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For an Anthropological Theory of Praxis
Dystopic Utopia in Indian Maoism and the rise of the Hindu Right

Abstract

Across the globe, we are seeing a popular shift of appeal from a liberal-humanitarian imagination of the world, or even a communist-socialist ideal, to one that is more conservative and often called 'right-wing populist'. In the ethnographic context analysed here, a utopian movement for revolutionary social change, led by Marx-Lenin and Mao inspired Naxalite guerrillas, that once had a wide appeal in parts of India, is superseded by a more conservative utopian imagination of Hindutva forces. In exploring the Indian Maoist case, I suggest that dystopia is embedded within utopia. If those engaged in utopian social transformation seek to challenge prevailing ideology to transform people's actions, it is equally possible for their utopian imagination to retreat into ritual that not only bears little relevance to most people but may also be potentially harmful and pave the way for other ideals to become prevalent. In analyzing this Indian case, the paper suggests that we develop an anthropological theory of praxis, one that deals not only with how imaginations to change the world become realized in practice, but also accounts for multiple competing imaginations and how and why some become prevalent over others in daily life, in a dialectical process of reflection and action.

Beyond the stasis of 'dark' and 'good' anthropology

The argument I present emerges from a dissatisfaction with the stasis in anthropology in thinking through the relationship between multiple, often competing, imaginations of the world and how people act in it. Despite some of the greatest minds of our discipline being concerned with ideology and action, idealism and materialism, transcendence and transaction, 'good' and 'dark' anthropology, stasis has generally guided the theoretical apparatus available to us. It is time, I argue here, that we develop an anthropological theory of praxis, one that deals not only with how imaginations to change the world become realized in practice but also accounts for multiple competing imaginations and how and why some become prevalent over others in daily life, in a dialectical process of reflection and action. This article is a foot in that door.

This project has always been important but in recent times has gained new salience because of the need to understand some fundamental transformations in many places. Namely, a popular shift of appeal from a liberal-humanitarian imagination of the world, or even a communist-socialist ideal, to one that is more conservative. The rise of Trump in the US, the BREXIT vote, the election of Bolsonaro in Brazil, or the retrenchment of power of Modi in India are potent examples. Such imaginations are often popularly referred to as 'right-wing populist', in part to differentiate them from 'left-wing' versions, ranging from Nardoniks to Chavistas and Masistas. Why do some utopian imaginations gain prevalence (over others) in people's actions to become intimately embedded in daily life? This is a question that anthropology should be able to answer but one that we mainly ignore.

The source of my discontent with anthropological theorising comes from trying to find tools within the discipline to understand both the rise and demise of a utopian revolutionary context that I observed as an ethnographer, a participant observer, living in the hilly forests of eastern India among its tribal or indigenous people, referred to by the state as its 'Scheduled Tribes' and more popularly called its 'Adivasis'. This is the Maoist-inspired Naxalite guerrilla insurgency – itself dependent on a high theory of social transformation, which I will argue became anachronistic. What concerns me is why this utopian movement for revolutionary change once spread in parts of the subcontinent but also why it diminished, became dystopian, and the contrast with a conservative utopian imagination of Hindutva forces which has spread in its shadows. Whereas the imagination embedded in the Maoist project was emancipatory transformation for an egalitarian communist society, that of Hindutva forces was the creation of a Hindu majoritarian state and polity. Or to put it another way, in relation to the forests where I was based, if the Maoists saw the Adivasis as 'primitive communists' to be transformed to 'real communists', the Hindutva forces saw the Adivasis as 'backward Hindus' to be transformed into 'proper Hindus'.

In what follows below, I follow the distinction between ideology and utopia in the way it is drawn out by Karl Mannheim (2012[1929]), though, as he notes, they are always difficult to distinguish (2012: 176). Ideology, following Mannheim, is a collective mode of thought about a shared social reality which

hides conditions and experiences that would question that conception of the world. It is usually perpetuated by dominant groups, enabling them to secure their place in the social order. Utopian thinking, in contrast, following Mannheim, seeks to challenge the current social order and is invested in collective transformation of society, though also does not see society as it exists. It often emanates from those who are oppressed, at the margins of society, or are their champions. For Mannheim, utopian thinking included not only that of millenarian Anabaptists, liberal humanitarian ideas and socialist-communist ones, but also more conservative ideas. If ideology preserves the current social order, utopianism seeks to shatter it.

We can assume then that if successful, a utopian movement would cease to be utopian and bring about a transformation in both collectively held ideology, and individual and collective action. In this sense both the Maoist and the Hindutva imagination of the world that I deal with here are utopian for they have not yet become embedded as ideology, a new way of conceiving the world that is so intimately embedded in people's ideas and actions that it has become common-sense which cannot easily be challenged. Although, as I will show, Maoism became a dystopic utopia and the spread of the Hindutva utopian imagination may, in the years to come, embed itself as ideology among the Adivasis. I thus argue that one possibility of what changes when a utopia is challenged, before it settles in as ideology, is that it becomes dystopia.

I draw on four and a half years of ethnographic field research as a participant observer living among Adivasis in two different field sites in the state of Jharkhand, but also on comparative insights travelling in the state of Bihar and Chhattisgarh, as well as in Nepal. My last extended stay in Jharkhand, between 2008-2010, was based in the Adivasi dominated villages of one of the then two guerrilla strongholds of Maoist insurgents. At the time the Indian security forces would not dare venture into those forested hills venture unless they were in an army of 500 or more. They would make the ascent only every three weeks or so and usually return the same day, only sometimes camping overnight in the local school of health centre for a night or two. They would climb single file on foot, separate from their battle ships, as they feared the manually triggered land mines that the Maoists laid under the dirt roads to blow up large vehicles (but could not target those who were walking). During that year and a half, I was able to experience not only life in the Adivasi villages but also in the guerrilla armies, eventually marching with a guerrilla platoon for seven nights across 250 kilometres from one part of the country to the next, a journey which frames my ethnography of the Indian Maoists in my book *Nightmarch* (Shah 2018). Since I left those forests, counterinsurgency operations escalated further and the security forces set up their permanent barracks within those strongholds, including in the village where I lived, crushing and displacing the Maoists. The Adivasi villages in those areas increasingly became susceptible to the Hindutva forces which had spread in neighbouring areas (and which the Maoists had earlier tried to keep out of their strongholds). Though I do not dwell at length on these Hindu majoritarian forces, I provide general reflections on their spread drawing on the scholarship of others as well as my own fieldwork in another fieldsite outside the guerrilla strongholds which I have known intimately since

conducting doctoral research there between 1999-2002 and where, over the years, they had an increasing appeal among the Adivasis.

My overall context may appear 'extreme', in that it is not only concerned with two radically different imaginations of the world but also two seemingly polar projects – an extreme 'left' one, and an extreme 'right' one. (Of course, I should note that the vocabulary of 'right' and 'left' bears little relevance to most people on the ground who simply don't see the world in terms of these binaries). Yet I believe that this context carries the seeds to understand the situation that many people in the world find themselves in today, that are beyond the remote forests where I was based, and perhaps as relevant to understanding the imaginations and actions of those who, for instance, voted for Brexit in the UK. Does current anthropological theory enable us to understand this cross-cultural process of transformation at this juncture of time and space?

In a wide-ranging review of the discipline, Sherry Ortner (2016) argues that theory in anthropology since the 1980s has had three foci. The first, which she calls 'dark theory', is a concern with power, exploitation and inequality (colonialism, neoliberalism, patriarchy, racism, gender inequality) and the 'suffering subject'. The second, is a backlash against this 'dark' turn which she summarizes as 'anthropologies of the good' - after Joel Robbins (2013) - and includes those exploring well-being, happiness, morality and ethics. The latter analyses moral dilemmas and ethical choices, and their studies include concepts of freedom, judgement, responsibility, dignity, self-fashioning, care, love, empathy, character, virtue, truth, reasoning, justice and the good life. Citing Michael Lambek's (2010) call for 'an ordinary ethics', Ortner (2016: 58) argues that the turn to 'good' in anthropology is a kind of resistance to the prominence of 'dark anthropology'. Ortner (2016: 60) wisely warns against drawing too sharp a distinction between 'dark' and 'good', because the 'good' in fact rely on the 'dark'. She concludes by highlighting a third trend, the 'anthropology of resistance,' included in which are critiques of the existing order, rethinking capitalism, and studies flagging alternative political and economic futures. The latter include James Scott's (1985) 'weapons of the weak' (though Ortner doesn't mention it, one could add Scott's [2009] 'the art of not being governed') and social movements to change the world, ranging from Arjun Appadurai's (2013) Shack/Slum Dwellers International to David Graeber's (2009) Direct Action Network.

Ortner importantly emphasises that we need to explore both the structures of power and inequality ('dark anthropology') and everyday ethics ('anthropologies of the good'). However, in resurrecting the anthropology of resistance as 'a third way', a means to marry the 'dark' and the 'good', there is an important omission. Left out is the fact that there are multiple (often competing) utopian imaginations of the world, some of which are not 'progressive' in the liberal sense. In fact, Ortner does not cite even one case of a conservative movement. Moreover, what is also left out is that we need to explore why some imaginations gain salience over others to embed themselves in daily life and become ideology, and how this process can itself change.

Ortner admits her study is not exhaustive. However, this gap in anthropological theory points not only to a general problem highlighted by Joel Robbins (2010) that anthropology has mostly been a science of continuity (not change),[1] but also another issue that I highlight in this article. This is the need for anthropology to centre a theory of social transformation that explores the fact that people are often faced with competing imaginations of the world, differentially impacting on their daily lives and how they act in the world, actions which in turn may alter how they relate to those imaginations. This transforming relationship between competing imaginations and action is neglected even by those anthropologists who draw on Mao Zedong and Che Guevara (Otto and Willerslev 2013) to think about ethnographic concepts as part of the discipline's guerrilla warfare and see themselves at the frontiers of developing ethnographic theory (Otto and Willerslev 2013). If Ton Otto and Rane Willerslev (2013) begin with our radical difference, Giovanni Da Col and David Graeber (2011) start with our radical sameness in their proposal for 'the return of ethnographic theory'.[2] The issue is that our informants do not live in bubbles,[3] unaffected by the varying imaginations and theories of others along which their own world is configured and reconfigured. There is a need to situate this process of transformation between competing imaginations and actions centrally in our analysis; how does one imagination become utopian, another ideology, and yet another resisted or ignored entirely? I have earlier argued that we need to bring back the political and economic forces of history into our ideologies of social change (Shah 2014). What my material presented here suggests is that we need to explore the changing relationship between multiple imaginations of the world, material relations and everyday action; what I call here an anthropological theory of praxis.

In what follows I begin by giving an overview of the context of the spread of the utopian imagination of communism through Maoism in India. I focus on the higher caste, middle class educated Naxalites who have carried forth the flag of Maoism in India and turn to how this utopian imagination spread amongst the Adivasis, the poor tribal folk I lived with in central and eastern India who became footsoldiers of the Naxalites. This is followed by an account of how and why this utopian imagination became dystopic and how it laid the ground for the spread of the forces of the Hindu right with their very different utopian imagination of the world. I conclude by proposing the need for an anthropological theory of praxis, that reconnects and intimately embeds the production of theory and practice, the idealist and the materialist, the utopian and the real, imagination and action.

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[1] Robbins (2010) own focus on change is culturalist – explaining change in terms of the culture that is changing (the overnight conversion of the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea to Pentecostal Christianity) – which does not account for the material forces critical to change.

[2] In fact, Graeber firsts spells out this vision (2004) as an unashamedly anarchist one and it is shared by other anarchist anthropologists as evidenced by Maxim Kuchinski, Ssorin-Chaikov's (2012) anarchist friend.

[3] Whether arguing for theory in anthropology to develop in relation to other social theory (the position of Otto), or for ethnographic theory to emerge on its own terms (that of Willerslev), Otto and Willerslev (2013) begin with the radical otherness of our informants.

Maoism going to India

It might seem an anachronism now, but it is perhaps no exaggeration to say that one of 20th Century's most uncompromising commitments to transformation for a utopian vision of a more egalitarian world – a communist one – came from the ideological force of Maoism. Following the Cultural Revolution in China, and launched by the global stirrings in 1968, Maoism inspired people to engage in radical social change in widely different places in the world (Lovell 2019). It influenced utopian ideals of transformation in Europe, notably in France, Italy and Denmark where it was backed by prominent intellectuals, from Simone de Beauvoir to Jean Paul Sartre, and Michel Foucault and Julia Kristeva. But it had a particularly wide impact in the global South.

In Latin America, a whole range of guerilla movements – from the Sandanistas and EPL in Colombia to the Peruvian Shining Path (Sendero Luminoso) – initially took on Maoist guerrilla warfare. In Africa, the Zimbabwean anti-colonial guerrillas led by Mugabe adopted various Maoist elements and the militant Eritrean People's Liberation Front which established the Republic of Eritrea was inspired by Maoism. In South East Asia, the Khmer Rouge in late 1970s Cambodia had strong elements of Maoism, and in the late sixties, Sisson established the Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines which continues to play a role in some parts of the country. But perhaps the most enduring expression of Maoism took root in South Asia in Nepal and in India where it continues to remain a force to contend with. In Nepal, the Maoists led a ten-year People's War which resulted in the overthrow of the Hindu monarchy in 2006. In India, Maoism had such a reach that from 2006 it was declared the country's greatest internal security threat and today the forests and hills of central and eastern India are drowned by counterinsurgency forces seeking to wipe out Maoist guerrillas.

Maoism germinated in South Asia more than half a century ago in the aftermath of the 1962 Sino-Indian border war when the Communist Party of India (CPI) split. Those CPI members who supported India's first prime minister Nehru (then close to the Soviet Union) legitimated India's position, while others were imprisoned as betrayers for supporting China. Reflecting a global split (Mao criticised Khrushchev for turning capitalist and deserting revolutionary underground war), the Indian communists supporting China argued that India needed a different revolutionary strategy, one that Mao had used against the Japanese in the 1930s when politico-economic conditions in China were allegedly akin to India. They set the stage for a Maoist inspired protracted people's war to mobilise peasants in the countryside, establish rural bases and organise an army of landless labourers and exploited peasants, in the hope of eventually encircling the cities to seize power from the state (Banerjee 1984).

Led by Charu Mazumdar and Kanu Sanyal, they began with a storm in May 1967 in the West Bengal village of Naxalbari from which they get their name, the Naxalites. Peasants and labourers occupied land, reclaimed it as theirs and demanded that the landlords cancel all their debts. This small rebellion was quickly crushed by police leaving eleven dead but agitation grew across the

countryside. The Chinese Communist Party declared that a 'peal of spring thunder has crashed over India', and broadcast the Naxalbari events on Peking Radio. In India, news of the rebellion spread and similar struggles erupted in faraway forested and hilly tracts in Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Bihar and West Bengal (Banerjee 1984).

The government responded with brutal force and many leaders and sympathisers were killed by the police or disappeared after arrest. However, a whole generation of middle and upper class city youth from India's higher castes was radicalized. They felt compelled to leave the comforts of their homes and their universities to work with the rural poor for a more hopeful, egalitarian future. Those not imprisoned carried out patient underground work amongst the low caste landless labourers and peasants. From the late seventies, some of those who came out of jail went to the colleges and villages to fight again. Over time they formed different revolutionary parties adopting Mao people's war and worked in different parts of the country. There was the Maoist Communist Centre, the Communist Party of India (Marxist Leninist) Party Unity, the Communist Party of India (Marxist Leninist) People's War and several other smaller groups, sometimes fighting each other for territories they considered their own.

From the 1990s, working in the agricultural plains became particularly dangerous. The high caste landlords raised private armies, backed by the police, massacring low caste Naxalite supporters. There was nowhere to hide. So, following Mao Zedong and Che Guevara's tactics, the leaders went in search of better geographical terrain for guerrilla warfare and retreated into the hills and forests of central and eastern India – into what are now the states of Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Orissa (Shah 2018). There they found themselves in lands historically dominated by the Adivasis – the communities of Oraons, Mundas, Hos, Paharias, Gonds, Birhors, Koyas and other tribal groups – who had themselves retreated centuries ago into those hills and forests, escaping dominant caste inequalities of the plains to create counter-cultures that were in many ways more egalitarian (Shah 2019). There, in those forested regions amidst the Adivasis, the Naxalites grew in strength and consolidated their armies. The underground leaders of the different revolutionary parties talked of unity and in 2004 these talks bore fruit, creating what is now called the Communist Party of India (Maoist). United, the Maoist armies expanded and so did the territories they controlled to the point that they could walk from one Indian state to the next and be supported by sympathisers along the way, until they were crushed by the Indian state and through their own actions, and Hindutva forces began to spread among the Adivasis.

The spread and demise of Maoism in these forested regions was dependent on the confluence of people from at least two very different social backgrounds. Organised as a vanguard party, those who became leaders were those who stayed the longest in the party, had been underground for twenty to thirty years. Newcomers joined at the bottom, needing to show commitment, loyalty and endurance before they could progress up the ranks. So, on the one hand, there were the higher caste middle class middle-aged educated male (rarely female)

leaders who has been mobilized in the cities and plains of India in the eighties and nineties to fight for social justice and a more egalitarian world. Communism – that is the idea of an egalitarian society – for them was both a future utopia but also guided their day-to-day practice in what can be called an 'everyday communism' in life underground. For they tried to shed the practices of caste hierarchies and stigmas and get rid of all private property for the commons, they sought to 'decast' and 'declass' themselves as they called it, giving up the privileges of their upbringing, sacrificing their lives for the 'cause' (Shah 2014).

On the other hand, there were the youth from Adivasi families. Although the Naxalites ultimately saw the presence of Adivasis egalitarian values as a form of primitive communism that had to be erased and superseded by a 'higher' form, a point to which I will return, the everyday communism of their leaders meant that they treated the Adivasis with a respect and dignity rarely exhibited by outsiders who had come into these regions. Historically, the Adivasis had been treated by most outsiders as *jungli*, that is 'wild, savage and barbaric'. They had long been neglected by the Indian state so that even 60 years after Indian independence when I conducted fieldwork in these areas, there was no sanitation, no electricity, very low levels of literacy. In fact, the most lasting experiences of the state for many Adivasis was the police guard who beat you or the forest guard who stopped you using your forest, selling it off to outsiders, thus encouraging them to 'keep the state away' (Shah 2007). If the contrast with the everyday domination and oppression of the state enabled the Maoists to be appealing to the Adivasis, so too did the campaigns they took up against the Indian state. And so, the Naxalites became intimately embedded in Adivasi homes and families and many of the Adivasi youth became footsoldiers in their guerrilla armies. In contrast to the enduring commitment of the high caste leaders, these Adivasi youth fleeted in and out of the guerilla armies, often for just a few months, in some ways mimicking their movement in and out of the villages to work in far-away brick factories for a part of the year. Rather than the break with their pasts experienced by the leaders, the Adivasis saw in the Maoist armies a temporary home away from home. They typically went to the guerrilla armies for reasons that were personal – a fight with a parent, a prohibited love affair, a chance to see a different world – rather than because of some commitment to a collective fight for a utopian ideal of a future world (Shah 2018). Whereas the Adivasi footsolders may not even recognize a photo of Mao, the higher caste leaders were committed to their version of the high theories of Marxism-Leninism and responsible for the endurance of a social movement in the name of Maoism in India and its spread among Adivasis. So, let's turn to that high theory and its bearers.

How a utopian imagination spread

To understand how the utopian imagination of communism through Maoism spread in India, we need to understand something of the theories of social transformation that guided the spread of the Maoists. These were the theories of Marxism-Leninism, the revolutionary transformation of society (usually a capitalist one), into a communist one (that would be classless), through a revolutionary movement led by a vanguard party drawn from the working

classes. Maoism marked a departure from earlier forms of Marxism-Leninism because of its potential for vernacularisation, that is its translatability across a wide range of contexts, at the heart of which were two issues; its theorization of the role of the peasantry and its theory of the 'mass line'.

To turn to the peasantry first. In earlier Marxist-Leninist theories of revolutionary social change, the countryside and its inhabitants were to play a minimum role at best and were reactionary at worst. Peasants were doomed to disappear from history, to join the ranks of the urban proletariat or transform into rural proletarians in large capitalist agricultural enterprises; they could only ever appear as helpers of the proletariat (Engels 1894). The principal contradiction, on which revolutionary social change would be based, would be that of capital versus labour. The proletariat would lead the revolutionary process for the birth of a new society as both the object of exploitation but also the imagined subject of the process of emancipation. The belief that the proletariat was the truly creative revolutionary class that would usher in a classless society through industrial capitalism, in fact distinguished Marxism from other nineteenth-century socialist doctrines (for instance those of Fourier, Saint-Simon, Owen and others). The latter, incorporated a moral-based rejection of capitalism and so were disdainfully referred to by Marx and Engels as 'utopian', drawing a contrast with 'scientific' versions more plausible as projects of social change (see Engels 1880).

Mao turned upside down this theory for revolutionary change. Modern revolutionary history was to be made by peasants in the countryside who would lead a war that would eventually encircle the cities.[4] Though Mao acknowledged the presence of capitalism versus labour, the principal contradiction was foreign imperialism versus the Chinese nation (leading a worldwide struggle of socialism).[5] As Maurice Meissner (1982) argues, socialism could therefore proceed without capitalism and be found in those areas of society least influenced by capitalism; in a peasantry and an intelligentsia uncorrupted by 'bourgeois' ideas. In a politico-economic context in which mass industrialization and the formation of a proletariat was not a part of the history of many nations, the move away from identifying the principal contradiction as capital versus labour, coupled with seeing the fight against imperialism as the most significant battle, enabled Mao's thoughts to become relevant for many in the global south. Thus the similarities with what the Marx and Engels called 'utopian socialism' – Mao's departure from more orthodox Marxism (centred on the idea of waiting for the proletariat to lead the revolution) – allowed Maoism to spread (see also Meisner 1982).[6] Those heading anti-colonial movements against imperial nations dominating them or developing critiques against their own national elites who they saw as allying with colonial forces, suddenly found Maoism relevant. In India, the Maoists argued that the economy was 'semi-feudal' and 'semi-colonial', calling this their 'scientific analysis.' Though I argue that this

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[4] Though in 'Analyses of the classes of Chinese history' Mao (1926) careful places them under the label, 'semi-proletarian' to mark his continuity with Marxism.

[5] There were of course other contradictions too (Mao Zedong 1926 and 1939).

[6] Of course, the high caste Maoist leadership would reject the idea that they are utopian as they imagine themselves as leading one of the world's last remaining 'scientific' Marxist revolutions.

outdated economic analysis became their pitfall (Shah 2013a), it meant that their rebellion was targeted at the countryside where most of India's oppressed lived and turned into an armed war against their national elites.

Second, with the shift away from the proletariat also came Mao's political, organizational and leadership theory of the 'mass line', central to which was consulting with the masses and interpreting and incorporating their suggestions within the revolutionary framework. Mao's process of 'from the masses to the masses', became a somewhat anthropological one in India – based on investigating the conditions of people, learning about and participating in their struggles, gathering ideas from them to create a plan of action in light of the revolutionary goal. Translatability of local political and economic conditions and problems was to some extent inbuilt into the idea of how Maoism spread in India.

Indeed in 1967, four Naxalite leaders crossed the Himalayas on foot, traversing across Tibet via Nepal to enter China where they received both ideological and military training from the Chinese People's Liberation Army. But when they finally met Mao at the end of their stay, he said to them, 'Forget everything you have learnt here in China. Once back in Naxalbari, formulate your own revolutionary strategies, keeping in mind the ground realities.'[7] It was an open invitation to develop revolutionary strategy based on local conditions (and not a universal model) and indeed the connections with China remained loose. So, until the 1980s, from the plains of Bihar to those of Andhra Pradesh, the Maoists fought for labour rights and land rights, and for the dignity of low castes. Dalits (previously called 'untouchables') and other lower castes were mobilized. But perhaps the translatability of Maoism to local conditions was nowhere more evident than in how the Maoists spread since the eighties, in India's Adivasi dominated forests where they now hide.

Many of those forested regions had little experience of feudal oppression for they had no large landlords. There, the Indian Maoist 'scientific' analysis (of semi-feudalism, semi-colonialism), which might have once been relevant for the agricultural plains, was redundant and provided the revolutionaries with no immediate enemy to mobilise against. So, they targeted the police and forest guards who the Adivasis had long considered oppressive. The guerrillas chased these state officials away by bombing and burning their rest houses and vehicles, establishing the sympathies of many locals. Then they embarked on developmental work, setting up medical camps, schools and agricultural cooperatives. They delivered better wages for the collection of *kendu* leaves (used to make the country cigarette, *bidi*) and replaced the outside contractors, who profited from trading leaves, with locals. They organized protests and demonstrations against government policies of liberalization, financialisation and displacement (Shah 2013b; 2018). But above all, what enabled, Adivasis to treat the Maoists as a second home, and the Maoists to become a part of local kinship networks (Shah 2013b), was the respect and dignity the Maoists showed towards the Adivasis as part of their everyday communism explained earlier. In

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[7] Quote from Kanu Sanyal (Bappaditya 2014: 130).

this process of embedding, local issues could also get translated to wider struggles in other places.

Undoubtedly the clandestine nature of the movement, backed by violence or the possibility of violence, was also an important part of spreading its myth (Shah 2006). The idea of sacrifice – that the guerrillas were willing to sacrifice their lives for the cause – gave them an authenticity and credibility above and beyond that of any political party or NGO. So too did their absolute rejection of operating within the parliamentary process which nurtured the idea of a purity in opposition to the corruption of the state.[8] In time, Maoism in its various vernacular forms – the '*Jungle Sarkar'* (the jungle state), '*Party*', *Maobadi*, the '*Sangathan*' or '*Krantikari'* (revolutionaries) (as the guerrillas were variously called) – came to represent an idea of social change for a more equal future and the commitment of some to sacrifice their lives for this end.

The point is that Maoism in India, as it did in varied places, came to bear no relationship to Maoism in China. The very 'utopianism' (as seen by orthodox Marxists) of Maoism made it a force with a transcendental appeal for it enabled it to be appropriated, translated and vernacularised. So that when China turned more capitalist, and even became the first country to supply arms to Nepal's king to suppress the Nepali guerrillas, the idea of Maoism even spread in Nepal and India. Everywhere in South Asia, Maoism's local manifestations were different, but for awhile it also came to represent the struggles against state repression, money laundering, brokers, corruption, oppression. It spread as a utopian imagination which stood for some kind of pure idea of social justice, development and liberation from the forces dominating and oppressing people. The more the state accused people or movements of being Maoist, the more they became Maoist and the more the idea of Maoism grew. But of course, the more you looked for it and idealized it, the more you couldn't find it, until it began collapsing.

The Dystopia in Utopia

Dystopia is always embedded within utopia, I suggest here. If those engaged in utopian social transformation seek to challenge prevailing ideology to transform people's actions, it is equally possible for their utopian imagination to retreat into ritual that not only bears no relevance to most people but may also be potentially harmful and pave the way for other ideals to become prevalent. This is what happened to Maoism in India in recent years.

Just as the Adivasi forests became the support base of the Maoists, they also became the target for mineral resource extraction by a state that was liberalising its economy, seeking to draw in big business. There was iron ore, coal, copper, bauxite, manganese, mica – India's greatest mineral reserves –

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[8] Interestingly, the Communist Party of India (Maoist) moved the question of electoral participation from a tactical issue to a strategic one in 2007, thereby signaling their unwillingness to ever consider the parliamentary process even if their own 'scientific' analyses deemed it necessary for the revolutionary cause.

under the ground of the Adivasi lands in which the Maoists created strongholds. Business analysts argued that Indian mining was a growth success story in waiting for decades and the mining potential of these lands had to be unlocked for the continued rise of economic growth rates. The most powerful multinational and national companies, backed by banks and pension funds from all over the world, were lined up to sign deals to harvest the resources, acquiring land to penetrate the landscape with mining operations, steel factories and power plants. Development under the barrel of a gun was the government solution to eliminate the Maoists and coopt or erase the people who inhabited those lands. The state increased its activity in the area, expanding its network of schools and health centres but also, since 2008, sent in hundreds of thousands of security forces to dominate the region, eventually recruiting Adivasis into the frontline of counter-insurgency operations to attack their own brothers and sisters (Shah 2018). What ensued was a brutal counterinsurgency campaign, which some say have created conditions of civil war in the heart of India. Under these changing politico-economic conditions with which came extreme state repression, Maoism became a dystopic utopia. It brought with it not only the violence of state counterinsurgency but also turned Maoism itself into a ritual that bore no relevance to ordinary people's lives, highlighting dogmatism and diminishing the movement, revealing the dystopia that lay within. The overall effect was that ultimately other utopian imaginations began to supersede its relevance.

In order to understand how this happened, it is necessary to understand something of the 'high priests' of Maoism, those higher caste middle class revolutionary leaders who were a part of the vanguard who remained committed to Maoism to create a more egalitarian future world no matter what the circumstances. I have elsewhere drawn comparisons between the Maoist leadership and the Hindu renouncer (Shah 201;, Shah 2018). Though of course the Maoist leaders would see such a parallel as Marxist blasphemy,[9] there is a long history of historical and anthropological work which charts the affinity between Marxist leaders and religiosity (Mead 1951; Meisner 1982; Slezkine 1985). In the spread of Indian Maoism, asceticism enabled a commitment to a way of life, a group of people and an ideal. Maoist leaders valorized a hard, simple and spartan life (in contrast to the opulence of the middle and upper caste-class backgrounds they came from and that marked what they called 'bourgeois' life). An aspiration to egalitarian social leveling by losing identifiers of caste and class was required of everyone who joined the armies. Crucial to this was sacrifice of everything – material objects, one's family and, above all, one's own self. This asceticism made becoming a Maoist into a moral project of self-making which required self-repression, self-alienation and restraint to internalize the prescribed values and norms of behavior. The ego was to be suppressed in selfless service. Loyalty and commitment were morally sanctioned and critique was welcomed mainly as self-critique. And with this ascetic morality and its norms came a commitment to the revolutionary 'scientific analysis' as

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[9] Marx saw asceticism as human self-alienation and was critical of the utopian socialist thought in which it was a prominent theme (Meissner 1982: 47).

sanctified in the party programme and documents, almost as if they were the Bible or the Koran.

Nevertheless, this small clique of leaders could reach beyond themselves as long as Maoism could be vernacularised in relation to different politico-economic ground conditions, taking on the programmes and struggles specific to that time and space. This translation enabled the Maoists to touch the lives of the poor marginalized communities they wished to bring into their fold – from the Dalits to the Adivasis, as I have argued. But under extreme state repression, such as is faced by the guerrillas in central and eastern India, doing work ('mass movements' they call them) based on grassroots struggles (and on which the vernacular spread of Maoism is dependent) risked exposing oneself and the people one is working with to the brunt of state forces. Burning, rape, arrest and murder were commonly used as part of the counterinsurgency operations across the hilly forested regions in recent years (Sundar 2016).

In such times, the focus of the Maoists became only their armed fight; how to fund their armies, survive militarily, launch offensives, blow up state forces; it became the arms themselves (Shah 2018). At the same time the Indian Maoists retracted religiously to Mao's scientific analysis of the Chinese political economy, which is what Mao had warned them against, and which moreover is outdated in South Asia (Shah 2013a; De Mello 2015). Adherence to Maoism as enshrined in the party documents and programmes came to have such a ritualized status for the leaders that wider deference to it became forced (as opposed to unnoticed) and any threat to its contents resulted in the alienation and elimination of critiques as betrayers.

The result was a disregard of the significance of local practices for the creation of their future world. On the one hand, there was a complete blindness to the relative egalitarianism that already existed among the Adivasis, their creativity and individual autonomy. They saw these values as part of a 'backward' society, a form of 'primitive communism' doomed to the dustbin of history, that had to be modernized and transformed, leading to the erasure of those values. (This process is elaborated in Shah 2018 and has parallels elsewhere, see for instance spread of Marxist Leninism among the Evenki in Siberia [Ssorin-Chaikov 2017]). On the other hand, there was a total failure to recognise the ways in which the values of capitalism were seeping into the forests and right into their own armies, including through their own actions, destroying them from within (Shah 2018).

The Maoists were in fact nurturing a slow social economic and political transformation among the Adivasis, though it was not one that they had bargained for or recognised. This transformation emanated from the fact that they funded themselves by inserting into the same capitalist extortion rackets around state development schemes and big business that mainstream politicians were a part of and through which illicit money could be gained (Shah 2018). Like for many others who rose into the party hierarchies, for the Adivasis who ended up staying within the Maoists and who were therefore tasked with collecting these funds, it was always tempting to pocket some of the funds away from the

party needs and into your personal purse, stashed away to eventually raise your mud house into a multi-storey brick building, acquire your four-wheel drive bolero and send your children to good private schools. The transformation among the Adivasis also took place through those who were given positions of contractorship of these state development schemes when the Maoists sought to 'democratize' the regimes of extortion by replacing the dominant higher caste men who controlled these markets with people from more marginalized groups (Shah 2018). Thus, the Maoists helped generate a new generation of Adivasis mini-entrepreneurs, seeking to line their own personal pockets in a similar fashion to state politicians, rising above the rest of their communities, creating new economic and social stratification among Adivasis. As with the Adivasi state politicians, these Adivasi youths now moved around in networks dominated by higher caste men, and with economic upward mobility also came the same development of higher caste hierarchical values most visible in their increasingly patriarchal attitudes to their women. It was unsurprising then that some Adivasis got disillusioned by the Maoists. And some eventually formed gangs to destroy the Maoists (Shah 2018). The utopian imagination for social change revealed the dystopia that lies within.

The rise of a competing utopian imagination

If the ritualization of utopia can't be adapted to address the requirements of the time to survive beyond a small group of people, its relevance beyond that clique – that is the imagination of roles and groups it represents – will be superseded by others.

Spreading among the Adivasi populations were Hindutva forces. They had begun in areas not controlled by the Maoists. But when the Maoists were reduced to focusing only on their arms, and as the Indian state increasingly took over the territories, they paved the way for the greater penetration of Hindutva forces. As I left the Maoist strongholds, it was no longer the guerrillas who attracted followers but a Hindu religious sect which was creating converts overnight out of Adivasis and Hindus alike (Shah 2014b).

This is not the place for a full account of how and why this more 'right-wing' utopian imagination gained Adivasis followers. Nevertheless, there are some important points to highlight. Over the decades, the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS, the paramilitary volunteer organization of the ruling party, the Bharatya Janata Party or BJP) had been silently but stealthily addressing people's health and education concerns and especially building schools across the landscape, as analysed in depth by Peggy Freoer (2007) and Amit Desai (2007).[10] Alongside these developments was a slow process to wean the Adivasis away from a multitude of practices. For instance, from sacrificing animals for their ancestors and spirits in the houses, forests and fields to doing pujas for 'proper' gods and goddesses in temples. Or, to stop the 'dirty' practices of drinking alcohol and eating meat and become 'pure' through vegetarianism and tee-

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[10] Also Tachhil 2014 and Sundar 2005.

totaling. Or to repress the sexual liberation and public autonomy of their women and make them into dutiful, responsible, subservient daughters and wives who veiled and remained inside the domestic confines of their homes. If the Maoists saw the Adivasis as 'primitive communists' to be made into true ones, the Hindutva forces saw the Adivasis as 'backward Hindus' to be made into pure Hindus.

In the Adivasi guerrilla strongholds where I lived, Hindu religious sects, which among believers were thought to provide enduring and efficacious cures for illness caused by attacks of witchcraft and magic, spread (Shah 2014b). Overnight, Adivasis converted to the sanskritising processes of giving up meat and alcohol. Amit Desai (2012) similarly argues that among the Gonds of Madhya Pradesh, while membership of such a sect allowed for healing, it altered the values and practices of adherents (they became vegetarian and teetotaler) to resonate powerfully with the messages promoted by the Hindu nationalist agents in the area.

Also spreading among these Adivasi areas were the schools of the Hindutva forces. Today there are at least 20,000 such schools across the country in which Hindutva ideology is central to the delivery of a 'cultural education' that blames the internal disunity of Hindus on a history of invasion by Muslims (Turks and Mughals), celebrates Hindu deities and heroes, and centres ideas of morality which includes teaching girls to be good housewives and mothers. Tribal dominated regions were specifically targeted in this national school expansion programme (see Froerer 2007).

Indeed, by 2014, in my first field site in Jharkhand, the Shishu Mandir RSS schools had become the preferred school for Adivasis. It is important to note that parents did not see these schools as linked to the RSS or spreading Hindutva, but sent their children there because they thought that they provided the best local education. However, over time, through the schools, also came the spread of Hindu festivals (such as Saraswati Puja) which were entirely new to Adivasi areas and the building of Hanuman temples.[11] Slowly the schools therefore paved the way for the spread of a Hindu utopian imagination into Adivasi homes to transform people's daily lives towards a more saffron agenda. Perhaps it is then no surprise that in 2019, areas in which people once followed Maoist diktats of boycotting elections, brought in the electoral victory of Narendra Modi's BJP. Today it will be not too far-fetched to imagine that an Adivasi who once was a part of the Naxalite armies, sends his son to a school run by the RSS.

If there are lessons to learn from this story, it is that not only did the Maoist analysis for transformation become arthritic but that, amidst the brutal state repression, they failed to deliver any of the programmes and policies aimed at

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[11] This process has similarities to that which Vitebsky (2017) explains of the spread of the Christian missionaries in Sora Adivasi areas in Odisha – as government development and education infrastructure infiltrated to Sora areas, the Christian missionaries were the first to exploit them. Within a few years, the Sora had converted from being animists to Baptists. Vitebsky also says that now Hinduism is spreading among the Sora, though the material is understandably not yet fully developed.

local people's daily material struggles. In the absence of any other social movement alternative,[12] the Hindutva imagination spread in contrast to the Maoist one because the institutions which supported it could address the material and related emotional needs of the people. My point here is to highlight that there are competing transcendental imaginations of the world (utopian and ideological) that impact daily life. And that we need to focus our theoretical and empirical lens on understanding the social transformations at the heart of why some imaginations spread and collapse, and are replaced by others in people's actions.

For an anthropological theory of praxis

I have argued here that the reach of Maoism in the twentieth century was based on its departure from orthodox Marxism, what the latter have called 'utopianism', allowing for its appeal to become transcendental and to represent a multitude of utopian dreams of social change. Maoism came to represent an imagined ideal for radical social transformation because it became translated and vernacularized – that is adapted, embedded and historicized to address people's material needs in varied parts of the world. But I have also shown the ways in which in the country in which it persisted with greatest force – India – where Maoism was closely linked to the morality of asceticism, under unfavourable politico-economic circumstances that included extreme repression, it was forced away from addressing people's daily struggles and turned into mere ritual that ceased to have relevance beyond a small elite of leaders. This ritualization of utopia carries with it the seeds of dystopia, and has enabled other imaginations to prevail. In the Indian Maoist case, the failure to translate their utopian imagination to meaningful material action, left the doors open to the Hindutva forces, with both its developmental project of healthcare, schools and temples, but also its idealist Hindu majoritarian state and polity, which now prevail.

In this concluding section, I would like to propose that to understand this changing relationship between different imaginations of the world and their relationship with how we act in the world, we need to develop an anthropological theory of praxis. Praxis, Don Nonini (2016), tells us is a word that seldom appears in anthropology texts or journals. When it does, what is usually meant is 'practice'. Praxis, though is more than just 'practice.' By praxis, I mean the process by which imaginations to change the world get enacted and realized, and also how that process in turn can change those theories themselves in a dialectical process of reflection and action. Inherent in praxis then, I argue, is an inextricable relationship between imagination, material relations and action that is involved in the active transformation of the present.

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[12] This was not a context in which anarchism or other social movements had yet spread (e.g. see Ssorin-Chaikov 2012 on anarchism in Russia), although part of my broader argument in my book 'Nightmarch' (Shah 2018) is that the Naxalites will also have given rise to Adivasi, Dalit and Feminist movements led by people who were initially mobilized by the Naxalites but disillusioned by their practices.

Praxis is a term that has most commonly been used by Marxists. Marx (1938) famously argued that philosophers had only interpreted the world, the point was to change it; engage in praxis. It gained greater prominence through the interpretations of Gramsci's 'Prison Notebooks' where 'the philosophy of praxis' was used to further Marxism in the aftermath of the defeat of the Communist Party of Italy by Mussolini's fascists. Its meaning for Gramsci, though much debated by scholars, is perhaps pinpointed by Peter Thomas: if philosophy is best comprehended as 'conception of the world', the philosophy of praxis radicalizes this perspective to insist that philosophy's task is to help produce a more 'coherent' conception of the world as 'a process of immanent critique' internal to ideology 'to provide resources for socio-political and even civilizational transformation' (Thomas 2015: 12). Paulo Freire (1970), likewise stressed praxis as a means by which oppressed people acquired a critical understanding of their own condition and, with teachers-students, engage in a struggle for their liberation. As Gavin Smith highlights, praxis entails, 'the ability of people as collective subjects to become a force in history, not merely other people's history' (Smith 2014: 23).

The failures of Marxian projects around the world, including in my own fieldwork context, lead me here to both widen and narrow the scope of an anthropological theory of praxis. Let me take each in turn. To widen first: I would like to suggest that an anthropological theory of praxis would need to include not only an understanding of the imaginations and actions of projects of 'the left' but a wider spectrum that includes 'the right'. Nonini tells us that praxis may take on a variety of forms, but must always be directed toward the liberation of working people. Indeed, my proposition is that even those who seek to further the Marxist tradition must take seriously the idea that the imaginations of conservative forces may be seen as liberating by many working people who embrace them. This is important to understand especially if any alternatives are to be posed.

Exploring conservative populism is an awkward topic for anthropology says William Mazzarella (2019), partly 'because of a tension between anthropologists' effectively populist commitments to the common sense of common people at a time when that common sense can often look ugly.' As he and Chris Hann (2019) suggest, no matter how hard we find it to empathise with what may be racist activities that defy our cosmopolitan norms, it is time we contribute to understanding this form of populism. And though it is heartening to see anthropologists tackle this issue (for instance, Kalb and Halmai 2011; Holmes 2000), rather than promote 'an anthropology of populism' as Hann (2019) and Mazzarella (2019) do, my suggestion here is that we keep our lens wider. We need to explore the transforming relationship between different competing imaginations (whether 'left populist' or 'right populist' or other), material relations and action, and ask comparative questions about why some imaginations of social transformation prevail over others at any one moment in time.

Let me now to turn to what I mean by narrowing the study of praxis from the tradition from which it emerged. Nonini ends up calling for an anthropological praxis that looks at what self-reflective actions anthropologists engage in when they seek the liberation of working people. This is also where Ortner (2016) concludes her marriage of 'dark' and 'good' anthropology; in studies of resistance. While by no means undermining the project of what anthropologists themselves do in action (whether it is development anthropology, activist anthropology, cultural critique, Marxist anthropology), what I argue for here is the need for anthropology to develop an anthropological *theory* of praxis if we are to better understand the world around us. This would may mean limiting our role as activists – at least in the first instance – to the production of knowledge.

In his comparison of Anthropology and Marxism, André Béteille (2007), characterizing Anthropology as 'the study of other cultures', and Marxism 'as the philosophy of praxis', argues that the two are fundamentally irreconcilable projects. Whereas one seeks to 'translate' or interpret the world (Anthropology) and is therefore mainly a 'witness', the other seeks to 'change it' as a 'partisan'. What I have suggested elsewhere is that our core method – participant observation – itself is a potentially revolutionary praxis (Shah 2017) that can enable us to better act in the world because it carries with it the possibility of challenging hegemonic conceptions of the world (including ones we hold) in a process of knowledge production that is dialectically produced and realized in action through the lives of others. But I have also argued that this potentially revolutionary praxis of participant observation is one which may inhibit our revolutionary zeal (Shah 2017) as there is a real tension between the democratic commitment to truth demanded by it and the partisanship expected of an activist.

In this article, it is a commitment to participant observation as praxis – not merely a method of anthropology but a form of production of knowledge through being and action, the process by which theory is dialectically produced and realized in action – that leads me to argue that we need an anthropological theory of praxis. That is, one that that would place centre-stage different imaginations of transforming the world (in my case the failures of the Naxalites and the simultaneous rise of the Hindu right) and their intractable and changing relationship with the lives of the people we study.

Such a theory would then necessitate attention to, at the very, least the following things. The first is *varied* and often *competing* imaginations of the world. That takes into account the fact that any one person is likely to be faced by different, often competing and sometimes overlapping, imaginations of the world – if not at any one moment in time, certainly over their life-course. The second is that the relationship between these different imaginations of the world and the experience of everyday life (impacted both by the 'dark' anthropology of inequality, power, exploitation and social suffering, and the 'good' anthropology of ethical and moral dilemmas) also matters. It is not just a question of their separate existence but the fact that they have a concrete impact on each other. The third is that we need to theoretically explore not only the interrelations between imaginations and actions but also how and why particular imaginations

may prove to have a transcendental appeal in a particular moment in time. That is, the processes by which some imaginations may be more relevant than others, turn from utopia to ideology, or even why they may recede and become mere ritual. Investigating these processes would centre how different imaginations affect actions (individual and collective), how they are linked to wider material transformations, and how and why in turn the aggregate of individual actions relate to transformations of the collective imagination. This is where an anthropology of praxis must begin.

Acknowledgements

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