Specified)	1	1.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Field Survey.



**Figure 3 District-wise Distribution of Respondents**

Source: Field Survey.

### Age

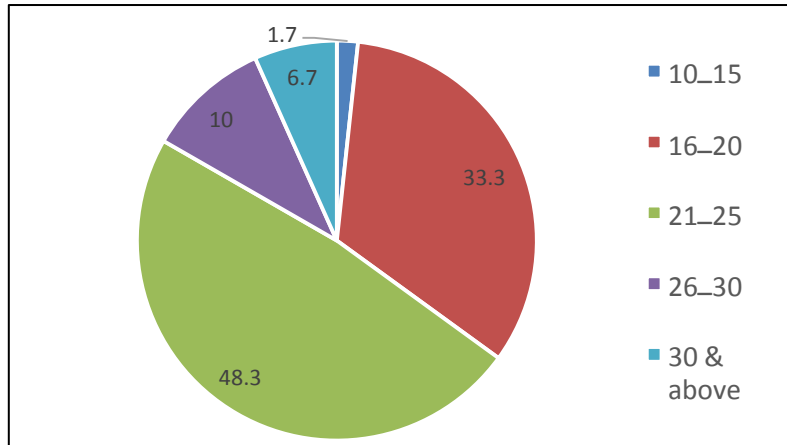
In Table 4, we see a breakdown of the respondents based on their age at the time they gave their information on joining the Naxalite Movement. 48.3% of those who filled out the survey were between the ages of 21 - 25. One-third of respondents were in the 16-20 age range, and 10% were in the 26-30 bracket. Only 6.7% of those polled were over 30 when they joined the revolution, and only 1.7% were between the ages of 10 and 14. According to the results, the average age of the respondents was 22.4% when they first heard about the Movement. Thus, the insurgent populace was overwhelmingly composed of young people, whose malleable brains were especially susceptible to the persuasive ideology of the Communist Movement. One possible explanation is that they are more physically fit, which is essential for any kind of military conflict.

**Table 4 Age-wise\*Distribution of Respondents**

Age	Number of respondents	Percentage of total respondents
10-15	1	1.7
16-20	20	33.3
21-25	29	48.3
26-30	6	10.0

30 and above	4	6.7
Total	60	100
Average age	22.4	

Source: Field Survey



**Figure 4 Age-wise\*Distribution of Respondents**

Source: Field Survey.

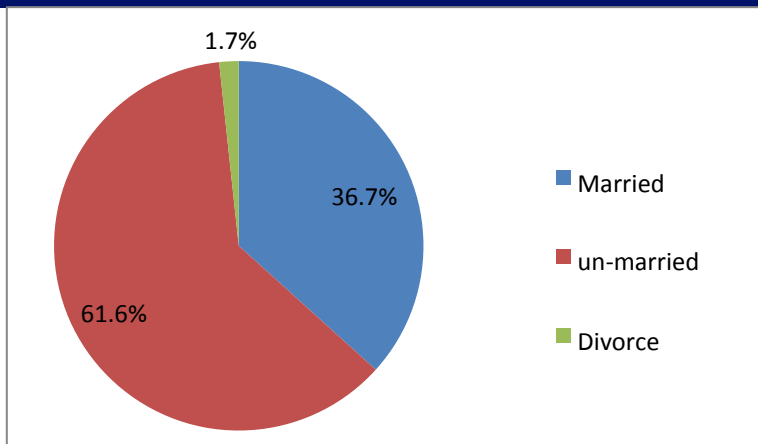
### Marital Status

Table 5 displays the results of a survey asking respondents about their marital status at the time they joined the revolution. When they joined the revolution, 61.6% of the respondents were not married. While only 36.7% of respondents were single, none of those who were married did so before joining the Movement.

**Table 5 Marital Status of Respondents**

Marital Status	Number of respondents	Percentage of total respondents
Married	22	36.7
Unmarried	37	61.6
Divorced	1	1.7
Total	60	100

Source: Field Survey, \*Status at the time of joining the Movement.



**Figure 5 Marital Status of Respondents**

Source: Field Survey.

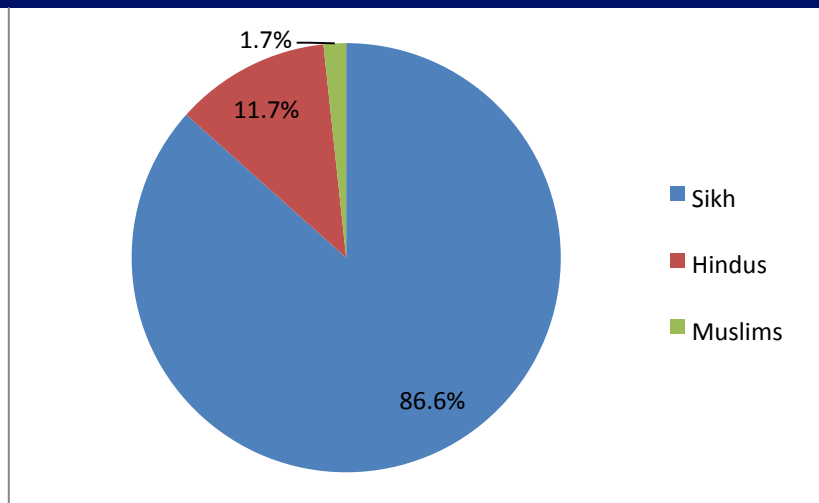
### Religion

Religion plays a significant part in developing a person's awareness, therefore it's necessary to take that into account while analyzing the responses. The breakdown of responders by faith is seen in Table 6. Since Sikhs make up the vast majority of Punjab's populace, they were the ones that volunteered the most information.—86.2%—practiced Sikhism, followed by 11.7 per cent Hindus. Islam was practiced by 1.7 per cent of the respondents.

**Table 6 Religion-wise Distribution of Respondents**

Religion	Number of respondents	Percentage of total respondents
Sikhism	52	86.6
Hinduism	7	11.7
Islam	1	1.7
Total	60	100

Source: Field Survey.



**Figure 6 Religion-wise Distribution of Respondents**

### Ideological Orientation

People's ideological leanings were another factor in their decision to join the rebellion. 23.3% of people polled believe that revolution is the only way for a society to attain its bigger goals. The Naxalite philosophy led 11.7% of the respondents, who were staunch believers in social justice and equity, to take up arms against the State. One respondent shared his time as a student at Khalsa College in Jalandhar, where he said the Punjab Students Union (PSU) was the only student organization that ever talked about things that mattered to the school and the community. After N.S. Dhesi took control, he joined the PSU, the largest Naxalite outfit at the time. He attended several indoctrination sessions at the PSU before deciding to join the Movement. They were pushed forward by the hope that the State could be reorganized and refocused to guarantee social justice and equality for all. According to one reply, two young people were killed at the Regal Theater event during the Moga unrest in 1972 over the very minor issue of ticket black market sales. He was an MBBS student at the time, studying at Amritsar. The student body responded with demonstrations to these killings. This experience inspired him as a student to become involved in the Naxalite Movement.

### Political Affiliation

One respondent said his father was an active Naxalite and that he came from a long line of left-wing political philosophy. As a result, he had a firm grasp of Naxalite ideology long before he joined the Movement. He was arrested as a student when he staged a protest against a Congress leader on campus. He was falsely accused and sent in jail. He took up insurrection after that. The survey found that 6.7% of respondents were involved in left-leaning political parties prior to joining the Movement.

### Role of Art Forms

All forms of artistic expression have the potential to live on in the minds of the masses. Thus, artistic expressions served the Movement well by molding the collective mentality of young people. One person recounted how his roommate in a university dorm had introduced him to Naxalite literature. Another respondent said he was encouraged to join the insurgency after reading the Punjabi novel Lahu di Loh in Class 10. He was moved by the novel's

depiction of the revolutionary youth of Punjab's selflessness. Another respondent mentioned how the fairs conducted in Khatkar Kalan hamlet in honor of Bhagat Singh persuaded him to join the Movement because of the plays and kavishiri performances put on by the Lok Sampark Vibhag.

### **Role of Religion**

An individual's story of coming to terms with poverty, prejudice, and injustice inspired him to work for social justice, equity, and the liberation of the downtrodden. His upbringing in the teachings of Sikhism drew him to the humanist ideal of the Naxalite Movement. His worldview was formed by the many holy luminaries in Sikh history who fought for equality and social justice. Despite his connections to communists, he was unimpressed by their doctrine until he discovered a kindred spirit in the Naxalite worldview. As of that point on, there was no turning back.

### **Other Factors**

One respondent said the communist's unassuming style, which typically consists of a kurta-pyjama and a cotton bag slung over the shoulder, had an impact on her. Then, when he learned more about their philosophy, he was inspired by their resistance to oppression, discrimination, and social injustice. Because of this, he decided to join the insurgency.

### **CONCLUSION**

As the first major social upheaval in post-Partition India to affect the people of Punjab, the Naxalite Movement had far-reaching and far-ranging consequences. As a result, the respondents' understandings of the Movement varied widely, depending on factors such as personal experience and socioeconomic and political context. According to the data, most people joined the Movement between 1967 and 1970, when the armed revolution was at its height in Punjab, before the insurgency was put down by a brutal crackdown by Central government forces. It was also found that the majority of respondents were locals of the districts of Bathinda, Sangrur, Ludhiana, Jalandhar, and Hoshiarpur in the Malwa and Doaba regions. The Malwa region, which has less productive soil and consequently poorer peasant families, has a long and storied history of class struggle for the freedom of the masses, giving rise to organizations like the Kirti Kisan Party, the Muzara Movement, and the Red Communists. The Punjabi village of Doaba became well-known for the high rate of emigration that characterizes its population. Since they were already familiar with Western ideologies like communism, they found the Naxalite Movement appealing. The Ghadar Movement had a noticeable impact on the local population, which helped the insurgency succeed there.

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