"PASSION TO FIND JUSTICE FOR FELLOW MEN": BLACKSTONE

Romen Basu's tenth novel, Blackstone (1909), deals with the armed peasant-uprising in Debra-Gopibalavpur in West Bengal under Naxalite or Maoist leadership twenty years ago. One of the author's favourite motifs is the past and the lessons it can impart to us. The novel traces the dramatic rise and fall of the Naxalite movement; its turbulence and its mellowing; its strength and weaknesses. The novel also draws the reader's attention forcefully to the 'angry conscience' of the oppressed peasants giving rise to the violent movement against exploitation and holds lessons for a just and equitable social order. In this sense, Blackstone and Romen Basu's eighth novel, Outcast, show great resemblances.

The story of Kalapathor forms the nucleus of the novel. Kalapathor's father, Karan, is harassed by the landlord, Gour Haidar, who demands his share of crop even when there are no rains. Karan gives up land but is still hounded by the landlord. Karan pays with his life for informing the police of the illegal felling of sal trees by Gour Haldar's men. Kalapathor becomes a vagabond. His sister, Futu, is raped and killed by the police. When the novel opens, he is twenty, living on hunting and 'a tormented man, unable to forget the injustices his family had suffered.' He is one young man among hundreds of landless peasants
in Gopibalavpur district "burning with passion to find justice for his fellow men." They repose faith in the Naxalite Party chairman in realizing their dream to have their own land. He gives a call to follow the peasants in Naxalbari to seize land from the 'jotdars' (landlords) by killing them. Kesab Ganguli, a fresher from university, is appointed local leader in Gopibalavpur. Kalapather is selected to kill Gour Haidar because the latter is the most corrupted and hated landlord. Kalapather becomes 'a blind follower' of Kesab. He carries out the task assigned to him. The murder of Gour Haidar is followed by the murder of another landlord, Ghanasham. The tempo of violence picks up when the students join the revolutionaries leading to the seize of a police station and murder of a police inspector. Egged on by this successful venture, Kesab plans 'Operation Midnight' to attack the district headquarters and to take the magistrate hostage. Meanwhile, Kesab makes a tactical mistake of holding a people's court to try and hang a landlord, Khodan. The large meeting of peasants on this occasion is surrounded by the police and more than two hundred 'revolutionaries' are massacred. This pre-emptive act of the police puts the Naxalite leaders on the defensive. Differences set in between the chairman and the secretary of the Naxalites over the future course of action. The

1. Romesh Basu, Blackstone (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1989), p. 3. All further references are to this edition and the page numbers are given parenthetically at the end of quotations.
ailing chairman is arrested by the police and hospitalised. The secretary announces to the Party meeting that the revolutionary movement should spread to the labourers in factories, other employees and women and calls to shun secrecy in party matters. The chairman dies. Kalapathor is arrested by the police in his attempt to kill a policeman but is released after an armed confrontation between the police and the frenzied mob. The movement in Gopibalavpur district is at crossroads because of the uncertainty in the future course of action. By the end of the novel, Kesab, Kalapathor, the students' group and the tribal leader sit together, sort out their differences and resolve to start a 'new struggle' with a renewed commitment to revolution and not to relent 'until we become the master of the nation's destiny.'

Blackstone has a well-knit but unintricate plot-construction. It has a good beginning and a growth of events in a set direction in the middle and a logical ending. The events are arranged in natural progression with no shuffle or overlapping. Kalapathor's joining the armed revolution forms the starting point of the plot. The plot reaches its take-off point with the killing spree taking landlords, policemen and students as victims. The massacre of two hundred peasants at a meeting by the police constitutes the crisis in the plot-structure. The chairman's arrest and death in the wake of differences over the future plan of the Party forms the denouement. The plot has a convincing end in the patching-up of differences of opinion by the leaders and planning a new direction.
The novel has a single plot woven round the chief character, Kalapathor. Only the story of Kalapathor's family is delineated in full-length. The love-affair of Kalapathor and Sabitri is not drawn at length. It is dropped halfway unlike the love-story of Sambal and Putki in Outcast although, like Sambal, Kalapathor refuses to get married as it would entangle him and take him away from the path of armed revolution.

There are four significant episodes in the novel concerning Karan, Futu, Rontu and Sombhu. Karan is Kalapathor's father. The sad tale of his suppression and murder and decimation of his family by Gour Halder acquires thematic significance as it has forced Kalapathor to take arms to seek justice. The episode of Kalapathor's sister, Futu, serves a similar purpose. As he hopes to get her married, she is raped and killed by the police on the charge of killing a man to save her honour. Further, the episodes of Rontu and Sombhu are intended to reveal how students were drawn into the armed revolution. Rontu, a barrister's son and a student of M.A. is drawn towards Naxalism by his cousin, Bishu. He tells his mother:

I have chosen to serve the poor, the desperately neglected, those who have no hope, those who need a chance to live. I will probably die with a bomb exploding in my hands, but I must try to help others. Your love has given me the courage to help other mothers make their sons and daughters strong (p. 27).
He takes money and a revolver from home and goes to Gopibalavpur with his cousin to join the landless peasants. His father's attempts to save him fail. Rontu is killed in a daring attempt to seize a police station. Sombhu's episode is even more shocking. He is the son of Amit Ghose, an intellectual in Communist Party, who lost his legs in a factional party fight. Sombhu learns his first lessons in communism from his father. Later he is attracted to the militant faction of the communists. It leads to differences between him and his father. Sombhu is so committed to his Party that he kills his helpless father at the behest of the Party leader and leaves home for good. Thus, the episodes are intended to endow the plot with depth and intensity.

Yet, the plot-construction seems to suffer, to some extent, from the fact that after the massacre of more than two hundred revolutionaries, the reactions or responses of the escaped revolutionaries are not given attention to. One tends to feel that the implications of the massacre are not explored adequately.

As regards Basu's art of characterisation, most of the characters are 'flat' characters. Kalapathor and Kesab Ganguli are the only 'round' characters. These two characters appear throughout the novel and register convincing growth. However, the fictional focus is more on the character of Kalapathor. It is profitable to study the character of Kalapathor by juxtaposing him with Sambal of the novel, Outcast. First, while Sambal is the son of a corpse-burner and hence treated as an untouchable, Kalapathor
is the son of a poor sharecropper of Santhal tribe. Second, in the case of Sambal, we witness economic oppression and humiliation on account of untouchability whereas in Kalapathor's case, it is predominantly economic oppression. Third, both Sambal and Kalapathor make their revenge motive a part of the larger ambition of emancipating the class of people they belong to. Thus, Sambal wants to kill the landlord, Paramesh Ganguli, and also achieve the privilege of temple-entry to all the untouchables. Similarly, Kalapathor wants to kill Gour Haldar and also emancipate the poor sharecroppers from the exploitation of the landlords and provide land to them. While Sambal fails to kill his enemy, Kalapathor succeeds.

Fourth, both Sambal and Kalapathor are uneducated. They cling to the Communist leaders, Manmatha and Kesab Ganguli respectively. But unlike Sambal, Kalapathor becomes a man Friday to Kesab. Kesab tells of him: "He is the most courageous, loyal and trustworthy follower I have." (p. 10). He makes Kalapathor his second-in-command. As a devoted worker, he blindly carries out all the work that is assigned to him. Apart from killing Gour Haldar, he shoots the police inspector to death while seizing the police station. He maintains discipline among the students and judges their 'suitability for front-line work.' He helps Kesab in naming and planning 'Operation Midnight' "to demonstrate to the police and the jothdars that the people no longer feared to protest against unjust landowners." (p. 71). But his major contribution to the Party lies in acting as a catalyst among the power groups in
the Party. He removes dissidence among the students against Kesab when the latter wavers in planning the future course of action for the Party. He plays a vital role in bringing back the expelled tribal leader back to the revolutionary movement and in uniting him with Kesab. While his allegiance to Kesab is total, he also has high regard for the students for their sacrifice and intellectual strength. His advice to the tribal leader not to disappoint them speaks of his sagacity and impartiality:

The spirit of the Calcutta students must be saved. The people whose suffering they want to remove can be awakened any time at the call of a leader. It will be much more difficult to bring back the disenchanted youth. And what about the sacrifice of those parents who also had dreams that some day their sons and daughters would become magistrates, doctors or high functionaries in the government? .... More than half our students come from families like that. Those who were shot or struck dead by lathis, they were the real heroes. The surviving comrades are asking why? (p. 146).

Agreeing with Kalapathor, the tribal leader says:

You are right. I must do whatever it takes to save their hopes. We can't let these intellectuals turn into frustrated misfits.

(pp. 146-147)

Kalapathor also pleads with the tribal leader to support Kesab:
Dada, please join your forces with Comrade Kesab against the secretary's group. You believe the late chairman was the right thinker for the Party, don't you? He was the man who believed this country's only hope was to take power through armed revolution. I believe Comrade Kesab is the man who can trust to follow that line. (pp. 138-139).

The tribal leader expresses his willingness to meet Kesab to sort out differences and work for the Party. On the other hand, Kalapathor successfully persuades Kesab to heal the Party's break with the tribal leader. He convinces Kesab about the good work done by the tribal leader and makes him agree to meet the tribal leader.

It is here that Kalapathor excels Sambal as a revolutionary. While Sambal refuses to see from the point of view of others in a frenzy of emotion, Kalapathor is willing to listen to others and is not dogmatic. Sambal refuses to see reason in Manmatha's plan of action while Kalapathor wins Kesab's confidence even when he is critical of some of Kesab's ways. For instance, he tells Mukul that Kesab always puts him on guard and so it is difficult to deal with him. He says:

He is up there, and I am down here ... comrades or not, I can never forget that he is a brahmin and I am a santhal. Besides, his intellect scares me -- he can always convince me with his logic, even when my heart tells me he is wrong. (p. 150).
Kalapathor "could never muster the courage to contradict his mentor." (p. 150). Further, while Sambal pushes himself to suicidal form of violent methods and reaches a point of no-return, Kalapathor evolves into a leader. At the end, he emerges as one of the trio of the revolutionary forces, the others being Kesab and students on the one hand and the tribal leader on the other. Kesab also takes note of Kalapathor's popularity especially among the peasants after he is saved by them from the police custody:

Kesab had not meant to question Kalapathor's popularity. His own leadership was intellectual and could be lost any time it went against the sentiment of the people. Kalapathor was one of them, they cared for his life more than for their own. (p. 98).

Both Sambal and Kalapathor are illiterate. A part of Kalapathor's evolution as a leader is his desire to become a literate so that he can read and understand for himself the Marxist theory and whether the movement is on the right lines. He tells Sabitri:

My world was not very different from yours, but I have to learn something new everyday. Some say that our resolution is according to the path followed by China, others disagree. Wish I could read, then perhaps I could judge for myself who is right. (p. 101).

Kalapathor remembers one of Sambal in another respect. While Sambal's love for Putki looks plausible and convincing, Kalapathor's love for Sabitri, a landlord's daughter, is
unconvincing and ironical. Like Sambal, he refuses to get married. Like Sambal, he tells Sabitri not to try to reform him or to think of love between them:

I don't want you to get hurt by being close to me. My life will never change. I shall die a revolutionary, even if there is no Party, no leader. My sister's death will always remind me that there are too many helpless people who need my protection .... In this cruel world you take what you can, or lose in the battle. Understanding weakens one's power. Love has no place where victory is the only goal. If you want to know if I care for you, yes, I do. That is my reason for not wanting you to get hurt. So stop trying to reform me. (p. 102).

Kesab Ganguli, the mentor of Kalapathor, is the next important character in the novel. He represents the intellectual dimension of the Naxalite movement and acts as the spokesman of the chairman's line of thinking in the Party. The author also makes a deft use of the character to bring out the strength and weaknesses of the movement. Even as a student "he became convinced that Marxism was the only answer for millions of starving Indians." (p. 6). He believed that the masses should be made to understand that their poverty was due to their exploitation by the rich. His firm conviction was that "if Mao could do it for his people in China, so could a real Marxist leader in India." (p. 6). As he tours the entire Gopibalavpur district, he finds hundreds of restive peasants ready to fight against the jothdars. The chairman tells the peasants: "Like me, Kesab knows power can be taken from the rulers only by force." (p. 5).
Kesab gets a hit list prepared with names of jothdars who possess more than fifty acres of land and generates a killing spree with Gour Haldar as the first victim. He explains to his followers that "the overall strategy was not for unnecessary killing and that the aim of the Party was to remove the jothdars from the village, to take their land, harvest the crops and distribute them to the peasants through an organized committee." (p. 39). However, the series of murders raise a controversy within the Party. The Party secretary and a few others try to impress upon him that it is not the right way to get people's support.

The people's support will only come when they are revolutionaries with a true understanding of the movement. Indiscriminate killings only send a message of terror to the villagers. You'll find your supporters will turn against the Party at the flick of a match if they feel the cause is in selfish interests. (p. 45).

Kesab asserts his line of thinking:

I believe in what our chairman believes. We destroy the enemy -- the police and the paramilitary forces. We take over the jothdars' land by force and give it to our people ... After all, any plan to search out and kill the enemy has to be done without too much thought for the consequences. (pp. 45-46).

He feels that "the Party secretary and his faction were intriguing against the chairman to change the direction of Party policy." (p. 46). He later tells Kalapathor:
How do you convince these theoreticians that revolutions don't happen by talks and more talks? There is only one way to change. Pick up anything strong that kills and with it hit the enemy. When the masses see that the more prosperous are ready to die for the cause of the poor, they will do the same. (p. 48).

In his obsession with armed attack, Kesab seems to overestimate his power and simultaneously underestimate the State power. He tells the Party men:

We have enough arms and abundant man power. Don't you think killing twenty jotdhars and the inspector shows we have enough spirit to fight until victory is ours?.... My men are totally loyal. I keep telling you, you don't need to be afraid. Their morale has not been affected by the last police raids or the casualties suffered by us. (p. 45).

He says that he cannot stop the movement halfway.

How do you think I can keep my men together if we don't go on with our plans? Do you think they will sit still forever if we have no more land to distribute? .... No, for me, there is no alternative but to fight to the end. (p. 46).

Though the 'Operation Midnight' proves abortive, it does not deter the chairman and Kesab. The Party secretary and Kesab clash in their plans for the Party in future. The secretary tells Kesab to 'set aside the idea of confrontation for the time being' and use the students' energy to join serious grassroots work. He
feels that they should acquire better arms to face the police. He is convinced that "hit-and-run-terrorism would destroy the people's confidence with every defeat they encountered." (p. 75). Kesab fails to see sense in the secretary's argument. He says that the secretary has "chosen the wrong example to suggest the people are demoralized." (p. 74). He echoes his old argument:

Our force is just as strong as before, and we can hold our own until the remaining landowners are finished off and driven out of the territory. Once all the captured land is distributed among the peasants, we will be in a position to establish our own order, no police or military will be able to break us. (p. 95).

But, later on, Kesab relents after he is advised by his trusted comrades and the chairman's supporters in Calcutta to 'exercise restraint' and 'to heal his differences with the secretary' because "controversy only plays into the hands of our enemies." (p. 97). Back in Gopibalavpur, he tells his followers:

The new policy is no more 'hit-and-run'; we must, therefore, consolidate what we have gained. (p. 98).

He says that he is not sure to 'continue the policy of the late chairman without the help of the Calcutta group." (p. 108). He is caught in a conflict and dilemma. The students feel that "Kesab's indecision and his refusal to answer questions presented the first crack in the solidarity of their group." (p. 110). Even his
trusted lieutenant Kalapathor is kept in dark. Kalapathor tells the tribal leader:

If only Comrade Kesab would explain his reasons openly for stopping the attacks, I am sure most of our people would be satisfied. His stubborn refusal is part of the problem. Everyone, too, knows of his differences with the secretary, but no one knows if he wants to break away from the Party and carry the torch of our departed chairman. Our last defeat was a shattering blow, but our men and women are ready to go on fighting, no matter what sacrifices it takes.

(p. 136)

But soon Kesab rises to their expectations. He "comes to accept that openness, at least with his commanders, was the only answer." (p. 120). He recognises his setbacks. He admits that he is "partly responsible for wanting to take only hot heads with me, once the division started." (p. 159). He also admits that it was "a mistake to punish the immediate commanders for raising questions." (p. 159). He chalks out the future course of action, independent of the central leadership, taking into confidence Kalapathor, the tribal leader and the students. He declares:

The days of fighting are not over, we will not relent until we become the master of nation's destiny. (p. 160).

Thus, by the end of the novel, the character of Kesab shows signs of change and development. He is mellowed by the
events such as the chairman's death and domination of moderates in the central leadership but adapts himself to the changing circumstances, recognises his setbacks, learns to see realities and to accept the point of view of others thereby making himself a more acceptable leader.

As a part of his narrative technique, Romen Basu makes a predominant use of third-person point of view and also a judicious use of the devices of flashback technique, memory digression and probing the thoughts of characters. A simultaneous use of these devices helps the novelist in presenting the characters and events in a more forceful and convincing manner. For instance, in chapter one, the author narrates the story of Kalapathor's father in a flashback using third-person point of view. In course of it he writes:

Kalapathor was never to forget what happened after Jasoda came home. (p. 1).

and goes on to present the humiliation of his parents and looting the house using Kalapathor as the focal point. Similarly, when Mukul refers to Futu, the author makes use of Kalapathor's character as the medium to narrate her tragic story in a flashback. In another instance, as Sabitri and Karuna are discussing the kidnapping of Kalapathor by the police, the author freezes the narration to present the events leading to the kidnap in flashback. After this, the narration is again brought to the present.
The author makes a sparing use of the device of memory digression in this novel. For example, as Kalapathor is engrossed in happy thoughts of his sister in course of his conversation with Mukul, the author narrates as a piece of his memory how he brought a young man to his house with a view to get his sister married to him. The same device is used to record Kesab's memories of the agony of peasants as he is walking on the parched land just by the side of the river:

He remembered bitter scenes of village workers carried away by force and whipped for questioning starvation wages for twelve hours of work. (p. 6).

Similarly, when the tribal leader holds Kalapathor's wrist, the latter remembers of his first meeting with him:

The firm grip reminded Kalapathor how, long ago, he'd come to the leader for help when his father had been killed ... Kalapathor had asked him for a revolver to kill Gour Haldar. "You have never used a gun before," the leader had said. Why do you wish to take a chance on missing a shot? With that strong arm you could throw a spear that would kill a buffalo. (p. 134).

The author makes an effective use of the device of probing of thoughts in the case of the two characters — Kalapathor and Kesab. This device is similar to memory digression in freezing the external action for a moment and tracing the thoughts of a character's nature and attitude or
an incident more understandable or to give a relevant piece of information. The author uses the device to reveal Kesab's thoughts when he goes to different, trusted comrades in Calcutta after his differences with the secretary to know whether they still support the chairman:

Did they now support the secretary's view? Were they prepared to abandon the chairman's vision of victory through confrontation, armed or unarmed? (p. 9).

Similarly, Kesab's thoughts about the contribution of students to the armed struggle are probed:

Kesab's face showed nothing, but he was painfully aware of his responsibility to the students. He knew well that each one of them was a potential card-carrying member of the Party. They had the discipline and theoretical knowledge essential to the success of the movement. Most important of all, they were the resolute front-line fighters, dedicated to the armed struggle, the type of idealistic followers the Party needed. (p. 99).

Later, as Kalapathor is waiting for Kesab at the cave, he thinks about the change and dilemma that he has noticed in Kesab of late:

Why didn't Kesab come? Why didn't he confide in him, as he'd done in his past? He was sure Kesab was a fighter to the end. Surely he was not content to follow the Party's new directives?

(p 100)
The author probes Kalapathor's thoughts about Sabitri and her suggestion of non-violent methods:

He often wondered why she loved him, knowing how she hated violence. He smiled, thinking of her idea that if all the villagers refused to cultivate the land, the jothdars would have to give in to them. "If the peasants' will not to cooperate is as strong as their will to kill, that should work, don't you think?" She'd asked him. The barking of a street dog broke into his thoughts. (p. 122).

Again, as Kalapathor goes through green paddy fields to meet the tribal leader, the author peeps into his thoughts about the future of armed revolution and about Kesab's leadership by means of this device:

How could the peasants give up all they had fought for and face poverty again? Even the most sincere leaders cannot feel the anxiety of the starving, he reflected. How could he convince Kesab that they must go on with the struggle? Much though he admired and loved him, Kalapathor recognized that Kesab was a revolutionary only intellectually. Although he was their leader, he had taken no lives himself, none of his own family had been killed. So many Kalapathor loved had been taken away most cruelly. He could never imagine giving up the struggle. (p. 132).

What does the novel say about Naxalism as a movement? Significantly, the novel does not aim at telling whether the Naxalite
movement is right or wrong. Commenting on this aspect, a reviewer says:

Romen Basu has evoked the spirit of those stirring movements at the height of the Naxalite movement between 1969-71. But it is romantic rather than political evocation. As such it will take its place in the lists of historical fiction perhaps, but it lacks the critical discrimination, even in fictionalized terms, that would have subjected the Naxalite 'reaction' to harder analysis or testing. This disappoints in a novel about such a subject written 20 years after the event.

But, as the blurb says, the author 'seeks to go beyond the images of violence that dominated the news media of the period to the human hurt and need behind it.' The author gives fictional treatment to the emergence of armed revolution to wipe out oppression, the setbacks faced and overcome by the revolution and the attempts to revive the revolution with a view to winning political power. The author remains objective in presenting several viewpoints towards the movement. For instance, there are two divergent views within the leadership held by the chairman, Kesab and Kalapathor on the one hand and the secretary on the other as to how to carry on the movement. Further, there is sacrifice and fierce idealism on the part of some student members and there are

some students who "found no reason to stay on if Comrade Kesab had decided to withdraw from the struggle." (p. 110). In the opposite camp, there are feudal landlords like Gour Haldar, Ghanasham and Khodan who, obviously, are the enemies of the movement. The author also provides the viewpoint of the bureaucrat—parents through Rontu's father, Rippen, and the viewpoint of the government through the home minister, Harish. Harish looks at the Naxalite movement as a law and order problem and sees suppression as the only solution. He asks Rippen:

What are we supposed to do when they throw bombs at our police and kill innocent people from sheer hatred? (p. 32).

But Rippen sees nothing wrong in the idea of countering injustice and tyranny. He tells Harish:

Only the strongest have the courage to stand up to injustice and tyranny, I suppose .... These are innocent boys, misguided perhaps, but they are not hardened terrorists .... Look, I don't like terrorists any more than the next person, but these boys are searching for some answers. (pp. 31-32).

Rippen finds fault with the choice of terrorism as the only means in spite of their best intentions of heralding a just social order. He further says:

Rontu is my only son, I don't want to lose him. I am not against him going into politics, but we parents have a duty to reason with our sons that terrorism is meaningless. Obviously I have not
succeeded in convincing him of that. He tells me they are following Mao's path. These simple-minded boys don't understand how far they are from it. The Naxalite leaders have created a middleclass terrorist den in Calcutta, and the government's answer is to finish them off. One day your Ministry will wake up to realize that it is not the answer. (p. 32).

Amit Ghose, a communist, holds a similar view:

He stuck to his belief that the Naxalite brand of communism was the sure road to disaster that would lead to ever greater divisions within the leftist movement. He tried to make Sombhu realize that without a strong theoretical base, no party could pursue a consistent policy. To start a party was easy, he would say, but after the party was formed it was hard to evolve and grow without sustained intellectual support. (p. 77)

Thus, Romen Basu remains objective in presenting several reactions to the Naxalite Party or movement and leaves it for the reader to make an assessment of the movement for himself.

However, the author indirectly points out the strength and weaknesses of the movement. Its main strength is its band of highly motivated and disciplined people who can achieve quick, dramatic results. Its chief weakness lies in using indiscriminate violence as the means to achieve their end of social justice. It makes confrontation an 'inevitable process' and, killing the people in the hit list 'only increased their thirst for blood.' It is like riding a tiger and, as Kesab admits, 'there is no alternative but to fight to the end.' It has unleashed a reign of terror:
Everyone in Jhargram seemed to be without fear of the police .... It seemed to be an accepted fact that if a man owned land, however small an acreage, he was an enemy of the people. Many landowners had abandoned homes built by their forefathers to move to safer areas, Das and Mukul were told. (p. 61).

Similarly, the murder of Amit Ghose leads to factional killings within the Communist Party in Calcutta which weakens the Party as a whole:

The entire city was stricken with terror by the killings of the intellectuals and opposition party leaders. It caused the police no worry. They were not concerned about how afraid citizens were of the plague of violence. (p. 81).

Secrecy is another handicap which erodes the faith of trusted followers in the Party. The secretary pleads to shun secrecy:

Secrecy and exclusivity have been like a curse on our movement. We could have moved forward much faster and with greater cohesion if everyone had been involved. (p. 88)

Further, the armed movement is relied on a single leader and hence when the leader is captured, it has led to a clash of ideologies and divisions in the Party. Thus, Romen Basu presents the strong and the weak points of the Naxalite movement through the characters and events in the novel.

Blackstone is essentially a novel of social realism. Social realism is "the acute awareness of the social forces that surround the individual, their power to influence the lives of men and women and the overall interaction of individual and society." 3 Being a

topical novel, Blackstone abounds in realism not only in the choice of the theme but also in rendering the theme in fictional terms. The author succeeds in giving the reader the illusion of actual experience. The physical location of a district in West Bengal which is the seat of Naxalite movement and the historical time add verisimilitude to the novel.

Further, secrecy characterizes the Naxalite activities and Romen Basu captures the element of secrecy in events such as Mukul and Das going to meet Comrade Saral in the latter's labyrinthine room at Jhargram. The residence of Kesab chosen by Kalapathor is itself a secret to others. The arrest of the Party chairman by the police is a typical chase of its kind. The secret preparation of arms under the tribal leader's command also provides the element of surprise to the novel. Kalapathor's release from the police by the mob of peasants, the killings of Gour Haidar and Ghanasham, the seize of police station by the Naxalities, the people's court held by kesab followed by Khodan's hanging to death, the fake encounters announced by the police, Kalapathor's daring action of setting Sabitri free from her brother's kidnap are all sketched in dramatic realism.

But, Romen Basu does not appear to have shown an equal keenness for realism in the choice of language used by several characters in the novel. For instance, the language used by a tribal peasant when he speaks to the Congress Party secretary after Gour Haldar's murder is not as it should be. It looks polished:
Lawless men will now become the law and I call it just. How can the law be your enemy when you kill to punish? But even Gour Haldar's death will not be sufficient warning to other jothdars. It is too late. (p. 18).

Dear brother, let someone speak to the pathetic representative of the government. I have no fear. I am the voice of angry conscience. Let me speak. (p. 19).

Kalapathor is an illiterate tribal. But, at times, his language looks unsuited to his upbringing. Referring to Kesab, he says:

... his intellect scares me -- he can always convince me with his logic, even when my heart tells me he is wrong. (p. 150).

Barring such exceptions, the author uses language in keeping with the nature of characters. This is particularly true in the case of the educated, elite characters in the novel. For instance, the chairman's voice is persuasive and inciting and suits the purpose as he speaks to the tribal peasants:

"Every inch of the land where you stand, toil and sleep is yours." he cried out. "You and your forefathers have lived and died here. Even from buying firewood for your parents' cremation, the moneylender has made huge profits. If you are willing to make sacrifices to remove these vampires from your land, you will sleep without fear of lathials and arsonists."(p.4)
Further, Kesab's speech to the comrades in chapter 16 supporting the chairman is a fine piece of oratory matched by the secretary's speech to the comrades in chapter 13 pleading for a change in the Party's methods of action.

In terms of technique, an outstanding feature of the novel is that "the story is unfolded through those who were in, or affected by, the Naxalite movement—poor peasants, cruel landlords, police personnel, bright university students with vision of a new India, and intellectuals.... This lends authenticity, intensity and depth to the novel." 4

Conflict is an important part of the author's technique in the novel. Conflict is presented at several levels in the novel. At the surface level, there is conflict between the landless peasants and the oppressive landlords. There is also conflict between the moderate and the extremist factions of the communists represented by Amit Ghose and his son Sombhu respectively leading to the 'plague of violence' in the Calcutta city. Similarly, there is conflict between the two factions of Naxalites represented by the chairman and the secretary. Further, as a reviewer says, the conflict or "the tension between loyalty to the Party, the blind discipline demanded by it, and the more-down-to-earth instincts of the peasants and the tribals, who realise from their own experience that "loyalty" and "discipline" cannot be blind, is nicely drawn." 5

The author uses contrast as a device to juxtapose the three kinds of reactions, namely, that of the intellectual students, that of the local Party leadership represented by Kesab and the peasants represented by Kalapathor, and that of the tribal leader and their followers to the crisis generated by the conflicting stances over the future course of the Naxalite Party.

Romen Basu sees a pattern in contemporary and recent events. This requires historical sense and an 'awareness of the present in the past.' The author achieves considerable success in this regard. In this connection, a reviewer says:

The writer rises above regional frontiers and effects a viable synthesis between the temporal and the universal. Although the movement had a well-defined ideology and set tenets, Blackstone embodies a plausible pattern and rhythm of life in artistic terms.6

The title of the novel, Blackstone, appears to be an English translation of the Bangali name of the protagonist in the novel, Kalapathor. This, perhaps, suggests the nature of the heart of an innocent tribal changed into a burnt mass of stone by the cruelty of man to man. He often commits murders, assaults, kidnappings and all other criminal activities making the novel 'a

proFoundly sad book.' The author strikes a note of affirmation of life despite the sadness of the events in the novel. A reviewer says:

After reading Blackstone, one feels that this world may be a sad and sorry place, but it is not a hopeless place, for it is a place where truth must be learnt and should be filled with forgiveness, love and forbearance.7

The reviewer is also of the view that Blackstone "shows Romen Basu at his best as an artist. In it the reader will find perfect blending of amazingly various qualities and skills that made him one of the best known Indian novelists."8

8. Ibid.