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***Development Change Distinguished Lecture 2020***

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**What if We Selected our Leaders by Lottery? Democracy by Sortition, Liberal Elections and Communist Revolutionaries****Alpa Shah**

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**ABSTRACT**

What if we selected our leaders by lottery? Zooming out from the mud huts of indigenous communities in the forested hills of eastern India, this article compares three different models of leadership and democracy: liberal electoral democracy; Marxist-Leninist Maoist democracy; and democracy by sortition — the random selection of rotating leaders. The significance of sortition is introduced into discussions of democracy in India (showing connections with practices in Nepal and China) as part of a broader attempt to make scholarship on South Asia more democratic. The author also re-reads ideals of leadership among indigenous people, showing that we need a theoretical and practical vision arguing not for societies without leaders but for societies in which everyone may be a leader. In India, this compels us to push back against the critique of its indigenous communities for not producing leaders and enables a profound re-reading of the history of subaltern anti-colonial rebellions. The final aim of the article is to highlight the virtues of the potential of sortition in creating democratic society globally. How we think about democracy and leadership is thus turned on its head to provide a new vision for the future.

Now the average CIO bureaucrat or Labor Member of Parliament in Britain would fall in a fit if it was suggested to him that any worker selected at random could do the work that he is doing, but that was precisely the guiding principle of Greek Democracy. And this form of government is the government under which flourished the greatest civilization the world has ever known.

C.L.R. James (1956) 'Every Cook Can Govern'

*For David Graeber, who showered us with mountains of gifts*

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## INTRODUCTION

Liberal democracy as a means of collective self-rule, and the values of leadership it has promoted, has revealed itself to be hollow. Democratically elected leaders routinely deprive people of basic rights and liberties, serve their own interests and those of corporate power, thus generating vast inequalities. In the nations that consider themselves as global protectors and custodians of democracy, fighting ‘wars on terror’ to defend democracy from its foreign enemies, seasoned bullies have ruled. In India — the country where I have done most of my field research — Hindu supremacism has taken hold with Narendra Modi at the helm, a man whose chest size is more discussed in public fora than the thousands of Muslims murdered under his watch. With the country celebrated as the world’s largest democracy, it is procedural democracy that is fetishized — that is, the way rulers are elected, the fact that there is a routine process of elections, that people cast a vote — not the kinds of power they hold, the way it is exercised or the values they promote. Elections have come to stand for some kind of gold standard of what democracy ought to be.

Today, under such liberal electoral democracy, people in the centre and east of the country, the Kashmir valley, or the north-east border states are easily imprisoned without being brought to trial, or simply disappear. They live under a military rule in which security forces burn, rape and plunder with impunity. For much of the Indian population, the constitutional promise of equality and dignity is far-fetched, as they are thrown into detention camps, have their land snatched from under their feet, the last vestiges of basic labour rights removed from them. Moreover, anyone criticizing or speaking out against these injustices is likely to be harassed by the police, have cases filed against them and face imprisonment. Intellectuals, lawyers and democratic rights activists have been targeted; many of my colleagues and friends are now in prison. Under democracy has flourished a form of capitalism that has exacerbated stark socio-economic inequalities backed by extreme violence, both concealed and open.

These horrific injustices have not gone unchallenged. A whole range of protests have arisen or persisted. Of these, the ones that have historically presented the most extreme challenge to overthrow the current order are underground armed revolutionaries inspired by Marx, Lenin and Mao-Zedong. Popularly called Naxalites or Maoists, they fight a 50-year-old war to take over the Indian state in a ‘new democratic revolution’ to bring about a global communist society, what they call ‘real democracy’. Yet, as I have shown in my book *Nightmarch* (Shah, 2018), these revolutionaries wittingly or unwittingly undermine their own aims.

It is clear that we need a radical rethinking of the values of leadership that underpin liberal electoral democracies. We need new models of how to imagine democracy, its core values and what kind of leaders would be required, if leaders at all. We need a revolution of sorts in how we think about

leadership and democracy. In this article, I draw on my long-term research living as an anthropologist among India's indigenous people — popularly called Adivasis — to compare and contrast three different models of leadership and democracy, with the intention of drawing attention to one that is hidden even within India. The first is the model of leadership promoted in liberal electoral politics. The second is leadership among revolutionary Marxist-Leninist Maoist insurgents. And the final one — on which I will dwell the most — is sortition, the drawing of lots, or the random selection of rotating leaders.

While my focus is India, I believe the case and models I present are of global relevance. In fact, as I will show, while sortition has gained some recognition in practices of democracy in other parts of the world, it has not in India. In presenting these models of democracy and leadership, I draw inspiration from Marshal Sahlins' (1963) method of uncontrolled comparison developed in his famous comparative piece on the Melanesian Big Man versus the Polynesian Chief. The models are abstract sociological types of which there will be important variants and exceptions not treated in any depth. As Sahlins (*ibid.*: 285) wrote, '[a]ll would agree that consideration of the variations and exceptions is necessary and desirable. Yet there is pleasure too, and some intellectual reward, in discovering the broad patterns'. To this intellectual pleasure, I would add that there is political necessity in discovering other ways of living in the world, highlighting other ways of being, other perspectives as a critique of our own reality, to draw inspiration from in envisioning other possibilities. Indeed, this is the radical, even revolutionary potential of long-term ethnographic research and its method of participant observation which, as I have argued elsewhere (Shah, 2017), is a potentially revolutionary praxis because it forces us to question our theoretical presuppositions about the world, produces knowledge that is new, and centres that which was confined to the margins or was silenced.

The model that I want to highlight in this article contains a radically different idea of leadership and democratic values which underpin a more communal way of being and acting in the world. As such, my argument is unashamedly utopian for, as I will show, these systems of democracy and leadership are disappearing even among the indigenous people I lived with. Yet, I believe it is important to draw attention to them as they may help us rethink the premises of our own practices of democracy. This is in the spirit of my dear late colleague and friend David Graeber's (2004: 12) suggestion for social theory to 'refashion itself in the manner of a direct democratic process', in the sense that 'one obvious role for a radical intellectual is ... to look at those who are creating viable alternatives; try to figure out what might be the larger implications of what they are (already) doing, and then offer those ideas back, not as prescriptions, but as contributions, possibilities — as gifts'.

Therein lies the possibility presented to me by the Adivasis I lived with, that the idea of democracy by sortition — that is, the random selection of

rotating leaders — could be a real utopia.<sup>1</sup> In this case, a real utopia in the sense of rethinking and practising democracy to change our current systems that create domination, exploitation, oppression and that go hand in hand with deep socio-economic inequalities.

The article will unfold as follows. I will comparatively analyse the three models of democracy as they impact on one community; the indigenous people I lived with in India. I will begin with democracy by sortition, the form likely to be least familiar to the reader, then turn to the rise of liberal democracy, and then finally the spread of Marxist-Leninist Maoist revolutionary democracy. I suggest that if the latter prioritizes economic inequality in its analysis for revolutionary transformation, its struggles take place through a party organized by extreme political hierarchy that suppresses individuality. In contrast, liberal democracy promotes a system of political equality based on individual rights but does not fundamentally challenge economic inequality. I will show that Adivasi leaders rising in both these systems — liberal electoral democracy or Marxist-Leninist Maoist revolutionary democracy — have brought new economic inequalities into their communities and, with that, also new political hierarchies of the values of caste. It is only in democracy by sortition that we have a system in which everyone is equally a potential leader, where the values of egalitarianism prevail, both politically and economically, alongside a flourishing of individual autonomy.

With this comparison, I will chart some of my wider aims. The first is to show the existence and persistence of practices of sortition in South Asia, which have received almost no scholarly or political attention. I will suggest that part of this failure is a result of the overwhelming dominance of scholarship on hierarchy in South Asia which has neglected the study of more egalitarian values that today lie in its jungle margins but may have had a wider presence in the past. Here, I seek not only to introduce alternative traditions of democracy in India but also to make scholarship on South Asia more democratic. Yet, I also wish to move this potential beyond national boundaries and show that these more egalitarian practices of democracy by sortition were diffusely connected beyond India, to practices of sortition in Nepal and China.

A second aim is to call for a re-reading of leadership among indigenous populations, showing that we need a theoretical and practical vision that argues for societies in which everyone may be a leader. In India, I will argue that this directs us to push back against the critique that Adivasis have not produced leaders and, significantly, also signals the need for a profound re-reading of the history of subaltern rebellions. A final aim is to highlight the virtues of the potential of sortition in creating democratic society anywhere.

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1. I take the concept of real utopias from Erik Olin Wright (2010) who, in the latter half of his life, encouraged the study of emancipatory models of society as it could exist, and how to get there.

The argument presented in this article is contextualized by the reminder that in ancient Athens and medieval Florence, voting in leaders through elections was understood to be aristocratic and that democracy involved sortition. This is an idea that has a long history, and that is being revived today, whether it is through the remaking of the Irish Constitution or the Extinction Rebels and Climate Assemblies. Indeed, I am not alone in resurrecting the possibilities of indigenous democracy offered by sortition for rethinking contemporary democracy more broadly.

## DEMOCRACY BY SORTITION

Let me begin by turning to the context from which I speak, which takes us to a seemingly remote, forested area of eastern India in the state of Jharkhand, dominated by the Munda and Oraon people. These are people who form part of wider groups generally referred to as Adivasis — a popular term for those considered tribal or autochthonous to India, its indigenous people, who have historically lived in its forested and hilly frontiers. Classified by the Indian government as its ‘Scheduled Tribes’ (STs), at just over 100 million, they account for 8.8 per cent of the country’s population. Adivasis are generally seen to be some of the poorest people in the world. Here, I will show that they may be some of the richest, once we move beyond the quantification and measurement of wealth in terms of GDP, income or assets, and instead start thinking about values such as humanity, solidarity, the good life or indeed democracy.

India is usually thought of as the land of hierarchy and inequality. But those who have lived for several years among the Adivasis in the forests and hills of the country as one of them<sup>2</sup> have noted that many of their communities are exceptional for being quite at odds with the values of *homo hierarchicus* that have dominated the analysis of India. Adivasi groups are noted for their relatively egalitarian or anti-authoritarian values, and the dignity and pride with which they hold these values, when compared to the caste-divided hierarchical communities of the plains of India.

To invoke the relative egalitarianism of Adivasis is not to say that there is no hierarchy among them. For instance, youth show deference to elders, marking social relations of hierarchy between generations. Nor does it mean that all groups are equally egalitarian. Some settled Adivasi groups like the Khewars are very Hinduized and more akin to caste societies and their hierarchies. But other groups — like the Paharia or Birhor who mainly hunt and forage for a livelihood — are perhaps more comparable to James Woodburn’s (1982) immediate return societies of the Hazda in the Tanzanian plains than they are to the Dalits of the Indian Bihari plains. Moreover,

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2. For example, Bailey (1961); Bird-David (1983, 2017); Elwin (1942, 1944); Gardner (1966); Morris (1982, 2014); Padel and Das (2010); Vitebsky (2017a, 2020).

egalitarianism by no means equates to equivalence<sup>3</sup> — that everyone is the same, or even aspires to be the same. In fact, among the Adivasi groups I lived with, individuality and individual autonomy are greatly valued — not in an instrumental or possessive way, but in terms of encouraging an individual's capacity to be self-determining (see Gardner, 1966; Morris, 2014).

By egalitarian values I mean that *people see others as equal to themselves and thus value each other equally as human beings, including their individual autonomy within a relational society, respecting their similarities and differences*. Such values generate a fundamental respect for others not because of some qualities they happen to have (for instance, talent or merit, wealth or status), nor because they conform to some straightjacket of an ideal person, but for whoever they are. What I wish to highlight here is that in relation to the stark caste-based inequalities of the agricultural plains, the communities of these hilly forested frontier regions are notable for their egalitarian spirit that leaves them relatively free from unequal social divisions. Egalitarian values appear in many aspects of Adivasi life: the relative absence of the show of wealth or the idea of saving/accumulating;<sup>4</sup> the significance given to sharing, mutual aid and labour exchange;<sup>5</sup> the relative gender equality;<sup>6</sup> and, pertinent for this article, the egalitarian spirit through which communities can be led.

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3. Harry Walker (2020) talks of 'equality without equivalence'; however, as far as I can see, many of those who have stressed egalitarian values among foraging and hunting societies have at the same time also stressed their individual autonomy, and the underlying assumptions are that egalitarian values by no means mean that everyone is the same (see, for example, Morris, 2014).

4. Internal stratification based on the show of accumulated wealth through material consumption is not typically encouraged (for a brilliant analysis conducted among the Muria, see Gell, 1986). In fact, foraging and producing to meet not much more than subsistence needs is common, as many Adivasis live mainly just for the moment of the annual cycle rather than saving resources for posterity. Eating, drinking and making merry are a central part of daily Adivasi sociality but this consumption is first and foremost about sharing with others and not about showing your superiority, or marking yourself apart from others.

5. Mutual and collective aid through systems of non-monetized labour exchange between households is crucial. Adivasis proudly continue collective hunting and share the fruits of their labour just as they participate in communal labour exchange: you help me build my house, I will help you build yours, or, you help me sow my fields today, I will help you sow yours tomorrow. People are valued as masters of their own production and consumption and when they can't survive on what they find around them and have to participate in wage labour for some parts of the year, they often do so in a similar spirit, as 'wage gatherers', seeing wages as just another form of gathering for subsistence (see Bird-David, 1983).

6. Striking, in a country so marked by inequality between men and women, is the relative gender equality and the social, sexual and economic freedom that women have across the forests of central and eastern India in comparison to the higher-caste societies of the plains. Not only do women work outside the household (with some women even going on hunts), it is common to find men cooking and doing other domestic work such as washing clothes, collecting water, sweeping and looking after children. This is not to say there is no gendered division of labour — household roles are fairly marked — but that the different roles are

Scholars have said that India's forest-dwelling communities are marked by the fact that they are ordered societies without forms of rule that represent enduring structures of domination and exploitation (Morris, 2014) and, as such, largely detached from the sense of politics as leadership and control (Vitebsky, 2020). These values come across in different ways in different Adivasi communities, but a quintessential example of these anti-hierarchical, anti-authoritarian values appears in the idea of democracy by sortition as I experienced it in the selection of village leaders where I lived. Let me now turn to that.

Among the Mundas and Oraons, the most important positions of responsibility in the village are those held by the *pahan* and his helper, the *paenbharra*. These indigenous authorities have several roles. They are to facilitate the resolution of any conflict among the Adivasis whether it is a marriage dispute, a land claim, an accusation of theft or witchcraft. They are to feed the entire village three times a year at significant points in the agricultural cycle when important festivals are held (at Khalihani, Sarhul and Karam). They are to look after families who fall upon times of need (including providing grain for them) in a kind of provision of a welfare state or social security net. They are to propitiate the village spirits with blood sacrifices at various points in the year<sup>7</sup> so that the community is protected from harm caused by calamities such as droughts, fires and disease. And they are to exorcize any spirits that enter the village to create havoc. For all these purposes, special lands are set aside for them and they are also allocated seven helpers who also have allocated lands.<sup>8</sup> I will return to these responsibilities but what I want to begin with here is how the *pahan* and *paenbharra* are chosen, a remarkable process which takes place every three years and which I witnessed first in November 2000 (Shah, 2010, see Figure 1).

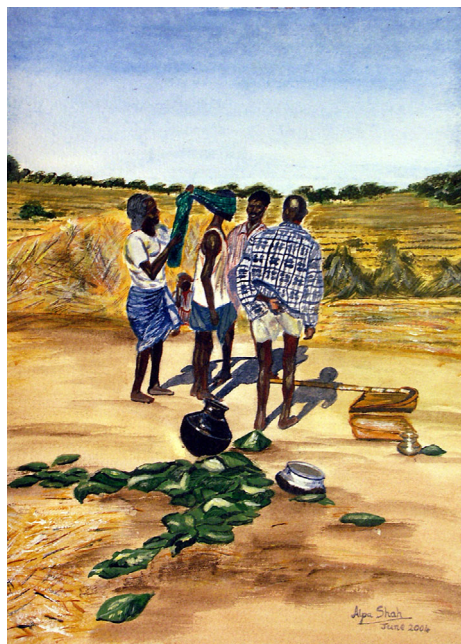
It was the morning of the day after the Khalihani festival which marks the beginning of the rice harvest. Many Mundas had gathered in the threshing site in the middle of the agricultural fields. Rice beer had been brewed for the occasion, as it was for every important event; the spirits needed drink and the first drop was always poured for one's ancestors. Everyone was happily merry. Eventually a man with a light shadow — needed for the selection

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understood as complementary and equally valued. And when there is drinking and dancing, Adivasi women participate alongside men with equal fervour. In fact, I was often struck by the notion that the communities that I lived with have a form of gender equality that surpasses the conditions in the West that decades of feminist movements had fought hard for.

7. Especially before the first harvest in November/December at the time of the Khalihani festival, in February–March during Fagua (perhaps marking a time when the village spirits were rehoused as the forest was burnt and cut down to make the village), in March–April at the Sarhul festival (when the sal flowers start blooming, perhaps representing the bounty of the forest) and in Kadoleta in August when the first rice is sown.
8. In the village where I lived, the *pahan* and the *paenbharra* each were given about 2.5 hectares. The land given to their helpers was called *bhutkhetta* land (land of the spirits), the largest sized plot being 0.5 acres.

Figure 1. The Selection of the Pahan and Paenbharra in a Munda Village in Jharkhand, 2000



Note: A man with a light shadow is blindfolded and possessed by a spirit who will take him to the households that will lead the village for the next three years.

Source: Painting by author, 2004.

process — was blindfolded and given a wooden pole at the end of which was a winnowing basket. The outgoing pahan, throwing a few rice grains, called up the village spirit *Sarna mai* to possess and direct the blindfolded man. Soon his winnowing basket started shaking and he began walking; the spirit had taken him over. He wandered from the fields to the hamlet, moving from house to house gathering a following of villagers behind him. At the first house he entered, the man stopped shaking, indicating that the spirit had left him to settle in that house which she had chosen to provide the *new* pahan for the next three years (see Figure 2).

The man was then blindfolded and possessed again. He once more wandered from house to house till the spirit eventually left him again to settle at another house. There, a man dressed in his loin cloth was quietly eating while his household, and therefore he, was declared the new paenbharra for the next three years as he unceremoniously continued to finish his lunch.

A few years later, I happened to stumble upon the selection process in the village immediately neighbouring the one where I lived, taking place with a slightly different twist but along the same principles (see Figure 3). Instead



Figure 2. Selecting the Next Pahan of a Munda Village in Jharkhand, 2000  
(cont.)



Note: The spirit settling into the household from which will emerge the next pahan.

Source: Photo by author.

of wandering from house to house, in this village the selection process took place inside a circle of rocks laid in the village *akhra*, the dancing circle and meeting ground. Each rock represented an Adivasi household of the village. The blindfolded possessed man stumbled around the circle of rocks, going round and round, watched by a merry group of Adivasis. This time he was rolling a *lohar*, the stone used to grind grain and spices, rather than holding a winnowing basket. When he eventually stopped shaking, the rock closest to his *lohar* was that which represented the household to be the next pahan. The process was then repeated for the paenbharra.

These practices of choosing leaders may appear extraordinary even to scholars of Adivasi communities who have conducted deep ethnographic research. In many areas, there are village headmen appointed by external authorities (often during colonial times) in hereditary perpetuity, leading to powerful and wealthy lineages (e.g. in the Kolhan areas of Jharkhand or among the Sora of Odisha; Vitebsky, 2017b, 2020). However, random selection of rotating leaders was in fact common in at least 100 or more of the neighbouring villages, and the practice had been recognized and recorded in the colonial land settlement reports of 1932 which at the time demarcated land for the roles.<sup>9</sup>

9. I am yet to come across cases of sortition recorded by ethnographers of Adivasis beyond this region. It is possible that scholars have just not picked up on these practices as sortition hasn't been on their horizons. Upon my prompting, fellow anthropologist Piers Vitebsky

*Figure 3. The Selection of the Pahan and Paenbharra in Another Village in Jharkhand, November 2010*



*Note:* Each rock represents a household. Whichever rock the grinding stone held by the blindfolded man touches, will represent the household of the next pahan.

*Source:* Photo by author 2010.

Years later, I realized that this method of selecting leaders in fact represented what others described as democracy by sortition. It seemed to have little in common with the traditional authority of priestly status or kingly power in India; or the choosing of leaders in the liberal forms of electoral democracy; or in revolutionary democratic centralism that also infiltrated the area. In fact, it appeared to have more in common with ancient Athenian and medieval Florentine practices, or for that matter today's citizens' assemblies in Ireland, British Columbia or Oregon (to which I will return at the end), than with the other traditions of democracy and authority in India.

There are several important things to note about this selection process. The first is that these practices of choosing a leader are so democratic that it is a lottery as to who is selected; any household can be chosen. I was convinced that the system would be manipulated. However, after tracing the history of the pahan and paenbharra selection of the 15 previous years in the village in which I lived, I could find no pattern. Second, implied in democracy by sortition is that not only can any household be chosen but every single household has the qualities of leading, can lead, and should lead. Indeed, it should not really matter who leads as all can potentially do so.

Third, leadership requires no special qualities that sets one above the rest. This contrasts with dominant models in the contemporary world in which

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says that he began asking about such rotating leadership among the Sora in Odisha and did indeed pick up memories of such practices, but that this needs further investigation.

leadership is encouraged through meritocracy and individualized and personalized attributes of courage, vision, direction, clarity, passion, talent, charisma, wealth, rank or status. In fact — and fourth — people often did not care to be leaders at all. They did not groom, cultivate, accumulate or petition for leadership. Rather, it is a ‘cargo’ or charge — a duty or responsibility that can even be a burden — to serve the village. Sometimes it is the case that a household is not able to take on the responsibility (for example, if it has only one adult member and therefore limited capacity for cultivating the lands to feed the village). In this case, leadership is even passed on to others.

Fifth, this form of democracy by sortition is set up to ensure the impermanence of power. As the household which holds the responsibility to lead changes every three years in a rotating system of random selection, power is not allowed to concentrate in any one individual or family. The fact of rotation and the relatively short term of leadership are very important safeguards against leadership being used for perpetuation of status or concentration of power. Sixth, real power lies in the collective of the community itself. Any important decisions — including solving any disputes in which the indigenous leaders cannot facilitate a resolution between the parties — involves calling a meeting of the whole community. Decisions are then reached by a process of open deliberation where people offer opinions and discuss to reach consensus, often taking several hours and sometimes even several days. This is not a system ruled by the ‘stick’, which is part and parcel of the monopoly of violence of the traditional Hindu king. I never heard of the pahan or paenbharra imposing their will, giving orders, taking collective decisions on their own. Seventh, it would be easy to characterize this as a leaderless, or acephalous, system. But this would be to miss the point that anyone can be a leader and that leadership therefore rests in everyone.

There are several caveats to note that cannot be discussed at length here, but which I will touch upon. First, these systems are meaningful only to *some* of the Adivasis — the Mundas and some other tribal groups — not the higher castes who also live in the village,<sup>10</sup> nor the Adivasis who have

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10. The Yadavs, whose ancestors had been introduced as feudal landlords to collect revenue from the village, never attended the Munda meetings, did not partake in the decision-making practices, had no hand in the selection of the pahan and the paenbharra. I believe these ex-landlords allowed these systems to persist because they had no bearing on what they considered their own domination of those villages, and in fact enabled their own colonization of the modern state (Shah, 2010). Moreover, they had found a way to exploit these indigenous structures; some time in the zamindari period (in the 19th century) they had introduced the rule that the pahan and paenbharra had to organize free labour to fetch wood from the forest for their Hindu weddings and funeral pyres and plaster their temples. But ultimately, theirs was what Ranajit Guha (1998) called a ‘dominance without hegemony’, as for the Mundas it was the pahan and the paenbharra, and not the feudal landlord, who were the authorities they recognized as legitimate.

Hinduized or converted to Christianity.<sup>11</sup> Second, corruption of the system can happen if rotation of leadership stops. There is of course always the possibility that even in the least unequal system, ‘some are more equal than others’, as Orwell famously said. The Mundas in fact differentiated their pahān and paenbharra selection from that of a nearby village where an Oraon claimed that the spirit kept settling at his house and therefore he and his descendants had become the permanent pahāns of the village. The interesting thing to note about this corruption, to which I will return, is that this man had become a Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA), a leader elected via the liberal electoral democratic system. Third, the spirits settled in houses and it is households which are chosen to lead, but de facto the man of the household (not the women) carries out all the responsibilities.<sup>12</sup> Fourth, I found evidence of such practices of democracy by sortition only at the village level, not at the inter-village level.<sup>13</sup>

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11. Relatedly, it is also my hypothesis that these systems of democracy by sortition have persisted as a form of counterculture among Adivasis who lived directly under the regimes of outside feudal landlords but were paradoxically destroyed in those areas where there were no outside feudal landlords or in areas that experienced Christianization (from the late 1800s). This is because in the regions without outside feudal landlords, Adivasis were directly co-opted by the colonial state to collect revenue through the insertion of new positions of headmen and chiefs chosen from within their communities who were to act as colonial agents; this brought the infiltration of new inequalities and hierarchies straight into the Adivasi communities (see also Vitebsky, 2017b). Unsurprisingly, I also found no trace of systems of democracy by sortition in the Adivasi areas which had experienced Christianization. One of the first aims of the missionaries was to get rid of non-Christian supernatural ideals. Instead, they introduced a more individualized notion of equality which in fact paved the way to the entry of the liberal democratic state among those Adivasis. In contrast, ultimately the feudal landlords’ exploitation of the pahān and paenbharra to provide labour seems to have been a small price for the Mundas to have paid for maintaining values that are quite at odds with those whom they served.
  12. I never heard of a woman killing chickens for sacrifices or facilitating the meetings for village disputes. And although women are always vociferous in giving opinions, they rarely attend the village meetings for deliberation. As I have indicated earlier, this does not mean that women are valued less than men in the society, but it reflects the gendered division of roles in households where all roles are equally valued. Perhaps a modern version of this system would seek to rebalance this inequality of roles in leadership, but as I have pointed out, a gender division of roles here does not mean that more generally one gender is dominant over the other. Moreover, one must not lose sight of the wider point that being a leader is not valued over other roles; leadership is not an aspiration but a duty.
  13. Inter-village governance among the Adivasis (resolving tensions between villages or conflicts which could not be settled at the village level) takes place through a council called the *parha* which represents anywhere between five and 21 villages. It seems that colonial rule eradicated this structure at the inter-village level. Where it exists, it was reinitiated by MLAs to try to gain the vote of the Adivasis (Shah, 2007) and at a wider level it is being revived by social movements and NGOS — but on very different secular principles from those that it represents in villages like the one where I lived (Shah, 2010). While I have argued at length elsewhere that the revival of the *parha* there took place precisely because these MLAs knew that for the local Adivasis the *parha* represents an ideal of democracy

Lastly, it could be argued that the ultimate selection of these indigenous leaders is down to the spirits and therefore not at all random. Indeed, in his critique of the analysis of egalitarian societies such as the Chewong hunters of the Malaysian interior as recounted by Signe Howell (1985, 1989, 2012), Marshall Sahlins (2017) points out that for all their egalitarianism, ultimately the whole practice was coercively ruled by a host of cosmic authorities. Perhaps spirits do have their own volition, but I argue that what is important is the practical impact of the spirits' actions; and this is that anyone could equally be chosen. Indeed, in my view, the implication is that Sahlins fails to note that the practical impact of what the spirits sanction matters in the day-to-day interactions between people. The spirits could have sanctioned only one household or an elite group to lead (or based their decision on wealth, power, charisma or other kinds of individual prowess) and therefore promoted social relations based on hierarchy and inequality, as in the rest of India. But instead, they nurtured counter-hierarchical, anti-authoritarian values between people, tried to ensure that power and status would not get entrenched in any one person or group, as any household could equally be chosen to lead, had to be prepared to take on responsibility, and that would change every three years.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, what is important to highlight is that it is ultimately sortition itself that gives the selection authority, either through the spirit or the idea of fate (sort). Thus, the history of the working of sortition itself becomes its authority.

So, despite all the ifs and buts — all of which would have to be considered for a 'real utopia' — what I seek to highlight in this section is that hierarchy, dominance, power and status have preoccupied the Indian sociology of values to the detriment of attention to more egalitarian values.<sup>15</sup> What we have in leadership by sortition are democratic values that are quite contrary to the hierarchical ideology of caste where all are not equal and only the selected few have the right (moral or divine) to rule. Indeed, this is not a system representing the classic debates of Indian society — it is neither a Dumontian model of religion encompassing politics, status

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that is separate from and more legitimate than that of the modern state (Shah, 2007, 2010), we have little insight into how it was historically supposed to operate.

14. Oliver Dowlen (2008) warns that in the 19th century the debate over the use of lot in ancient Athens became fixated on the issue of its religious function (the idea that chosen leaders were an act of divine will) and that this religious fixation is perhaps one explanation as to why sortition declined.
15. Whether emanating from those who supported Dumont's theory of status encompassing power (the Brahmin encompassing the King, religion encompassing politics), or those who propped up Hocart, and argued that it was the other way around (the king or the functions of the dominant caste, not the priest, was at the centre), the debate on Indian hierarchy is vast and protracted (for a review, see Raheja, 1988). There is not much to be gained by revisiting it here. The point is that the debate has focused on who is on top and has authority, based on the overall structuring of the hierarchy of status and power. In doing so, other important features of Indian society have been sidelined; namely, for the purpose of this article, the persistence of more egalitarian communal values.

encompassing power (Dumont, 1966/1970), nor a Hocartian one which puts it the other way round (Hocart, 1950). Underwriting leadership by sortition in this Adivasi case is the fact that politics, economics (or religion) are not considered separate realms; perhaps more akin to the Maussian ideal for Melanesia (Mauss, 1925/1990) than to anything that has been analysed for India.<sup>16</sup>

Significantly, in the Adivasi structure of values that I present, political power is neither a means to economically rise above others, nor a means to distribute resources to gain patronage over and impose oneself on others. In fact, leaders are bearers of community-based egalitarian values in which significant economic stratification is discouraged. Democracy by sortition among these Adivasis then represents a system in which political and economic equality go hand in hand. As such, it is at odds with the two other structures of democracy also prevalent in the area — electoral voting and revolutionary democratic centralism — to which I now turn.

## LIBERAL ELECTORAL DEMOCRACY

With Indian independence came liberal electoral democracy. Today India is often celebrated as the world's largest democracy, home to one-quarter of

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16. The existence of these practices of democracy by sortition suggests that hidden by Dumont's (1966/1970) analysis of India as the land of *homo hierarchicus*, where religion encompassed politics (or its Hocartian antithesis), are also societies prioritizing egalitarian values that had more in common with the Melanesian societies described by Mauss (1925/1990). These are the societies where religion, economics and politics are one realm — societies from which Dumont sought to distinguish India. Dumont, in fact, had little to say about India's Adivasi societies and was possibly flummoxed by what he read of them, not knowing where to place them (Vitebsky, 1993), and he certainly got individualism all wrong as far as Adivasis are concerned (see Morris, 1978). Jonathan Parry identified the much-neglected wider comparative framework of Dumont's reading of India; that following his teacher Mauss, he sought to compare and contrast different kinds of societies at the level of values. That is, if Mauss's (1925/1990) essay on the gift was concerned with how modern societies separated off religion, politics and economics (to produce purely economic exchanges and the idea of a *homo aequalis* or the Western individualism and self-interest), and primitive or archaic societies were ones in which religion, politics and economics were indivisible, for Dumont India was halfway along a path of development in which religion encompassed politics. Overall, what the material presented in this article suggests is that, contra Dumont, for some decades in India we have in fact had the coexistence of at least three different kinds of society in the realm of values. We have the 'modern society' brought in by the Constitution and liberal democracy which stress equality (political equality) and individualism and in which the different domains of life — economics, politics, religion — are separated. We have also had the Dumontian model of the hierarchical traditional India where religion encompassed politics (or its Hocartian antithesis). But, significantly, we can also see in India tribal societies structured by egalitarian values as per Mauss's interpretation of Melanesia where religion, economics and politics are all one realm (see also Shah, 2010: 60–61). The task for the anthropologist, sociologist and historian then would be to understand how and why these different models coexist and how some gain salience over others.



the world's voters. Leaving aside the hidden Adivasi world I have explored, it is generally the modern democratic state with its constitution and ballot box that is credited with spreading the ideals of equality — based on individual rights — to replace hierarchical values (of caste) in India (Beteille, 1986). However, I want to argue next that these liberal norms of democracy are replacing Adivasi egalitarian values with the idea of equal rights as property to create both new hierarchical values among, and new socio-economic inequalities within, indigenous communities.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the rise of the democratically elected leader, elected through the ballot box, the MLA. With the modern state, equal opportunity for all on the basis of citizenship is to be granted but there is also the idea of special opportunities for some on the basis of community and the historic injustices they have suffered which needed rectification. Independent India put in place some of the most extensive policies of affirmative action for its Adivasis (ST) and Dalits (Scheduled Caste, SC) to correct the historic injustices of the past. These include reservation for SCs and STs as MLAs or MPs (members of parliament) in areas where they are numerically dominant, as well as reserved places in higher education and in government institutions in proportion to their representation in the total population.

Limited space prevents me from exploring the nuances of the transformations in Adivasis' relations with the state that followed.<sup>17</sup> Here, I can share that where I lived, the first Adivasi MLAs tried to win the Adivasi vote (and to get them to vote in the first place) by protecting their indigenous systems from the reach of the state; democracy as an ideal was separated from the state. Over time though, the MLAs' own participation in the electoral process is one that is bound to undermine Adivasi egalitarian values. This is

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17. In the forests and hills of central and eastern India, as I have argued elsewhere (Shah, 2010), the state initially emerged in its most oppressive forms. Its face was the feudal landlords who, from the late 19th century, collected revenue, the police who beat you and the forest guards who prevented your entry into the forests but allowed outsiders to take away its fruit. Over time, the seemingly more benevolent form of the state also began to take root — the block development officers who sought to bring roads, erect schools and health centres and build bridges; the teachers deputed to the schools, and the health workers sent out to immunize and increase life expectancies. But at first these positions were mainly filled by outsiders — usually Bihari high-caste men — who stigmatized the locals as *jungli*, as wild and savage as the forest which surrounded them. In Christian converted areas, the missionaries educated the Adivasis and generated social movements demanding more education and jobs for the Adivasis. In many of the non-converted areas, it was only when Jharkhand got independence from Bihar in the new millennium, and a generation of Adivasis were educated in the modern state school system, that Adivasis could compete for state sector jobs, despite the constitutional affirmative action measures that set those jobs aside for them. Yet, we can see the transformation in values nurtured by these new ideals of equality enshrined in the modern state by exploring the rise of Adivasi leaders promoted by electoral democracy (no education was required to fill these posts and, in reserved constituencies, only Adivasis could be fielded).

Figure 4. Adivasi Chief Ministers of Jharkhand since its Independence from Bihar State



Source: Image credit: <https://english.newsnationtv.com/photos/india-news/in-pictures-chief-ministers-of-jharkhand-since-its-inception-in-2000-3822>

because, as an MLA, it is necessary to operate in the wider electoral system governed by the higher castes and classes, to negotiate one's position at the regional and national level in party and state structures. To be a democratically elected leader as an Adivasi one must compete in terms that are set by a very different system of values in which it is essential to cultivate individual power, accumulate private property and wealth, charisma and status, requiring leaders to differentiate themselves from the communities in which they are born (see Figure 4).

Over time MLAs build themselves brick mansions in place of the simple mud houses. They begin wearing a white *kurta pyjama* (long baggy top and trousers that are customary of 'big men' in much of India) or trousers and shirt, in place of a *lungi* (loin cloth). They consume to show their wealth and status, presenting themselves as a cut above the rest. They cultivate charisma, oratory power and individual talent and prowess. They depend on an image of ready access to muscle-power (other men with sticks and guns) against those who get in their way (in a context where there is no such idea of prowess). And they increasingly treat women as their property, as they try to keep their wives and daughters 'protected' within the confines of their houses (instead of freely roaming the fields and the forests), search for 'romantic' love from women they can possess, and boast to other men about the women they sexually conquer, presenting a new kind of patriarchy and machismo (historically muted among Adivasis).



At the heart of this transformation is that electoral democracy in India brings very different values of leadership to the indigenous model described earlier. Today, leaders nurtured through electoral democracy need to be ‘big men’ or ‘strong men’ (only sometimes a woman gets in), stand above the masses, and show their personal power through their ability to command an army of people and abundant resources. They need to accumulate capital to show their individual status and power but also to contribute to the party coffers and to redistribute to followers and workers/volunteers as a sign of their patronage. Where I lived in Jharkhand, the greatest source of wealth is extortion from big business (whether it is traders or mining companies) and from state development resources coming into the area. The building of roads, schools or health centres are all subject to elaborate systems of extortion in which a nexus of various officers, politicians and their local contractors accumulate illicit money. These are well-regulated informal economies of state schemes (for details, see Shah, 2009, 2010), otherwise called administrative and political corruption. Drawing parallels with the analysis of the Sicilian mafia (Gambetta, 1993), I have argued (Shah, 2006) that these informal economies are best characterized as ‘markets of protection’ whereby leaders compete to offer followers protection from the threat of their own violence as well as that of competitors. These ‘markets’ involve a complex moral economy in which illegality does not equate to immorality (Shah, 2009). Nevertheless, it is also quite normal for these democratically elected leaders to be prosecuted for criminal charges; Adivasi MLAs and MPs are no different to the general Indian pattern.<sup>18</sup> Across the country, criminality is in fact an asset to a candidate’s electoral fortunes, placing them at a competitive advantage (Vaishnav, 2017). Undoubtedly, involvement in criminal activity today is part and parcel of democratically elected leadership, and also shows how such positions of leadership are a route to unbridled accumulation. This is supported by evidence released since 2003, when the Supreme Court made it mandatory to disclose the criminal record data of electoral candidates. In 2018, 36 per cent of parliamentarians and state assembly members (1,765 in total) were facing ongoing criminal prosecution. In 2019, the figure was up to 43 per cent of all members of parliament — that is almost every other elected member of parliament. What it involves is the intertwining of crime, business and politics, in a ‘Mafia raj’, that some scholars say has now become indigenous to South Asia (Michelutti et al., 2018).

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18. This is evidenced by some of Jharkhand’s most famous politicians. Shibhu Soren, for instance, who has served three times as Chief Minister of Jharkhand, as Minister of Coal in the Union Cabinet in 2006 and is president of the Jharkhand Mukti Morch, was found guilty of murdering his private secretary and has been indicted on various other criminal charges. Madhu Koda, Jharkhand’s fourth chief minister, was alleged to have taken several hundred thousand US dollars as bribes to allocate mines to business houses and was convicted for money laundering in this ‘coal scam’. The current chief minister, Hemant Soren, also has two cases pending against him.

Marxist critiques have long pointed out that procedural electoral democracy is simply the tool by means of which a tiny majority class, a bourgeoisie, rules. What democracy under capitalism does is to formally separate politics from economics (see Ayers and Saad-Filho, 2015). On the one hand, procedural democracy promises political equality; everyone can equally vote in a representative government. On the other hand, however, the structures and processes that perpetuate economic inequality are left intact; that is how state power maintains and promotes the interest of the capitalist classes from which it is in fact inseparable.

If once all this was veiled, today neoliberalism has laid it bare by giving a new lease to the role of the private sector in the economy and society which includes control over the state and liberal democratic processes. Recent changes in Indian law permit increased corporate spending on elections, allowing corporate power unashamedly to control the state. India is no different from the USA. In the USA, corporate managers can now buy elections directly (Chomsky, 2010). In India, in 2017, a cap on the amount which companies were allowed to donate, equivalent to 7.5 per cent of their net average profits earned in the preceding three years, was removed. In addition, electoral bonds were introduced, eliminating the mandatory disclosure of donors' identities by political parties. Since 2018, foreign companies registered in India are permitted to make political donations. The current trajectory of widening economic inequalities led by large corporations will only be exacerbated under procedural electoral democracy.

Against this backdrop, the criminal charges against some of India's politicians — for example, former Adivasi Chief Minister Madhu Koda, who was convicted on charges of involvement in coal scams in Jharkhand — seem small fry as they serve to conceal the larger criminals at work, namely the corporations Koda was serving and which will go unscathed. It would, however, be a mistake to conclude that electoral democracy in India has merely bolstered the power of the ruling classes. The Constitution does stipulate special measures through affirmative action to groups who otherwise would never have gained access to the state because of circumscribed historical inequalities. Were it not for these democratic values, Adivasis would never be in a position to lead political parties. Yet, in the broader scheme of things, these gains seem small. Looking from the bottom-up experience of indigenous communities, it can be argued that procedural electoral democracy may allow Adivasis to enter mainstream politics, but it also brings in a new form of leadership accompanied by the cultivation of new inequalities and hierarchies.

In the area I lived in, the first three Adivasi MLAs who dominated electoral politics from the 1960s to 2000 came to be seen as corrupt, immoral, 'spoilt' men, echoing the old adage that power corrupts. However, with the rise of a new generation of educated Adivasi youth who could access state sector jobs and move beyond the worlds of their parents, the new values cultivated by these MLAs began to represent a wider transformation of

indigenous norms. These include new desires to accumulate and save money, and new patterns of consumption which seek to elevate an individual above the rest — changes that are bringing in a new degree of economic differentiation among Adivasis.

At the same time, low-caste upward mobility comes with the reproduction of many higher-caste values. The most striking example of this is the cultivation of a more patriarchal paternalistic machismo among men, at the heart of which is the control of women's sexuality. On the one hand, women within one's household are increasingly policed as good wives and daughters who must stay at home or attain decent reputable jobs but can no longer freely wander through the villages and drink and dance alongside men as their equals. On the other hand, non-related women can easily become the object of sexual control, at any time dominated and dehumanized especially in front of other men.

Perhaps the greatest tragedy of the hierarchical values enhanced by the spread of the liberal democratic state among Adivasis is the feeling of inferiority vis-à-vis others higher up in the social hierarchy. If Adivasis once roamed the forests and the fields with confidence, autonomy and dignity, their increased participation in processes of liberal democracy and the modern state interiorizes the inferiority that others ascribe to them. This is the psychological trauma that Verrier Elwin (1942) so astutely described as 'a loss of nerve'. The political response from Adivasi political leaders to this 'loss of nerve' is the development of an Adivasi identity politics — indeed the introduction of the term 'Adivasi' is itself a part of this<sup>19</sup> — demanding equal recognition on the basis of identity, now seen as a kind of property, but which has little to do with longstanding indigenous values, for example as represented in leadership by sortition (Shah, 2010). My basic proposition then is that democratically elected leaders are bearers of a system of political equality based on individual or group rights which in fact exacerbates economic inequalities (as some individuals seek to rise above the rest). Among the Adivasis, this also brings new hierarchical values (for instance, the increasing treatment of women as the second sex) combined with a growing inferiority complex. Together these changes undermine the egalitarian values that democratic leadership through sortition represents.

## **MARXIST-LENINIST MAOIST REVOLUTIONARY DEMOCRACY**

Spreading among the Adivasis are those who see electoral democracy as a sham, who consider economic inequality as the source of all oppression,

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19. It was the Christian-influenced Chota Nagpur Adivasi Mahasabha (which later become the Jharkhand Party) that introduced the idea of the Adivasi as a pan-Indian identity in the 1930s.

*Figure 5. A Communist Party of India (Maoist) or Naxalite Guerrilla Camp in Jharkhand, 2010*



*Source:* Photo taken by the author.

and who for the last 50 years have been fighting for what they consider will be an equal society for everyone, a ‘true’ democracy; a communist one. These are Marx-, Lenin- and Mao-inspired underground armed revolutionaries — popularly called Naxalites, after the Himalayan village of Naxalbari where they raised their first rebellion in 1967 — hierarchically organized as a vanguard party. Since the 1990s they have created their guerrilla strongholds in the forests and hills of central and eastern India where the Adivasis live. Although many outsiders before them failed to infiltrate these forests, the Adivasis became the main support base of the Naxalites and it is here, in the heart of the country, that the guerrillas grew in strength, consolidating their armies. In 2004, various Naxalite groups united to form the Communist Party of India (Maoist), to strengthen their armed fight to take over the Indian state. Soon these Maoists, as they became known, were labelled ‘India’s greatest internal security threat’ by the then prime minister, and new rounds of intense counterinsurgency operations to wipe them out were begun and are ongoing. Figure 5 depicts a Communist Party of India (Maoist) guerrilla camp in Jharkhand in 2010.

Between 2008 and 2010, as these counterinsurgency operations intensified, I happened to live in an Oraon-dominated village in a guerrilla stronghold of the Maoists. The deep immersive methodology of open-ended participant observation conducted over years that one pursues as an anthropologist allowed me to explore not only the wider changes among the Adivasis caused by the guerrilla movement but also life in the guerrilla armies.

This enabled me to gain an understanding of the kind of values of leadership the communist guerrillas pursued and how these are translated among the Adivasis.

As per Marxist-Leninist theory, for the Indian Maoists, liberal electoral democracy, which is allegedly devoted to public interest, in fact only puts in place leaders who serve their own private purpose of hunting for higher positions and making a career. In making this argument, they follow Lenin (1918: 15), who said that democracy 'is the best political shell for capitalism' and 'the real essence of bourgeois parliamentarianism [was] ... to decide once every few years which member of the ruling class is to repress and crush the people through parliament'. In this analysis, despite some constitutional measures which seem pro-people, the state sustains the privileges of those with property. The argument follows that the rights of men, allegedly protected by the liberal state, are the rights of *egoistic* man, separated off from other men and the community; the practical application of the right of liberty is ultimately the right of property. The upshot of this analysis is that to celebrate democracy because people cast a vote at the polling booth to choose leaders completely ignores the wider power relations at stake in the electoral process, which exploit and oppress them daily.

Nevertheless, some Naxalite groups condone fielding leaders to compete for a seat in electoral politics as a means to progress towards a communist society. They join those Marxists who argue that 'revolution' can eventually come about through the ballot box if enough workers can win a parliamentary majority, making it very difficult for the ruling classes to manipulate the state in their favour. However, in 2007, the Communist Party of India (Maoist) entrenched its position that only an armed revolution can bring about democracy by taking the stance that participation in liberal electoral politics was so corrupting that the boycott of elections needed to be moved from a tactical issue (which allowed flexibility to change one's approach) to a strategic one (from which there could be no deviation).

In this perspective, liberal democracy and its leaders are thus seen as an instrument of class oppression designed to reproduce a system of economic exploitation. A revolution to get rid of this economic inequality is essential to bring about 'true democracy', a real participatory democracy, as enshrined in communism. Of course, what this 'true democracy' would look like, no Marxist has spelled out beyond general principles such as abolition of private property; the erasure of the division between mental and manual labour; the transcendence of the alienation produced by private property regimes to enable people to return to being entirely social, entirely human. However, there has been endless debate about how to get there: whether to immediately overthrow the state in direct action or wait for the right moment with patient long-term work; whether gradual reform is the way forward or whether underground armed warfare is necessary; whether spontaneous action could bring about change; or whether it is necessary to organize with a strategy and tactics.

The Indian Naxalites, following Lenin and Mao, organize themselves as a vanguard party<sup>20</sup> in a protracted ‘people’s war’ to move from the countryside to the city.<sup>21</sup> So their presence in the Adivasi villages brings in very different values of leadership and democracy from those situated at the centre of either sortition or the liberal democratic model. They mark a hierarchical party and military structure<sup>22</sup> in which inner party democracy is to be governed by Leninist principles of democratic centralism. In theory, all committees are democratically elected and there is space to criticize, debate and resolve differences. Significant changes need the consent (by vote) of two-thirds of the members of the concerned committee. Issues which cannot be resolved at one level are sent up the party hierarchy. Once a decision is taken, individuals are expected to abide by it to prevent factionalism. A disciplined hierarchy thus characterizes the structure, with the individual subordinate to the party, the minority subordinate to the majority, the lower levels subordinate to the higher levels, and the entire party subordinate to the Central Committee. Although the Maoist theory of the mass line — summarized by the phrase ‘from the masses, to the masses’ — introduces a strategy for

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20. The idea was to bring about a ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’, that is, the eventual rule of the working classes. ‘Professional revolutionaries’ — the vanguard of the proletariat — were seen to be necessary because communism could not organically develop from the working classes. For Marx, commodity fetishism made it impossible for workers to see their exploitation in the production process and to realize that a revolution was necessary. Lenin took it further, arguing that the working classes had become too corrupted, driven by private passion and greed, and needed to be led out of it. Their full revolutionary communist consciousness could therefore only be achieved in fighting for the party. (For Lenin, even history’s chosen people, the industrial workers, were so influenced by ‘corrupt’ ideas that, if left to their own devices, they would not do much more than try to raise their own wages; Lenin, 1902: 31–41.) The vanguard would not only be trusted to prevent people from further corruption, cleansing them to instil revolutionary ‘class consciousness’ (Lenin, 2018), they would also be equipped with ‘scientific’ revolutionary theory to lead the revolution.
  21. Their ‘scientific theory’ required the ‘correct’ analysis of the economy in order to determine the revolutionary strategy to bring about communism. As with many other Maoist movements, the Indian Naxalites see the choice as twofold. If the country is analysed to be predominantly a capitalist one, what is necessary is the Russian path of revolution as set by Lenin which called for both open, legal struggles and secret, illegal activity, working towards an eventual insurrection in the cities which would then move to the countryside. But if the country is still predominantly a ‘semi-feudal and semi-colonial’ one, the path of the revolutionary struggle set by Mao Zedong is necessary: an agrarian revolutionary programme of protracted people’s war beginning in the countryside and only eventually taking over the cities. The Indian Naxalites had endless debates about which analysis was ‘correct’ for the Indian economy, but in 2004, the Communist Party of India (Maoist) re-emphasized their commitment to the Maoist path (Shah, 2014).
  22. There is a Central Committee with a cascading party structure of various State Committees, Regional Committees, Zonal Committees, Sub-zonal Committees and Area Committees under which are village cells where new recruits enter. Parallel to this political structure is a military one organizing a People’s Liberation Guerrilla Army, headed by a Central Military Commission (itself under the leadership of and constituted by Central Committee) and another set of hierarchically organized committees: the State Military Commission, Company Party Committee, Platoon Party Committees, and so forth.

ensuring the direct contribution of the working classes to the political direction of the party, the structure of leadership is overwhelmingly top-down.

Unlike those elected under liberal democracy, leadership is supposedly not based on rank, status, wealth or charisma but above all on the commitment to the revolutionary cause, the subordination of any form of self-interest to that of the party, the willingness to sacrifice everything (including one's life), and the erasure of any cleavage between particular and common interests. It is in some sense very democratic as anyone can rise up the party hierarchy as long as they show commitment in theory and in action. This commitment to a higher cause involves not only fighting for a new world economic order that will usher in equality for everyone but also creating a new communal subjectivity in the present. For communism is not just the dream of a distant future but has to be fought for in the process of the revolution itself, in the remaking of people and social relations anew, in the prefigurative politics of the struggle.

Leadership is thus to be exemplary of a non-egotistic, classless and casteless subject. A new name is given to new recruits not just for security reasons but to get rid of all the baggage of the past. Party members are expected to eliminate any casteist practices,<sup>23</sup> give up all forms of private property, refrain from 'worldly' pleasures and the consumption of luxuries. Any deviance from this ideal subject risks being seen as egoism, an individual's pursuit of selfish ends and private interests, given a free reign under capitalism but to be suppressed for the revolutionary ideal. Maoist practices of 'criticism', 'self-criticism' and 'rectification' are crucial to the reformation of the individual. With this making of revolutionary subjectivity also comes the suppression of individualism and creativity (unless it conforms to party ranks), to which I will return.

My book *Nightmarch* (2018) explores the many facets of the contradictions in the making of revolutionary subjectivity through which the Maoists undermine their own aims. There is the fact that not many leaders can match these ideals. There are the dangers which come with the use of arms whereby it is easy to reproduce the violence of the oppressor one is allegedly fighting. And there are also the well-known issues of the dangers of authoritarianism under such deeply hierarchical leadership structures, whereby it becomes very difficult to question the leadership's vision without being cast as a traitor.

The issue I want to focus on here is the contradiction arising out of the social gulf which emerges between the leadership and their Adivasi rank and file. Since the leadership is dependent on commitment which can only be shown over time, leaders are from the small clique of middle-class, upper-caste men who were mobilized as students in the cities in the 1980s and

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23. Party members are expected to eliminate any practices of ritual purity and pollution that maintain caste hierarchy and to encourage their transcendence; cooking and consumption of food are to be shared by all; inter-caste marriage unions are welcomed.



*Figure 6. Adivasi Youth Painting a Communist Party of India (Maoist) Flag in the Jungles of Jharkhand, 2009*



*Source:* Photo taken by author.

1990s, and have been underground for several decades. If these leaders broke with their pasts for a ‘higher cause’, in contrast, Adivasi youths move in and out of their guerrilla armies as though it is a second home, as though they are going to live with an uncle or an aunt. (Figure 6 portrays Adivasi youths who joined the Maoists). These indigenous youths join more for personal autonomy — a fight with a parent or sibling, a love affair, to see a different world — than for the lofty goals of the transformation of the world or even the local economy. Only very few Adivasis end up staying within the party, making the rare transition to rise a little way up the party hierarchies (most often to lead platoons or to regional-level structures; there were no Adivasi in the Central Committee when I conducted my research).

That the Adivasis feel so comfortable moving in and out of the guerrilla armies is a tribute to the success of the Maoist leaders in treating them as equal human beings when all previous outsiders had cast them away as wild, savage and barbaric. Indeed, I have shown elsewhere that rather than reasons of coercion, greed or grievance commonly thought to be the reasons for the spread of such insurgencies, it is the emotional intimacy developed between the guerrillas and the Adivasis that allow the movement to spread (Shah, 2013b, 2018).

As the Maoists are subservient to a party structure dedicated to a specific programme of transformation based on a hierarchically imposed economic determinism, as the ego has to be arrested, individuality submerged and human imagination therefore stifled, it is ultimately a common leftist upper-caste imagination of Adivasi life that prevails among the leadership.



This is that Adivasis are above all economically exploited, their women sexually oppressed including by their own men, their societies vestiges of a past that has to be eradicated. The Naxalites therefore completely disregard the values of political and economic equality, the individual autonomy and creativity, which already existed in Adivasi communities (Shah, 2018). Moreover, the ‘science’ of their revolution becomes like a religious dogma which might keep a small group of leaders together, but disables them from taking account of what prevails and the changes around them, thus undermining their own reach (ibid.). Their stageist<sup>24</sup> programme of transformation fails to appreciate the egalitarian values of Adivasi life as they doom them to the dustbin of history. Moreover, the Maoist economic analysis of ‘semi-feudalism’ in India prevents them from seeing how capitalism is spreading in the Adivasi areas, including through their own actions (Shah, 2013a). The tragedy is that this leads to their own role in the acceleration of the erasure of Adivasi egalitarian values.

The Maoists are in fact nurturing a slow social economic and political transformation among the Adivasis, though it is neither one that they have planned nor one that they recognize. It emanates from the fact that the party funds itself by insertion into the same capitalist extortion rackets around state development schemes and big business that mainstream politicians — MLAs — are a part of and through which illicit money can be gained. Like others who rise in the party hierarchies, for the few Adivasis who end up staying within the party and who are therefore tasked with collecting these funds, it is always tempting to divert some away from the party needs and into your own pocket, stash it away to eventually raise your mud house into a multistorey brick building, acquire your four-wheel drive Bolero and send your children to private schools. Thus, the Maoists nurture a new generation of Adivasi mini-entrepreneurs, seeking to line their own pockets in a similar fashion to the Adivasi MLAs, rising above the rest of their communities, creating economic stratification among Adivasis. As with the Adivasi MLAs, these Adivasi youths now move around in networks dominated by higher-caste men, and with economic upward mobility also comes the same development of higher-caste hierarchical values we saw among the democratically elected leaders.

The upshot is that the revolutionary leaders fighting for economic equality do so through a political structure that is deeply hierarchical, unequal and suppressive of individuality. It accelerates the rise of economic inequalities among the Adivasis and brings new hierarchical values of caste into Adivasi communities, the irony being that this is despite their attempts to de-caste and de-class themselves. The effect is that the revolutionaries begin to mimic the very structures of inequality they seek to crush, the greatest tragedy of which is the undermining of a political and economic world that

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24. The idea that society needs to move from one stage to the next.

is far more egalitarian than the one they are creating among the Adivasis. The extent of the Maoist self-critique is that they have not been able to develop leaders out of Adivasis, a critique which is common among NGOs and social movements more generally. However, this misses the whole point; not only do the majority of the Adivasis not want to suppress their individuality as required by such a hierarchical political structure, they also hold a very different ideal of leadership from the Naxalite top-down vision, and that is one in which everyone already is a potential leader.<sup>25</sup>

### **CONCLUSION: DOES SORTITION TRUMP LIBERAL DEMOCRACY AND MARXIST-LENINIST DEMOCRACY?**

Let me begin this section by summarizing the three different models of democracy and leadership that I have explored in this article. To start with the last first; democracy and leadership as exhibited by the Marx-, Lenin- and Mao-inspired armed revolutionaries, the Naxalites in India. Here, we have those aiming to create a more equal, more democratic world. They prioritize challenging economic inequality in their analysis for transformation, but their struggle takes place through a party organized by extreme political hierarchy that suppresses individuality. Their communist egalitarian values enable them to become embedded among Adivasis. However, their economic determinism and programme of stageist transformation lead them to ignore the forms of socio-economic equality that already exist among the Adivasis. The result is that Adivasis who are influenced by these revolutionaries bring new economic inequalities into their communities. In India, this has gone hand in hand with emulating the lifestyles of the higher castes and therefore also inserts new political hierarchies in Adivasi communities through the increased penetration of the values of a caste society.

In the second model, we have the spread of liberal electoral democracy in which leaders are to be bearers of a system of political equality based on individual rights, but which does not challenge economic inequality. Adivasi leaders rising in this system bring new economic inequalities into their communities and, with that, as with the Naxalites, also new political hierarchies of the values of caste. In the first model, where democracy takes place through sortition — the random selection of rotating leaders — we have a system in which everyone is equally a potential leader, where the values of egalitarianism prevail, both politically and economically, alongside a flourishing of individual autonomy.

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25. Of course, Marxism need not inevitably end up in a Leninist vanguard party with such hierarchies. It is now well known that at the end of his life Marx became interested in anthropology and structures and the possibilities of moving to communism from the possibilities offered by more egalitarian societies (e.g. Anderson, 2010).

In thinking comparatively about these three cases, my wider aims have become threefold. The first is to show the existence and persistence of practices of sortition in South Asia, which has received almost no scholarly or political attention. The second is to call for a re-reading of leadership among indigenous populations in India, showing that we need a theoretical and practical vision that argues, not for societies without leaders, but for societies in which everyone may be a leader. The third is to highlight the virtues of the potential of sortition in creating a democratic society. Let me take each in turn.

### Sortition in South Asia and Beyond

First, I have sought to highlight — perhaps for the first time — the existence of indigenous traditions of democracy by sortition in India and to suggest that this may have a wider presence not yet recognized. I followed the anthropological strategy of studying in detail a particular case — as Marcel Mauss did for the potlach or the seasonal variations of the Eskimo — to highlight the values of a particular society, as they are presented in a condensed form, ‘as a result of which it may be easier to recognize them in other societies where they are less immediately apparent or where the configuration of other facts conceals them from us’ (Mauss cited in Parry, 1998: 152).

In fact, after starting work on this piece, I began finding remarkable buried cases of random selection of rotating leaders elsewhere in South Asia and beyond which suggest a wider diffused presence which then perhaps got overridden in most places by empires and the expansion of state-driven societies. Historically, it is reported that around 920 CE in the Chola Empire, in Uttaramerur village near Kanchipuram in current-day Tamil Nadu, the village assembly undertook the legislation, administration and welfare of the community autonomously from royal control with a leader that was elected by lot in a system called *kuda-olai*. Names of eligible candidates were inscribed on palm leaves and placed in a mud pot, from which a child retrieved a leaf which revealed the name of the next leader.<sup>26</sup> I also found more contemporary examples of rotating leaders in the work of ethnographers of the Tibetan Himalayas, both in Ladakhi India and in Nepal, rarely cited even in the small subfield of political anthropology of South Asia, despite the brilliance of their revelations.

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26. See <https://theencyclopediaofhinduism.tumblr.com/post/104798277303/uttaramerur-a-village-near-kanchipuram-in-the> (accessed 10 March 2020). It is also reported that in Meghalaya in 1978, when no party secured a majority, a coalition government of different parties was formed and the position of the chief minister was decided by drawing lots due to an inability to reach an agreement about who would lead between the coalition parties.

In the Ladakhi village she calls Photoskar, Fernanda Pirie (2005, 2014) describes how the nominal head of the village, the *goba*, and his four assistants, rotate between households: ‘any man can and every household must take its turn’ (Pirie, 2014: 233). The system operates on the basis of a logic at odds with the state’s structures of representative democracy, argues Pirie. The post does not require special individual qualities and in fact the rotating system ensures that individual power is squashed and cannot be concentrated in any single individual or group. The work is time-consuming, expensive and a burden; in fact, villagers see it like a tax that is said to ‘strike’ a household (ibid.). Pirie concludes that such rotating leadership operates as an anti-hierarchical force which counters the development of social stratification and permanent political hierarchies, reflects the equality of status and power between households, and represents the ‘counter-hierarchy and the impermanence of power that characterize Ladakhi village politics’ (Pirie, 2005: 384).

Across the border in Mustang, Nepal, Charles Ramble (2008) similarly documents how villages recruit headmen and allocate other duties and positions of responsibility either by household rotation, by common consent, or by lot. Ramble suggests that these practices reveal well-established traditions of ‘democratic civil society’ among the non-noble subjects (for the area was also a kingdom in the 15th century and subsequently ruled by local dukes). In one extraordinary village, Te, the headman was appointed annually by means of an elaborate game completely based on chance. Ramble tells us that headmen generally did not want the position but had no choice but to accept. In fact, these village leaders were always treated like kings at first and dogs at the end, regardless of who they were and what they had done (Ramble, 2008: 342). What’s more, every 12 years the villagers met collectively in a meeting called *Gō Sogwa* which literally means to ‘turn upside down’ which is what they did to the village constitution (ibid.: 280). The wider point is that this kind of lottery to select leaders may be more widely spread than we think; it is said that even the Dalai Lama’s government used such measures of selection including to appoint the Dalai Lama himself (Pirie, 2014).

In China and Taiwan, Stephan Feuchtwang (2003) has drawn our attention to the random selection of authority around important temple festivals where the master and vice-master of the incense burner are chosen every year by a game of chance. He points out that such share-holding rotas extend to other spheres of life — for example looking after the elderly, and in mutual savings associations. In fact, there is a long tradition of share-holding associations and contracts in rural and urban imperial China and Feuchtwang importantly points out that they are modifications of well-understood practices of selection from among equals for leadership.

Interestingly, Eric Mueggler’s (2001) work in Tibeto-Burman parts of southwest China recounts an institution in the 1930s and 1940s called ‘*ts’ici*

in which political and ritual responsibilities rotated every year among the area's most affluent households. These included hosting outsiders, resolving disputes, lodging prisoners, and sponsoring rituals for collective ancestors. Mueggler tells how locals recall the *ts'ici*'s slow disintegration, traumatic killing during the Maoist period and then its ghostly rebirth.

Feuchtwang criticizes Chinese urban intellectuals for not recognizing that traditions of divine selection of self-organization might pass most of the tests for a form of local democracy: 'not the exercise of choice, but yes the exercise of voice, local sovereignty, possibly universal qualification for leadership when women are included, and certainly universal judgement of legitimacy' (Feuchtwang, 2003: 114). He argues that for these intellectuals, as for anthropologists, what is in the countryside is often referred to as 'culture' and 'community', while 'civil society' and 'democracy' are only used for institutions of local government and elections introduced by the urban central government as an electoral political system based on Western models (*ibid.*: 98).

What the material presented here suggests is that we may extend a similar critique to South Asian scholars for overlooking indigenous democratic traditions beyond the impact of the modern state and its elections. Part of this failure may be explained by the overwhelming dominance of scholarship on hierarchy in India, the focus on empires and the modern state, and the long-lasting legacy of the Dumont–Hocart debates. Hierarchy and inequality are certainly dominating features of Indian society. However, what I have sought to show here is that the focus on hierarchy has marginalized the attention to more egalitarian values<sup>27</sup> and their study, particularly by ethnographers who landed up in the jungle frontiers among India's forest-dwelling communities. The major contributors of the Dumont–Hocart debates and legacy held positions of power in Indian sociology across the continents and across disciplines — anthropology, sociology, political science, Indology and history. Such was their sheer weight and force, their scholarly clout, that for several decades, those who drew attention to comparatively more egalitarian variants were likely to have been reproached as romantics at worst, or proponents of Gandhian village republics at best, and cast off to the

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27. A little-known piece by Jonathan Parry (1974) focusing on India drew early attention to the significance of 'egalitarian values in a hierarchical society'. Interestingly, of Parry's two examples of egalitarian values in India, one was the case of low castes rejecting hierarchy altogether either by conversion to an egalitarian world religion, by adherence to a sectarian ideology which asserts the fundamental irrelevance of caste, or by opting for salvation through *bhakti* (surrendering oneself to unquestionable, unconditional devotion to God). Parry later became the high priest of the high priests of India, and did not develop these insights further. However, in this article I suggest that in stressing the presence of egalitarian values among low castes, Parry was on to something — not in the anomalies of conversion patterns of low castes that was his focus, but as part and parcel of the values of everyday social relations among Adivasis.

margins of the institutions of scholarly production, sidelined and/or simply ignored.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, highlighting these practices of sortition in India is important, not only as an offering towards experiments of democracy but also as an offering to make scholarship on South Asia more democratic. Moreover, what I am also arguing is that we need to think beyond the nationalist-bounded orientation of our scholarship and unearth the wider subterranean or hidden practices of democratic sortition that may have existed transnationally, well beyond our current national borders. On this we will of course need much more cross-disciplinary scholarship from anthropologists, political scientists, historians and archaeologists. What I wish to suggest here is that the relatively egalitarian societies of the Southeast Asian massif called Zomia, which tried to stay away from state control, may have extended beyond the regions identified by Willem van Schendel (2002) and James Scott (2009), right into the heart of India in the Adivasi belts in the forests and hills of the centre and the east (see also Vitebsky, 2017b). And what my article might be excavating is that these Zomia societies might have included practices of democratic sortition; practices that stretched from India, into current day Nepal and southwest China; practices that have since been erased in almost all but a few exceptional places, like the one where — by chance — I lived among the Adivasis.

### **Rethinking Leadership among Adivasis: What if Everyone is a Leader?**

I have sought to point out that democracy by sortition is underpinned by ideals of leadership and values of egalitarianism that are far removed from the common trope of the *homo hierarchicus* of South Asia. Indeed, what I present of sortition among the Adivasis seems to have more in common with ideals of egalitarianism and leadership that anthropologists have unveiled among small-scale populations dispersed through Southeast Asia and the Malay Peninsula (Gibson and Sillander, 2011; van Schendel, 2002; Scott, 2009), in Amazonia, or among the hunter-gathering communities of Africa, which either denied the presence of chiefs or headmen, declared them irrelevant or even rejected them altogether.

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28. Tellingly, more than 30 years after he published *Forest Traders*, a remarkable study of the south Indian foragers, the Malaipantharam, that stressed their egalitarian values in contrast to the caste societies around them (Morris, 1982), Brian Morris (2014) said that the book was ignored by academics. But there are other such cases, for instance of those who could not get their articles published in reputable academic journals simply because peer reviewers couldn't believe the empirical and theoretical conclusions which were so at odds with the rest of Indian sociology and anthropology. As van Schendel (2002: 647) says of those who worked on Zomia, they had 'insufficient scholarly clout', and were 'unable to create a niche for themselves and for the social relations and networks that they studied'.

Amongst hunter-gatherer communities of Africa, Richard Lee (1978) reported that the !Kung deny they ever had a headman. Colin Turnbull (1962) said that there were no chiefs among the pygmies of Zaire; and Eleanor Leacock (1978/1992), drawing on her ethnography of the Montagnais-Naskapi people of the Labrador Peninsula, states that leadership was irrelevant among such band societies. The overall emphasis is, as James Woodburn (1982) famously reported of the Hadza, an assertive egalitarianism.

In Amazonia, in the case of the Matto Grosso Nambiquara presented by Claude Levi-Strauss (1944/1967), consent not coercion was the basis of chieftanship for the position involved an exchange between men — between those who were willing to take on the burden of leading and those who were willing to give them extra wives in turn. Subsequent ethnographers questioned the idea of whether the Nambiquara even had leaders or whether they just appeared to have leaders because the anthropologist was looking for them, suggesting that leadership was in fact a family responsibility not based on coercion but on a man's recognition that it was in his best interest to be his brother's keeper (Price, 1981). Famously, Pierre Clastres (1974/1987) argued that a general lack of chiefly power revealed a radical rejection of authority, a rejection of power itself. And contemporary ethnographers such as Evan Killick have expanded this idea to show the egalitarian principles at work in the way the dominance of individuals is prevented in everyday life among the Asheninkas of Peru, even if they may at times willingly give up degrees of their autonomy and allow leaders to emerge in order to gain some advantage that they see as important (Killick, 2007: 476).

The wider implication for South Asia is that we will need to re-read Adivasi history in a new light and think about their future mobilization in new ways. Some of India's foremost intellectuals have said that unlike India's Dalits, Adivasis have not produced a leader of pan-Indian significance who could inspire and give hope to tribals elsewhere. Indeed, Ramchandra Guha, a pre-eminent historian of India, says that this lack of leadership is one of the great tragedies that faces tribals despite 70 years of India being a 'free and democratic' country (Guha, 2016: 255). In contrast, what my analysis suggests is that this critique of the 'lack of leadership' among Adivasis fails to see the virtue of the values that exist among them, which is that everyone is a potential leader.

Overall, the analysis here suggests that we need a more revisionist history of subaltern politics than that which assumes, in a Gramscian frame, that social movements require 'organic intellectuals' or leaders. Indeed, it raises questions of the narratives of subaltern history which have tried to resurrect Adivasi anti-colonial rebellions through the identification of one or two people as their leaders — whether Birsa Munda or Sidhu-Kano or Nilamber-Pitamber. Birsa Munda, for instance, has become symbolic in Adivasi history today for 'leading' an anti-colonial rebellion against the British at the turn of the 20th century (Shah, 2014). In recent times, there have been attempts — spanning a wide spectrum of Indian political

organizations, whether indigenous rights activists, Naxalites or Hindu nationalists — to appropriate Birsa and resurrect him as a heroic ‘leader’ for contemporary Adivasis to emulate. In fact, what strikes me now in thinking about that late 19th rebellion is how unremarkable Birsa appears in the archives. Perhaps it was the case, as Fernanda Pirie (2005: 387) reminds of us of the Sanusi of Cyrenaica (a society without any overall political power studied by Evans-Pritchard, 1949) that in times of a real outside threat (in the Sanusi case, the Italian invasions of the early 20th century), the Adivasis allowed a leader to emerge in order to unite and defend the area and Birsa simply had to fill this role. Or perhaps there was in fact no leader as such to these movements, but it was necessary for the Jesuits and the colonial administrators alike to blame *a* leader as embodied in one person which meant that attention became focused on *a* Birsa. Whatever the case, at the very least we ought to give much more attention not just to Birsa but to all the other Adivasis who surrounded Birsa at the time. For perhaps the real power of these Adivasi rebellions of the past lay in the fact that there was no *one* leader and that everyone was equally responsible for leading those attacks.

This analysis also makes us question the models of indigenous leadership that are being promoted by many social movements (the Naxalites I have focused on here) and NGOs alike — whether it is a self-critique of the absence of leaders in their movements and organizations from Adivasi communities, or action to encourage the development of ‘leaders’ among the Adivasis. For again, what these ideals of leadership — aspiring to create people that rise above the rest — neglect, is that the power of leadership among the Adivasis was holding that responsibility in common.

### **The Potential of Sortition in Creating More Democratic Communities Globally**

I have also tried to point out the virtues of sortition’s political potential in creating a more democratic society. To summarize briefly: rotation of leadership, the relatively short term of leadership, together with randomness of selection, ensures that power is not entrenched; status is not accumulated; hierarchies are not encouraged; and that there is no elite group with special qualities from which leaders are selected. Overall, sortition is what gives the selection authority; that is, the history of its working becomes its authority. And real power remains among the people at large, any one of whom can lead, and all of whom can be involved in any significant decision or resolution of conflict. This idea of leadership prioritizes the notion of service and duty to the collective, and devalues merit, status, wealth or power acquisition by individuals which create political and economic inequalities between people.

All very well and good you may say, but this is to resurrect systems that are probably nothing more than a ritual residue of a long-gone era, exotic even among the Adivasis themselves, and in any case restricted to



small-scale societies. It is true that today's Adivasi society is rife with class differentiation and internal political hierarchies which I have explored in this article through the rise of Adivasi MLAs and the spread of the Naxalites. Moreover, even in the values that were represented in the practice of sortition among the Mundas I lived with, there were important caveats which I noted earlier — most significantly the effective exclusion of women from taking on the actual role of leading — that would have to be rethought for contemporary eras.

What relevance could democracy by sortition possibly have in our complex world today? Here, I want to make three points. First, it is worth remembering that it is only for the last few hundred years that we have taken democracy to mean elections. In ancient Athens and medieval Florence, voting in leaders through elections was long understood as undemocratic, aristocratic (van Reybrouck, 2016), even as oligarchic (Gastil and Wright, 2019), since only those with status and money could win. For more than 200 years from the 6th to the 4th centuries BCE, the Athenians practised democracy by lot; random selection determined who would serve in most offices of the state. Not only were officials chosen by lot, but there was a limited time to their service. A person who had served was excluded from serving again immediately. The idea was that everyone would take turns to administer the state and that the citizenry would therefore consist of men who could all govern.

Indeed, ancient Athenian democracy has gained legendary status among those working on deliberative democracy and there is now a growing literature reviving it. A comprehensive, thoughtful account is in Moses Finley (1983), a wider elaboration follows in Josiah Ober (1989) and Gill Delannoi and Oliver Dowlen (2010), and a consideration of its modern application is in Terry Bouricius (2013), David van Reybrouk (2016) and Oliver Dowlen (2008). Similar practices of democracy were also said to be found in 15th century Florence, then at the height of splendour and creativity; those who held office in its core institutional and political system (the executive, the legislative councils, parts of the judiciary) were chosen by random selection and the offices were held for short-term periods (see Sintomner, 2010).

I do not have space here to expand on these systems and there are important caveats to note — only male citizens were participants; slaves and women were left out. In ancient Athens only citizens were participants but most of the population were slaves. In Florence, the noble families and the manual workers were excluded from democratic life. Women were left out of both, as they were in modern electoral democracies until very recently. Nevertheless, the point I wish to make is that democracy by sortition once existed across entire city-states consisting of several thousand people — overcoming issues of scale (Bouricius, 2013) — and kept arising over the centuries.

The second point is that throughout history, this ideal of democracy has been kept alive by political philosophers and activists from Montesquieu to

Rousseau,<sup>29</sup> from Marx<sup>30</sup> to C.L.R. James.<sup>31</sup> Most of those who have kept alive the democratic potential of sortition have been reacting against the fact that although today we see representative government as inseparable from democracy, its modern history is a consciously chosen alternative to popular self-rule (Manin, 1997). Today's democratic governments, as Bernard Manin (*ibid.*) powerfully argues, have actually emerged from a political system — in the wake of the English, American and French revolutions — that was conceived by its founders to oppose democracy.

The third point is that today most of us know of the practice of sortition only through the selection of our juries for legal trials (Chakravarti, 2019), but in fact all over the world sortition is being revived by those seeking to reclaim democracy from the capture of elites. In a world where money dominates political campaigns, often to manipulate public sentiment for particular interests, where the media is co-opted and focuses on sensation and not substance, and where partisan divides drive policy choices made for political reasons rather than for the common good, it is hardly surprising that people do not believe that elected leaders represent their interests and are searching for such alternatives.

In 2017, the late Kofi Annan, in his keynote address to the Athens Democracy Forum, highlighted sortition's potential for preventing self-serving and self-perpetuating political classes disconnected from their electorates. Ségolène Royal, the French presidential candidate, envisaged a role for sortition in 2006 in revising the French constitution, and in 2019–20 the French Citizen's Convention for Climate, with a mandate to reduce the emission of greenhouse gases in France, formed as an assembly of 150 randomly selected citizens. Wang Shaoguang (2018), one of the most prominent Chinese intellectuals, has called for sortition to make China more democratic.

Sortition is returning through practical experiments of reclaiming democracy all over the world, in what has been variously called the 'lottocratic alternative' (Guerrero, 2014), 'deliberative democracy', or 'demarchy' in which randomly selected citizens' assemblies deliberate for several days about key issues affecting the wider public to make recommendations either to the public at large or to government itself. We have seen such citizens'

29. Linking elections with aristocracy and lottery with democracy, Rousseau (1762/2002: 232) says, 'Elections by lot would have few drawbacks in a true democracy, in which, all being equal in morals and ability as well as in ideas and fortune, the choice would become of little consequence. But I have already said that there is no true democracy'.

30. Richard Hunt (1974: 83–84) says Marx's ideal polity in fact lay in ancient Greece.

31. In his celebration of this Athenian democracy, C.L.R. James (1956) explains that this was a system which demonstrated that one could trust the intelligence and sense of justice of the majority of the common people, rather than hand over to experts. Importantly, he reminds us that, '[i]t was in the days when every citizen could and did govern equally with any other citizen, when in other words, equality was carried to its extreme, that the city produced the most varied, comprehensive and brilliant body of geniuses that the world has ever known' (*ibid.*: n.p.).

assemblies emerging in British Columbia (Warren and Gastil, 2015; Warren and Pearce, 2008) and Oregon (Gastil and Richards, 2013; Gastil et al., 2017), in Iceland and China, and right here on our doorstep in the UK and in Ireland (Farrell et al., 2019). In Ireland in 2016, a randomly selected citizens' assembly deliberated on a number of toxic issues that had plagued the country for decades. They made recommendations to government on the basis of which a referendum overturned current legislation on gay marriage and unrestricted access to abortion, leading to a change in the Irish constitution itself (Farrell et al., 2019). If only a randomly selected citizens' assembly could have played a role in the Brexit debate, argued Renwick et al. (2018), a bit too late. But it was heartening to see a UK climate assembly,<sup>32</sup> initially called for by Extinction Rebellion, but elected by sortition and run independently, even though its recommendations will most likely be ignored under the current government.

Beyond assemblies, we can see sortition emerging in other spheres of selection too. In the London School of Economics Anthropology Department where I am based, drawing on the lessons from the research for this article, in 2020 we agreed to put in place sortition as the most inclusive method to select PhD mentors for incoming prospective students since all those who had applied for the position were equally qualified. Some of us have even begun discussing whether we should simply select by lottery which PhD candidates are funded from those at the top of the list since they are all equally brilliant. There's room for expansion of this argument in the university system more broadly. For instance, if candidates fulfil basic entrance requirements, perhaps we should give university places by lottery. For such a system could have the potential to prove more inclusive in removing the influence of persisting unconscious bias in race, gender and other forms of discrimination that infiltrate into selection processes.

More generally, contemporary proponents of sortition advance a number of arguments in its favour.<sup>33</sup> They say it is the only selection procedure that is impartial, neutral and horizontal. They say it will prevent corruption in the selection of representatives and most likely in their participation. They say those selected by sortition do not have to flatter people to get re-elected. It will be more representative of the population at large. It will reduce the influence of aspirations for power. It will reduce the focus on short-term problems that takes place when the concern is re-election and will return our attention to long-term issues or those on which it is harder to take credit (e.g. climate change). Ultimately, they say it better represents fundamental values of equality.

To this list, based on my experiences with the Adivasis, I suggest we should add the significance of more democratic interpersonal affective

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32. See: [www.climateassembly.uk/about/](http://www.climateassembly.uk/about/)

33. Many arguments are presented as to why lottery selection is better than elections. Guerrero (2014) and Gastil and Wright (2019) provide summaries.

values<sup>34</sup> that sortition can inculcate, namely, respect for others, including our similarities and our differences. Such a respect for difference would have important implications for many domains of life, for instance the attitude to childhood, the treatment of elders, tempering of machismo, gender equality, the development of creativity, nurturing self-confidence and a careful balance between interdependence and individual autonomy, and indeed undermining racism. What strikes me the most — based on the experiences of my field research — is the cultures of masculinity among the Adivasis who practised sortition, in particular the absence of machismo and its related arrogance and aggression, and the presence of greater respect and consideration of others as equals. This stands in stark contrast to the ideals of masculinity, prowess and assault that seem to go hand in hand with liberally elected democratic leaders today. I can't help but recall again here the alleged 56-inch chest of Narendra Modi that is constantly evoked, or the locker-room talk of the alpha male, Donald Trump. It was rare to find aspirations for such bodily or verbal domination or sense of prowess or aspirations for supremacy among the Adivasis. Even though self-confidence and individuality prevailed, it never undermined respect for others. Perhaps the best metaphor is that people were like different melodies in a counterpoint that could be played alone but also together and that complemented each other but rarely took over one another. What I wish to point out here is that the implications of egalitarian values nurtured by democracy as sortition are not only those of political and economic equality but also respect for individual autonomy and creativity in all kinds of domains of life, including more affective and intersubjective dimensions.

This is not the place to dwell on the legitimate concerns of the virtues and pitfalls of different proposals for sortition, to evaluate the technicalities of how they might work out in practice and what problems these have encountered so far, on which there is a growing literature.<sup>35</sup> But I will end with one significant issue, a final twist. This is that, although there are some exceptions, most of today's sortition proposals centre on the problem of alienation of voters from parties. Their solutions are not aimed at replacing electoral democracy with a random sample of citizens selected for the legislature, but present a mix of the two systems. This is true even of the two pieces that are explicitly titled 'Against Elections' (Guerrero, 2014; van Reybrouck, 2016). Some proposals include the creation of one chamber of legislature by election and one by sortition (a sortition chamber), the 'bicameral system' proposed by John Gastil and Erik Olin Wright (2019), the latter of

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34. Only a few authors mention the more interpersonal values at stake. Gastil and Wright (2019) say that sortition promotes humility — that people chosen to office comport themselves more humbly because one is selected not because one is superior to the group but because one is an equal part of it.

35. See Bouricius (2013); Delannoi and Dowlen (2010); Dowlen (2008); Guerrero (2014); Sintomner (2018).

whom makes a case for sortition from a Marxist standpoint. In the UK in 1999, Barnett and Carty (2008) proposed to the Royal Commission on the Reform of the House of Lords that the upper house of parliament should be selected through sortition.<sup>36</sup> Rare is the author who has argued more radically for the exclusive use of sortition for democracy, with the abolition of elections altogether.

Most contemporary proposers of sortition are seeking political equality; they rarely engage with economic inequality. Of course, political equality can impact on economic equality. However, if economic inequality is not equally addressed, political equality at the level of selecting leaders could serve to perpetuate a wider inequality in which leaders selected by lot become but a mere token gesture of the idea of equality. Though still hopeful and important in developing and maintaining alternative, more egalitarian ideals of democracy, what the Adivasi situation suggests is that citizens' assemblies selected by lot in themselves are not radical enough. For it is perfectly possible for such bottom-up experiments to be disregarded by the powerful that lead our governments. Moreover, what is the guarantee that those influencing and advising the people chosen by lot — that is, the experts, technocrats or witnesses brought in to guide them who are part of even the most radical of sortition proposals — will ideologically be any different from those creating the extreme inequalities driven by neoliberal capitalism that advise government today?

What the Adivasi situation suggests is that we need a more wholesale change in the way we choose our leaders and that it is such a radical transformation that could be part of a process that fundamentally challenges economic and political inequality to bring about real democracy at all levels. With this I do not wish to imply that sortition would be necessary to lead every part of society, every single decision-making process — of course we will need hierarchical units within more egalitarian values, for instance to make and distribute COVID vaccines. Nor do I wish to suggest that all of us have equal competences — sortition does not preclude the possibility that the chosen leader will seek advice on particular issues. And leadership will include working alongside large-scale organizations of public vocation. Sortition will need to coexist with other forms of organization of publicly oriented social life. But the wider point is that if real power for major economic and political decisions did lie with everyone, then perhaps we might be able to bring about debt jubilees, tax justice, give proper remuneration for all the work that is undervalued, erase the persisting racism, challenge the massive corporations responsible for the destruction of our climate, and all the other systems and structures that are at the heart of the inequalities generated by capitalism. This is also why realizing the full potential of democracy and leadership by sortition today will be an uphill task. As Erik

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36. See also Callenbach and Phillips (1985) for a proposal for bringing sortition into the US legislature.

Olin Wright (2010) predicted, a capitalist state would not allow it, for it promises to deepen democracy and threatens to transform capitalism itself, moving towards a trajectory beyond it. It will require significant political mobilization and struggle. Some may say what I have presented here is bonkers, but perhaps these are the kinds of ideas we need right now.

I think a democracy is when the poor take over and kill some of the others, exile some, and hand out equal shares in citizenship and offices to the ones left; and in general offices in a democracy are acquired by lot.

(Socrates ventriloquized by Plato, *The Republic* §557a,  
translated by Piers Vitebsky)<sup>37</sup>

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In December 2019, when I first opened the invitation from Murat Arsel, the Chair of the Editorial Board of *Development and Change*, to deliver their Keynote Lecture for the annual Development Studies Association (DSA) Conference, I was not sure I had anything to say about the conference theme ‘New Leadership for Global Challenges’. I thought I ought to decline. ‘Leadership: I have been running away from that idea most of my life’, I laughed away when Murat generously called to convince me to come on board. However, on reflection, I realized that the occasion might be the perfect opportunity to work out the significance of the remarkable experiences of leadership that I once was fortunate to witness and that have troubled me over the last 20 years. I sincerely thank the Editors of *Development and Change* for presenting me with such an absorbing challenge. I also thank Johnny Parry and Piers Vitebsky for being a sounding board on this journey.

I began working on the piece in late January 2020. I was fortunate to be a writer in residence at the Programme in Anthropology at the University of Otago, New Zealand (thank you Greg Rawlings) and to have the time to ponder. As one day turned into the next, my ramblings grew and grew until coronavirus kicked in and our worlds were turned upside down. In times of despair and anxiety, we need to keep alive hope, we need new visions for the future. It is in this context that I offered this rather utopian lecture at the DSA Conference in June 2020.

In September 2020, we lost David Graeber, our dear friend, collaborator, colleague and writer who inspired readers across the world. Devastated by the loss of David, I dedicated this article to him as I finalized it for publication at *Development and Change*, for it is very much in keeping with his contributions. David used his anthropology and his privileges and powers to tirelessly open the human imagination, question the inequalities that dominate us, and show us that ‘another world is possible’. Though we never had a chance to discuss this article, David thought that what we call democracy

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37. Translated for the author.

is in fact the opposite of the real thing, that it protects the interest of the few at the expense of the many, and understood why it was important to look for other inspirations for democracy, amongst people and societies elsewhere in time and space. In February 2021, I was honoured to be asked to deliver the first David Graeber Memorial Lecture, as painful a task as it is. With David's spirit so acutely running through this piece, I share the ideas this article contains in my inaugural David Graeber Memorial Lecture in May 2021.

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