

# Religion and the secular left: subaltern studies, Birsa Munda and Maoists

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## INTRODUCTION

This article seeks to offer some general theoretical and political reflections on the relationship between religion and the revolutionary secular left. It does so by re-reading Ranajit Guha's *Elementary Aspects of a Peasant Insurgency*, and in particular Guha's account of the Birsa Munda movement at the turn of the nineteenth century. This re-reading is prompted by long term ethnographic field research on the contemporary spread both of an underground Maoist guerrilla movement and of a devotional sect in Jharkhand, India.

Between September 2008 and April 2010, George Kunnath and I lived as anthropologists in one of the two Indian strongholds of Maoist or Naxalite insurgents. Our field setting was a forested and hilly tract of Eastern India, ideal for guerrilla warfare, to which the insurgents had retreated after the intense state repression of the 1980s in the caste-divided agricultural plains. Spanning parts of the states of Bihar, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, these remote regions are inhabited mainly, although not exclusively, by India's Adivasi or tribal populations. It is a landscape of scattered mud hut villages, with no provision of electricity or running water, very high levels of illiteracy and a remarkable absence of the developmental state. In the course of fieldwork, I became familiar with at least ten villages – with a population of just under 2000 people – although I travelled to many more on foot, by bicycle or motorbike, and sometimes by bus.



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One of the most striking things I observed was the contrast between the relatively fluid commitment of local people to the Maoists – a Marxist Leninist vanguard party, also called the Naxalites, that for more than forty years had been carrying on a struggle to overthrow the Indian state in the march to a communist society – and their apparent overnight transformation into committed devotees of Shiv Charcha, a sect to the Hindu Lord Shiv that was spreading amongst low castes and tribes.

Whereas the Maoist leadership wanted a deep commitment from those who joined their People's Liberation Guerrilla Army, in fact many Adivasis maintained a much more contingent involvement with the movement. Many joined at first for a few months and then left, often to return again. They usually went to the Maoists because they were running away from kinship tensions, whether it was a fight with a parent or a sibling, or to live out a forbidden love affair. Kinship relations merged in and out of the movement. While people often stayed for other reasons, they initially went because the Maoists provided them with a home away from home – representing continuity with, rather than rupture from, village life. This continuity had the virtue of helping embed the Maoists in the local area but it was also an Achilles' heel: the same tensions of village sociality which encouraged people to join the guerrillas were easily reproduced in the revolutionary party, making it easy for them to leave (Shah 2013a).

In contrast to the Maoists, devotees of Shiv appeared to rapidly change even the most intimate of their daily bodily practices upon joining the sect. They stopped eating meat and drinking alcohol and began bathing daily. They stopped appeasing the village ghosts and spirits and giving them sacrifices of chickens, and they stopped all practices related to witchcraft. Instead they congregated for nocturnal gatherings in the village vicinity, held at least twice a week, to express their devotion to the Mahadev Shiv and his local messengers. Chanting devotional songs, they waited for Shiv to possess one of the followers and give his wisdom on the troubles of the day. These transformations in many ways marked a rupture rather than continuity with village life. Though this 'conversion' was not necessarily permanent (people could and did give up devotion), over the year and a half that I lived in this guerrilla stronghold I saw the popularity of Shiv Charcha grow, with significant consequences.

Even my fictive sister – the woman whose house I lived in and whose other sister's children had joined the Maoists – began, in spite of her scepticism, holding her own nocturnal gatherings towards the end of my stay. I recall vividly one hot summer's night the year before. We had both fallen asleep with the wooden door of the mud house wide open to seek relief from the heat. Temperatures used to soar to 50 degrees Celsius in those days. She woke up in the middle of the night, realising that her eight-year old daughter was not lying beside us. I suggested we search the village but my sister insisted, 'No, she is no longer young; she will either return by herself or she will find somewhere to sleep.'

The girl trotted in an hour later, as carefree as ever, and curled up on the mat. The next morning my sister reprimanded her daughter. I thought it was because the girl had returned so late but in fact she was annoyed that her daughter had been at a Shiv Charcha event. Yet, a few months later, our household stopped brewing alcohol and turned vegetarian and I found myself accompanying not only the young girl but also my sister to the nocturnal gatherings.

Again, what struck me were the differences between how local people became incorporated into Shiv Charcha and into the Maoist armies. In joining Shiv Charcha, as I've said, they rapidly transformed even their intimate bodily practices. By contrast, the Maoist leaders forever complained about the hard work of educating people into 'becoming a communist' and about their inability to stop their Adivasi cadres drinking the local brews *hadia* and *mahua*. Moreover, while the Maoist guerrillas in these areas came almost exclusively from the Adivasi and Dalit lower caste youth, Shiv Charcha attracted a wide range of followers across the caste/class divide and across generations and gender. It was not only the Oraons, Kherwars, Lohras, Ghasis and Bhuiya families (Adivasis and Dalits) who became devotees of Shiv, but also the Other Backward Classes, Sahus. Women and men, children, parents and grandparents were involved. And although I searched for patterns of upward mobility amongst those more likely to become Shiv Charcha followers, I have to conclude that there were no class distinctions among those who joined.

The ability of Shiv Charcha to form committed converts across the sociological divides was in stark contrast to the loose toing and froing of youth in and out of the guerrilla squads. I used to provoke the Maoist leaders by suggesting that what they really needed was to make Mao into a cult like that of Shiv. Like the photos of Shiv, the booklet on Shiv Charcha, and the bracelet of conkers that were sold alongside spices in the local bazaar, I suggested they needed photos of Chairman Mao, the little red book, and a locket with a hammer and sickle. [[1 \( #religion-secular-left-subaltern-studies-birsa-munda-maoists-n-1\)](http://aotcpress.com/articles/religion-secular-left-subaltern-studies-birsa-munda-maoists-n-1)]

[<http://aotcpress.com/articles/religion-secular-left-subaltern-studies-birsa-munda-maoists/#religion-secular-left-subaltern-studies-birsa-munda-maoists-n-1> ] Taking lessons from the biweekly nocturnal gatherings with the chanting and possessions by the Mahadev, they needed more mysticism and better songs. Chants to Mao and possessions by Marx and Lenin, were what was required. Here, I suggested, was the lock and key to producing committed Maoist converts.

In making this point, perhaps I had been influenced by David Lan's (1985) account of the anti-colonial struggle won by the guerrillas of the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army after they decided to work alongside – rather than opposing – Shona spirit mediums. But the Maoist leadership laughingly dismissed my comments as a joke and argued that Shiv Charcha should be understood as a Low Intensity Conflict – a LIC, they called it – that the Indian state was waging against them. Placing this alongside the infiltration of the World Bank reform programmes introduced by the government in the Maoist areas of the state of Andhra Pradesh, they saw Shiv Charcha as government infiltration intended to break down Maoist support. Indeed, seeing Shiv Charcha as 'religion' and as such an 'opiate of the people', a fanatic mobilisation, the Maoists created an active campaign against its spread. Villagers were warned off following Shiv Charcha and some of those who had hosted nocturnal gatherings were forbidden from doing so again.

Marx famously described religion as the 'sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of a soulless condition' (Marx 1843). But Marxist regimes and movements have been rightly criticised for treating religion simply as a fetish that prevents people from recognising and acting on real politico-economic causes. 'The dead weight of secularism' is how Julie McBrien and Mathijs Pelkmans (2008) have characterised this; they describe a case in Kyrgyzstan in which secularists turned Marx into a defender of the 'traditional religious status quo', and in which new forms of religion gained currency because they enabled people to challenge the Soviet religious and ethnic compartmentalisation. Parallel critiques have emerged around the world. In relation to the shantytowns of South Africa, for instance, Jean Comaroff (1985) once argued that the African Zionist Churches provided a more radical form of resistance than the labour unions.

To be clear on one point: I do not want to suggest that Shiv Charcha was a direct product of, and response to, Maoist influence in these forested regions. Shiv Charcha was also present in non-Maoist strongholds in the agricultural plains, and its local appeal and manifestations in those areas are likely to be very different. Moreover, I am certain that the more fascist arms of Hindu right wing forces can easily make use of and co-opt the spread of Shiv Charcha, whether in the forests or the plains. However, I was increasingly troubled by the rapidity with which the Maoists dismissed popular conversion to Shiv Charcha in the forests as both a Low Intensity Conflict and as a merely 'religious' phenomenon. This analysis signalled, to me, a lack of sensitivity to the question of why people themselves may be drawn to convert. What I want to suggest here, perhaps rather controversially, is that the followers of Shiv Charcha in these regions were doing something similar to what the followers of India's most famous anti-colonial insurgency had been doing a century before.

My analysis thus takes me back and forth from, on the one hand, the dusty tracks weaving through the Eastern Indian forests that the Maoists have currently laid with land mines to, on the other hand, a world of firing arrows more than a hundred years earlier, in similar geographical terrain some 200 kilometres away. The Chotanagpur Plateau of Eastern India, which is now a part of Jharkhand state, is famous for a series of tribal rebellions against the colonial state. Today these rebellions are a key means through which the Maoists legitimate their war in Adivasi areas, claiming that they are simply continuing the task laid out by the Adivasi anti-colonial rebel ancestors whose battles are still to be won. In preparation for my field-research, and intrigued by the potential similarities and differences between the Maoist struggle against the Indian state and that of anti-colonial insurgents, I decided to spend a few months in 2008 delving as deeply as possible into the colonial archives to understand one such tribal rebellion. I chose the most revered of the lot: the Birsa Munda rebellion at the turn of the twentieth century. Celebrated as the leader of the political uprising of Adivasis in search of greater democratisation, Birsa is now so famous that his portrait and statue don the Houses of Parliament in India (he is the only tribal to have such an honour), the Central Jail and the airport in Ranchi are named after him, a postal stamp has been issued with his picture, and political parties, indigenous activist groups and NGOs alike have taken his name.

What was it that people were doing in becoming a part of movements such as Birsa's? This question has troubled many a scholar. Stephen Fuchs (1965) included Birsa as one of the *Rebellious Prophets* in his study of messianic movements in Indian religions. He argued that in distressing economic and social circumstances, and given the failures of flight or rebellion, untouchables and tribals sought their last hope in

a charismatic leader who would take them to an earthly paradise. Indeed, Michael Adas's (1979) *Prophets of Rebellions*, which focuses on millenarian protest movements against the European colonial order, considered the Birsa movement alongside various others from the Java War of 1825-30, the Pai Maire Maori movement of 1864-67, the 1905-1906 Maji Maji rebellion in Tanganyika, to the 1930-32 Saya San rebellion of British Burma. But it was not until the publication of what some have called the most significant work of social theory since Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, Ranajit Guha's (1983) *Elementary Aspects of a Peasant Insurgency* – which gave birth to the school of history commonly known as subaltern studies – that sustained theoretical attention was paid to Birsa and his followers. For Guha (1983), above all, such movements marked a history of political consciousness, of agency and action of people against their domination. Peasants in these movements, while often acting in a religious idiom, were aware of their own world, had a conscious will to change it, and acted with a sovereignty, consistency and logic to do so. These were, for Guha, 'elementary aspects of peasant insurgency'.

In reading the colonial archives against the experience of my recent field research in a Maoist guerrilla stronghold, I want to revisit the question of the significance of what people were doing in becoming a part of movements which have been variously labelled devotional, millenarian, prophetic and anti-colonial. Reading the flaky files of the colonial correspondence around Birsa Munda in the British Library, I will suggest a different analysis of the so-called Birsa Munda rebellion to that of the received wisdom propelled by Guha and taken up by many activists and intellectuals, including my Maoist informants. I am convinced that both the Maoists and Guha have not gone far enough in their explanation. The issue is not simply one of interpretation but also one of theory and praxis, a theory of what they call politics and the place of religion within it.

First, I will argue that the Birsa Munda movement was not an anti-colonial rebellion of tribal freedom fighters per se. Rather, I will suggest that for its followers the Birsa movement's most important creative force came from a search to put all aspects of their life together in a time of great disorder. This was a disorder wrought on them by the disintegrative forces of the Church (a point missed by Guha) in conjunction with the colonial state. It was experienced as a segregation of the religious dimensions of their lives from politico-economic ones, underwritten by agrarian politico-economic changes, and brought into their communities through the alienation of their youth.

Second, I will suggest that the Birsa Munda movement is analytically not contiguous with the secular forces who resurrect it today as their historical antecedent – in this case Maoist insurgents. Rather, the Birsa movement's *creative potential* is akin, in contemporary times, to that of the devotional sect I have mentioned above, the Shiv Charcha – which is spreading in Maoist strongholds but which can easily be utilised by right wing forces. I will argue that in the contemporary forested areas of Eastern India, devotional sects such as Shiv Charcha spread as a force of integration against the fragmentation brought into people's lives by the spread of Maoist revolutionaries in conjunction with the postcolonial state. Although there are many differences between these modern and historical cases, I will argue that it is people creatively seeking to reintegrate and reorder their lives, to put it all together in a search for a more holistic world, which marks the similarity between what has been called an anti-colonial (millenarian) rebellion (i.e. Birsa) and what could easily be seen as a contemporary sect of the Hindu right (i.e. Shiv Charcha).

Third, the analysis here suggests some theoretical and political challenges for the secular left which has cast religion as a separate dimension of life that needs to be eradicated in order for radical change to be possible. In doing so, I support the various recent calls urging the political left to take 'religion' or even 'fanaticism' more seriously and reconsider what is classified as properly political and what is not (see Eagleton 2009; Toscano 2010). I will argue that we have been too quick to cast aside religion as secondary, or simply as a medium for class struggle in the eventual step to the necessary secularisation of politics. More specifically, I will suggest that what Guha and the Maoists did not take sufficient account of was that it was the very integration of politics, religion and economics that the converts sought against their segregation.

To develop these arguments the first section of this article sets up my theoretical critique of the foundational text of subaltern studies by Ranajit Guha. The second section re-reads the Birsa Munda rebellion in light of what I have found in the archives. It points to the significance of what Guha missed – the influence of the Christian missions in making the Birsa movement into an anti-colonial rebellion. The final section of the article compares followers of Birsa Munda with followers of Shiv Charcha a century later. The aim is to arrive at some tentative theoretical and political reflections on the relationship between the secular revolutionary left and what has been called religion.

## 1. ELEMENTARY ASPECTS OF A PEASANT INSURGENCY

Let me first turn to the foundational text of subaltern studies that my reading of the Birsa Munda archives compels me to revisit. There is no doubt that after its publication three decades ago, *Elementary Aspects* became one of the most influential texts for historians and social scientists working on resistance and popular movements in the global south. Various known as subaltern studies and postcolonial studies, though for many it has taken a very different form to the intentions of its early scholars, it is now highly influential not only in history but also literary theory, cultural studies, geography and of course anthropology. When James Scott wrote the Preface to its re-publication by Duke University Press in 1999, he described the book as a shipyard from which thousands of ships have sailed. Scott also talked of it as having rapidly become something of an 'underground classic' because after it was first published in India in 1983, the few copies that arrived early in North America, Africa, and Latin America were passed from hand to hand as valuable ritual objects.

*Elementary Aspects* was born in the context of the extreme repression of the Indian Emergency of 1975-77 when, seemingly loosing the grip that Congress once held, Indira Gandhi suspended constitutional liberties. This was, however, also a time of growing disillusionment of organised left parties in India. In particular, the Naxalite movement which had erupted less than a decade before had virtually collapsed with most of its leaders either killed or in jail. In this context, the early subaltern studies scholars marked a search for a New Left, seeking to move beyond the trappings of liberal ideology that framed colonial, nationalist and leftist historiography alike in India. As important was a project against the all too common orientalist charges of the time that burdened India as a place of religiosity and therefore incapable of revolution.

Though informed by a belief in a development of consciousness in more secular and socialist directions over time, *Elementary Aspects* was also intended as an antidote to the secularism and teleology of Marxist theory of political mobilisation more generally. Eric Hobsbawm was a

key interlocutor. Hobsbawm's *Primitive Rebels*, written in the 1950s, noted the scholarly and activist focus on the industrial proletariat when it came to revolutionary mobilisation and argued that more attention should be given to the struggles of the world's overwhelming majority. These movements of rural people, though 'blinding and groping,' Hobsbawm suggested (1959: 2), were neither unimportant nor marginal in making history revolutionary. Hobsbawm insisted that these 'primitive' and in particular rural peoples were the majority of the population in most countries of the world and that their acquisition of political consciousness made the twentieth century the most revolutionary in history, being the source or root of the great revolutionary upheavals in Mexico, Russia, Spain, China and Cuba (Löwy 2000). Though granting the struggles – of banditry, the mafiosi, millenarianism and the mob – practical or political importance, *Primitive Rebels* displayed an evolutionary history of movements that Hobsbawm felt were progressively better harnessed by modern social and political movements, from the prophetic sect of the Lazzarittists in the Tuscan mountains where medieval millenarian heresy survives, to the Andalucian village anarchist organisations showing millenarianism divorced from religion, to the Sicilian fasci who came to merge with the Italian socialists and communists. Hobsbawm evaluated the different degrees of millenarianism in these movements according to their increasing affiliation with the 'right kind of ideas about political organisation, strategy and tactics and the right kind of programme' (1959: 197).

Against this evolutionary backdrop, Guha sought to recast those who were all too easily seen, à la Hobsbawm, as the 'primitive rebels' of popular movements in colonial India into people who acted collectively with passion and indignation, but also with tactical and political logic. For both theory and praxis, the point was to understand and appreciate these 'subalterns' – variously also called 'peasants' – in their own terms. Influenced by the turn to 'culture' among British Marxian social historians – Christopher Hill, E P Thompson and Hobsbawm himself (Sarkar 2000) – and further inspired by Gramsci (Arnold 1985), Guha and many of the early subaltern studies scholars saw their role as bringing anthropology to the study of history. Reading 'against the grain' of history, producing a 'history from below', they sought to 'alter the ego' in history (Gupta 1985), seek the 'small voice of history' (Chatterjee 2010) and bring the people back in.

Anthropology was not just to be used for a new interpretation of the past but as the basis for a new theory and a different praxis. The challenge was to Marxist theory and its claims about the production of modern society, the formation of modern citizenship and a secular politics organised around individual rights, through the spread of capitalism emancipating workers and peasants from feudal bonds and the parochial world of community, religion and interpersonal domination. The theoretical ambitions were to undermine the narrative of capitalism's quest for hegemony and the global spread of bourgeois forms of political and cultural reproduction. The aim was to arrive at a different theory of the spread of capitalism in the Global South, one that made possible 'dominance without hegemony' (Guha 1997).

According to Guha and his collaborators, in colonial India, capital expanded and dominated but without integrating the dominated classes into the accompanying liberal worldview. Colonial rule and the spread of capitalism in India thus created a distinction between an elite domain of politics and a subaltern one. Failing to universalise its mission, colonial capital left popular or subaltern politics unmarked by its accompanying bourgeois liberalism of rights, citizenship, and rational pursuit of individual interests. The gulf created between the subaltern and the elite was further maintained by the Indian bourgeoisie who failed not only to integrate the two domains into one, but also to recognise the diversity of subaltern politics in their own terms and not those of the liberal bourgeois culture they inherited from the spread of colonial capital. The dominant classes did not therefore inhabit the same political and cultural universe as the subaltern ones and the dominant liberal historiography of India – both colonial and nationalist – failed to see this. Thus the persistence of this divide between the elite and the subaltern in the postcolonial world called for a new framework to understand politics.

Guha and his collaborators sought to move beyond what they saw as the Marxist teleological accounts which recognised 'true' politics only in organised revolutionary parties and which disregarded subaltern agitations waged in religious terms, or around caste or ethnic groupings, as prepolitical or premodern. Although my own reading of Hobsbawm's *Primitive Rebels* is that Guha and his collaborators were much closer to Hobsbawm's political project than Guha allows, the subaltern studies scholars were keen to mark themselves out from Hobsbawm. They argued that campaigns launched against the dominant classes by the peasantry in terms that were quite different to the instruments of modern politics – whether millenarian or prophetic for example – were fully modern and political. Religion, then, was not to be seen as mystifying and non-transformative but as having the potential to lead to political action and the overthrow of the dominant order. Indeed, in Guha's words there was 'nothing in the militant movements of (colonial India's) rural masses that was not political' (1999: 6). Though not expressed in codes and not drawing on resources that could be assimilated into the language of modern organised politics, Guha's aim was thus to show that peasants in rural India were makers of their own rebellion, to attribute consciousness and agency to them, justifying their use of insurgency as a means of social agitation.

For Guha, colonial domination worked through the triumvirate *sarkari, sahkari and zamindari* – the official, the moneylender and the landlord – extracting surplus from the peasants in terms so explicitly and ubiquitously coercive that they could not be seen as anything but political. He sought evidence that peasants wanted to destroy this system and argued that it 'was essentially a political task, one in which the existing power nexus had to be turned on its head as a necessary condition for the redress of any particular grievance' (Guha 1999: 8). Guha covered a whole range of revolts in just over a century ending with Birsa Munda in 1900. He argued that there was nothing spontaneous about these risings and though they may not have had a blueprint for what was to come in place of the authority, when they tried to destroy this authority it was totally political. Although he added the caveat that it would be wrong to overestimate the maturity of this politics and read into it the subsequent phase of more intensified class conflict, widespread anti-imperialist struggle and generally a higher level of militancy among the masses, Guha (1999: 11) insisted that these revolts showed the beginnings of a theoretical consciousness that had a sovereignty, consistency and logic to constitute a pillar of politics.

Guha and his collaborators have been the subject of intense interest, criticism and controversy. They have been charged with presenting a false divide between the elite and the subaltern, stressing the autonomy of the subaltern, producing a kind of ethnicisation of the peasant mind, and of romanticising resistance in presenting it as dichotomous with domination (the clearest critiques are from Gupta 1985, Bayly 1988, O'Hanlon 1988, Ortner 1995, Sivaramakrishnan 1995, Sarkar 2000, Chibber 2013). Yet, despite their explicit turn to anthropology in reading history, rare is the ethnographically grounded analysis of their work (Amit Desai's research (2013) is one exception). I have elsewhere

written an ethnographically grounded critique of the early subaltern school's division between the elite and the subaltern in peasant insurgency (Shah 2012). In this article, in re-reading the Birsa Munda rebellion via the insights of living as an anthropologist in a contemporary Maoist guerrilla stronghold, I wish to argue that in introducing religious dimensions but keeping them at the margins, Guha did not go far enough in his critique of secular politics for the political significance of what the people he focuses on were doing. In what may be read as a radical defence of Guha, I will argue that Guha was ironically not Guha enough.

## 2. RE-READING BIRSA MUNDA

In order to study the relatively 'pure' state of elementary aspects of rebel insurgency before the politics of nationalism and socialism penetrated the Indian countryside in a significant way, Guha terminates his period of analysis with Birsa Munda and his early death in the hands of the colonial state. For Guha the movement under Birsa marked the last great rebellion of the century and showed a conscious leadership with an aim and a programme – to liberate Mundas from British rule and to mobilise the peasantry for war against the Raj.

The basic contours of the story of Birsa that Guha relied on are as follows: When the Chotanagpur plateau came under the direct administration of the East India Company, the transformation of the agrarian system as a result of the rise of the feudal state began. Outside (and usually high caste) traders, merchants and moneylenders were introduced in what were essentially tribal areas of hunting-gathering and subsistence farming. These newcomers took possession of tribal lands, evicted the tribals, became their landlords and started extracting rent and forced labour. Although some areas, such as those under the influence of Birsa, did not directly suffer from this transition as a kind of corporate tenure of the original reclaimers of the land was protected, the threat of disintegration of the rights of tribals over their land spread. These processes gave rise to a whole range of tribal movements against the British Raj and the outsiders, who were called '*dikus*' – from the 1756-73 Paharia uprisings, 1830-31 Kol insurrection, the 1850-56 Sidho-Kano Santhal movement, to the Sardar agitations beginning in 1858 and evolving into the Birsa movement at the end of the 1800s.

Although the Birsa uprising is said to have lasted not more than a month and killed less than thirty people, it became the most significant of the lot and stretched for about 400 square miles across the hilly country. On 3 January 1900, a telegram was sent from the Viceroy to the London office, reporting an outbreak among Munda Kols in Ranchi District. By 12 January additional forces of 170 native troops and company military police were dispatched to join the 230 rifles and 6<sup>th</sup> Jats that had already been sent (on 29 December and 8 January). On 15 January 1900, the troops were ordered to fire and advance on a group of Mundas resting on a hill, killing at least sixteen people, including three women and a child. Birsa was captured soon after and died from a cholera attack in jail.

For all his claims about reading the colonial archive against the grain to discover those 'small voices of history' (Guha 1996), Guha's analysis of the movement relies not on these records but on a 1966 book on Birsa (Singh 1966) which was the doctoral thesis of a remarkable Indian Administrative Service Officer. This was Kumar Suresh Singh, first District Magistrate in Khunti (when he collected oral histories and songs of Birsa), then appointed District Commissioner at Palamau in 1965-68 (at least two decades before the region became a Maoist stronghold), then Commissioner of the Chotanagpur (1978-1980) and finally Director General of the Anthropological Survey of India (from 1984). In 2002, four years before Singh died, when republished for the fourth time, the inside sleeve of the book contained an extract from his new Preface, 'When about forty years ago I wrote the story of this man and his movement – in fact I had used Birsa as a metaphor to tell the story of his people's struggle – little had I realised that it would have such a far-reaching impact on subaltern studies and in tribal politics' (Singh 2002). The book had established Birsa as a cult, inspired folk and regional literatures, poetry and songs, and most significantly, formed the basis of *Elementary Aspects* and thus a foundation for subaltern studies. Rather overwhelmed by the production of the myth of Birsa that his book has been responsible for, Singh is careful in the Preface to this last edition to point out the various gaps in knowledge. In the face of the fact that today's militant movements have presented Birsa with not only bows and arrows but sometimes even a sword, Singh questioned whether there was any evidence that Birsa had taken part in the armed uprising, whether he was even present at the scenes of armed struggle, and whether he had ever shot an arrow.

Indeed there have been many leaps in interpreting Birsa as an anti-colonial insurgent (c.f. Rycroft 2004) and the colonial archives show some important facets and contradictions in the discussions that took place at the time that have since been swept under the carpet. In visiting the correspondence between the colonial authorities that Singh relied on for his book, what is noted but strikingly underplayed in Singh's original analysis, and virtually absent in that of Guha's, is a reflection on precisely who the targets of the attacks were on those cold nights of December 1899. The attacks that made Birsa into a significant threat to the Raj were in fact almost all related to the Church (German Lutheran and Roman Catholic) rather than the government per se. Most of the attacks were either against Christians or people in, or coming out of, Mission compounds. [[2 \(#religion-secular-left-subaltern-studies-birsa-munda-maoists-n-2\)](#)]

(<http://aotpress.com/articles/religion-secular-left-subaltern-studies-birsa-munda-maoists/#religion-secular-left-subaltern-studies-birsa-munda-maoists-n-2>) ] Moreover, the most significant attacks – a list of 24 occurrences – were all committed on the night of 24 December, Christmas Eve.

What is also quite clear from the confidential correspondence with the Chief Secretary of the Government of Bengal (C W Bolton) to the Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department, is that the Commissioner of Chotanagpur, A R Forbes and his Deputy Commissioner in Ranchi District (Streathfield) were relying on the reports of the Munda jungles coming from two missionaries. Dr Nottrott (the head of the German Lutheran Mission) but especially Father Hoffman (the German Director of the Society of Jesus, the Roman Catholics who had come from Belgium) were the main conveyors of the troubles. Hoffman who had taken the place of Constant Lievens in the 1890s, was described by Forbes as the 'oldest and most experienced European resident in the neighbourhood.' Moreover, it seems that Forbes and his officers, notwithstanding the skeptical and conflictual relation they had with the missions, were reliant on Hoffman for information and direction on the actions they carried out against the Mundas at the turn of the nineteenth century. These were the military actions that enabled Singh and later Guha to resurrect Birsa as preeminently an anti-colonial rebel. What I will suggest is that Guha's (mis)reading of the Birsa uprising is thus ultimately traceable to his reliance on Singh, who relied on Forbes, and ultimately, Hoffman.

Enclosed in Commissioner Forbes's correspondence of 20 Jan 1900 to the Chief Secretary of Bengal, is a very interesting long letter from Father Hoffman. [[3 \(#religion-secular-left-subaltern-studies-birsa-munda-maoists-n-3\)](#)]

(<http://aotcpres.com/articles/religion-secular-left-subaltern-studies-birsa-munda-maoists/#religion-secular-left-subaltern-studies-birsa-munda-maoists-n-3> ] Hoffman begins by saying that he is redeeming a promise made to Forbes's predecessor of 'informing local authorities should he apprehend an instance of armed rebellion of any fraction of the Munda population,' perhaps seeking to make clear that there was no ulterior motive to his letter but the threat against the state. The letter is fascinating for Hoffman downplays the targeting of the missionaries and their converts. Instead, Birsa is turned into a major political threat to the British Raj, accused of using religion by playing '*fakir*', turning himself into a 'divine incarnation' destined to serve Mundas in this world and the next, in order to dupe them into armed rebellion. 'Under the garb of religion', Birsa is charged with assuming a 'purely political role of high ambition' – of leading an armed rebellion against the colonial government and its outside authorities. In fact there is little actual evidence to suggest that Birsa and his followers, at the time of the attacks in 1900, were specifically targeting the holy trinity, '*sarkar, sahuakar and zamindar*,' that Guha later resurrects him for. What is clear though is that the Church was loosing hard earned converts into the sect of Birsa (see also Chandra 2012 for the significance of the role of the Church in the Birsa rebellion).

The task of conversion to Christianity in the inhospitable, malaria ridden, hilly jungles of the Chotanagpur had been a painful and difficult one. The German Evangelical Lutherans were the first to arrive in 1845 and a split in that Church established the Anglicans from 1869 but they found it hard to keep the 'heathens'. The Roman Catholics, though the last to arrive were more successful. Setting aside Christ and the Gospel, increasingly both the Lutherans and the Catholics tried to gain the 'hearts and minds' of the tribals by prioritizing education and development, and by mobilizing tribals to make claims for their land in English colonial courts, arguing on the grounds of customary law against their dispossession. It seems that the Sardar movement, which had preceded the Birsa movement, was in fact led by the German Mission, though later when Dr Nottrott failed to help them many Mundas turned to the Roman Catholics. Indeed Father Hoffman had continued the painstaking task of Father Lievens before him. After thirty years the number of Mundas baptized had finally grown. So it is perhaps unsurprising that Birsa was a threat to Father Hoffman when Christian converts kept departing to be with him.

Who was Birsa? Named, as is custom among non-Christian Mundas even today, after the day of the week when he was born – Thursday – Birsa was in fact baptized by the Gossner Mission some time in the 1870s. He went to the German Mission School in Chaibasa from where, when the Sardars broke from the German Mission, Birsa was found criticizing Dr Nottrott and expelled. Birsa and his family are said to have joined the Roman Catholics then. However, a three-year stay with a Vaishnav monk, Anand Pane, had Birsa wearing the Hindu sacred thread, worshipping the tulsi plant and turning vegetarian. This experience, it seems, led to his transformation into a prophet and stories about him as a healer and miracle worker spread. Devotees – Mundas and low caste non-Mundas alike, women/men, parents/children – gathered around Birsa believing he was God and that their salvation could be directly reached through him. They turned vegetarian, became teetotalers and stopped appeasing village spirits and ghosts and practicing witchcraft. White pigs and white fowls were destroyed in households all across the district. People gathered twice a week in devotion to Birsa. Indeed, his reach was so profound that on one particular day in 1895, it seems that around 6000 people gathered on a hill in Chalkad as Birsa had claimed that the end of the world would arrive on that date and only those on the hill would survive.

This gathering on the hill led to Birsa's first arrest. Though undoubtedly any large gathering might be a threat to colonial governments, in fact the letter from Commissioner Grimley on Birsa's arrest is keen to note that the only witnesses and Birsa himself said that he was addressing people purely on religious matters, and that perhaps it is his hearers who had given his words a more political slant. It seems that many Christian converts had become part of Birsa's sect and that Birsa was arrested on the reports of the missionaries as a suspected lunatic and someone whose activities were likely to create a breach of the peace. Whatever the case, what is clear in re-reading between the lines of Father Hoffman's letter five years later is that it was the missionaries who were keen to label Birsa as a 'fanatic' (indeed that is the word that is used) and who wrought the machinery of the colonial state against his sect.

Hoffman, who claims to have been personally targeted by Birsa's sect, was indeed quite panicked by Birsa's popularity. At one point in his letter to Forbes, describing the earlier gathering at Chalkad, Hoffman says, 'It was impossible to reason with the crowds. Birsa was the Bhagwan (God) of Chotanagpur and not only of the Mundas. Incredible as it may seem, in a few months the bulk of Oraon and Munda population... were convinced Birsa's. There were but *very few* [he emphasises this very few] Christians who did not openly side with the new redeemer.' After stressing that Birsa was using religion but was in fact bent at any cost on having an armed rising against the government, Hoffman goes on to qualify his own position.

Need I say that, as a missionary, I came to these people with the one object of working for them to my dying day. I am not animated with any bitter feelings against them, notwithstanding their cowardly attack on us on 24<sup>th</sup> December, and that I should willingly pardon and forget all today if they came to better feelings. If, then, I expressed the conviction that nothing but a severe lesson, and nothing short of the absolute removal of Birsa and the chief ringleaders will bring the ordinary rank and file rebels to their senses, I did so simply in the interests of those who are still stoutly loyal, and in the interests of the still greater number, who though apparently loyal, are really wavering, and who will readily join the rebels if they are not quickly repressed.

A list of recommendations from Hoffman follows and includes, 'a severe example to be made of the first gang that is met by the military and that no respite should be given to either Birsa or his chief men.' However, it is also quite clear that the Commissioner Forbes has read the ambiguity in what Hoffman was calling his troops in for – the fact that this may be the missionaries acting against what they saw as a competing religious sect on the ascendancy. Indeed in his letter to the Chief Secretary of Government of Bengal, Forbes declares, 'Our object must not be understood as a crusade against the Birsa *religion* (for such may it be called) but only the stern putting down of all attempts at lawlessness.' So it was that the armed forces of the colonial state were sent in to crush Birsa and his followers, laying the ground for those interested in Birsa more than half a century later to propel him into the status of an anti-colonial rebel.

I do not wish to suggest that Birsa and his followers were not seeking to make demands of the colonial state (c.f. Chandra 2013). Nor do I wish to remove the possibility that for the Birsaities both the Christian Fathers and the colonial officers may equally have been outsiders. What I wish to stress is that a significant proportion of the attacks of the Birsaites were against the missionaries and that the missionaries were very concerned at losing hard earned converts to the sect of Birsa. We can see that Father Hoffman needed to downplay the threat to the Church and stress instead that Birsa was a threat to the colonial state in order to bring its force to crush the Birsaites. In this way Father Hoffman played a large role in the making of the Birsa movement into an anti-colonial rebellion, a narrative that has persisted and gained strength throughout the century. In failing to read between the lines of the colonial correspondence, the nuance of Hoffman's position was not given sufficient attention by Kumar Suresh Singh – and was thus disregarded by Ranajit Guha. Separating religion from politics, sidelining to 'religion' the prophetic and millenarian dimension of Birsa, Guha was thus able to stress the political role of Birsa and create a 'Birsa Munda Rebellion' as the basis for the grammar of his *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*.

### 3. PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

If it was not overtly an anti-colonial rebellion, what were the Birsaities doing? Why did the Birsa movement seem to have such a purchase and why was it significant for the people who joined? Clearly it is very difficult to answer these questions, given the events took place more than a hundred years ago and we have nothing but the correspondence between the colonial authorities and the missionaries to go by. What we do know is that the Birsaities repeated a very common pattern (Fuchs 1965) to that which has periodically and repeatedly spread in hilly and forested Adivasi areas over at least the last two centuries – from the Tana Bhagat movement in Eastern India which held that Kaiser Willem II would save them (see Sangeeta Dasgupta 2013), and the Bhagat and Devi Movements of Western India (see David Hardiman 1987; 2003), to the more recent Mahanubhav Panth (see Amit Desai 2007; 2009). Though their salvation was to come in different forms, akin to followers of these movements, and indeed those of Shiv Charcha, the Birsaites changed the most intimate of their household and bodily practices. They transformed what they ate and drank, how they bathed, and their spiritual and mystical practices in order to come together (across caste, class, gender and generation) in a devotionalist worship involving collective singing to, and sometimes possession by, a prophet, goddess or god.

In Indian sociology such movements have been noted for their ambivalence. On the one hand they deny an inequality between people. Jonathan Parry (1974) has highlighted the potential for devotional sects (or bhakti movements) to create egalitarian values within a rigidly hierarchical society. Indeed, Shiv Charcha and what we know of the Birsaites show that they were very inclusive, incorporating people across caste/class/gender and generational distinctions. For a period of time, the Birsaities encouraged the giving up of property and, as with Shiv Charcha, marked an attempt to eliminate social differences by calling each other brother and sister. On the other hand, Chris Fuller (1992) has argued that devotionalism's accommodation to institutionalised inequality has been one of its most significant features. At one level this can be seen in both Shiv Charcha and the Birsa movement when followers almost universally adopted higher caste life-styles and norms. This was a process that could easily be interpreted along the lines of M N Srinivas's (1956) concept of sanskritisation, an attempt by lower castes to raise their standing in relation to higher castes by emulating them. Indeed, in the form that their transformative practices took, the Birsaites were probably borrowing from Vaishnavism and perhaps also mimicking certain aspects of Christian ritual. [\[4. \(#religion-secular-left-subaltern-studies-birsa-munda-maoists-n-4\)\]](#)

(<http://aotcpress.com/articles/religion-secular-left-subaltern-studies-birsa-munda-maoists/#religion-secular-left-subaltern-studies-birsa-munda-maoists-n-4>) In fact, such movements may later enhance the spread of institutionalised religion (Hardiman 2008). And in different contemporaneous regional locations, their local manifestation may even seamlessly merge with institutionalised religion – as was the case for Shiv Charcha in the caste divided plains. However, Hardiman (1987) is surely right to say that the adoption of orthodox life styles and customs does not imply an acceptance of hierarchy and, moreover, may become part of a challenge to the existing social structure.

In fact, I think the people involved in such millenarian, prophetic or devotional sects are best thought of as *bricoleurs* in the Levi-Straussian (1966) sense; they are borrowing from various sources in order to create something different. When seen as such, it makes it possible for all of the previous attempts to explain the effect of these movements to be correct; they could internally promote egalitarian values in a hierarchical society while at the same time accommodating institutionalised inequality *and* erupting as a force to challenge it. Indeed, I suggest that the Birsaites, the Devi Movement, the Tana Bhagat movement, the Mahanubhav Panthis and the Shiv Charchaites, amongst others, all lie on the same continuum. They could all turn physically violent. While some overtly challenged dominant authorities, others did not. Some were more millenarian than others. Some had more charismatic leaders than others. Some were internally more egalitarian than others.

What we need to analyse, however, is not just the form of these movements but the processes entailed. If we do so, what unites all these movements is that they mark a similar process of people creatively rejecting the alienating effects of the social transformations that surround them by collectively reintegrating and ordering their lives. The alienation faced by these societies took on two different but related forms in both the period of the Birsa movement and that of Shiv Charcha. One was the result of the institutionalisation of religion as a separate or special domain of life. The second was the result of agrarian change, in particular the acceleration of the processes of capitalism encouraged by institutional authorities, and experienced in local communities through their youth.

#### Separating religion: Missionaries and Maoists

Let me take the institutionalisation of religion first. These areas were marked by an absence of institutionalised religion, what might be called a holistic situation in which religion, economics and politics were one conceptual and practical realm. Religion here was not a separate dimension of life but was, as Maurice Bloch has argued (2013), part of an inclusive transcendental social. I have earlier used the term 'sacral polity' (Shah 2010) to describe this situation of religion being inseparable from economics or politics. Indeed the colonial and postcolonial state, seeking to classify these areas, have forever struggled to mark the 'religious' box, creating 'animism' and more recently a 'sarna' religion. In the context of a cosmology of the sacral polity, just as the Christian missionaries (in the early 1900s) encouraged a separation of religion from the politico-economic domain, so too did the Maoists in a nearby non-Christian influenced area (a century later). To evoke Bloch (2013), in both cases from being nothing special, religion became central.

### Missionaries (1900s)

In the case of the missionaries, we can only guess at the precise ways in which the relationship between the process of alienation and the search for holism worked out. However, we have some significant pointers. The Missions attacked local practices of witchcraft and sorcery, local forms of healing, as well as local forms of authority and dispute management, labelling them 'supernatural' and considering them 'backward'. In attempting to dismantle these practices, as David Mosse (2012) has shown in the case of Southern India, the Christian missionaries tried to re-establish the relationship between the sacred and temporal spheres by carving out a separate domain of religion.

### Maoists (2000s)

The Maoists were the mirror opposite of the missionaries; they tried to create politics as a separate domain from religion; religion was to have no role in the temporal sphere of politics-economics. Once they had initial control over the local 'markets of protection' (Shah 2006) through the threat of violence, the Maoists sought to establish their authority in the region through control over dispute resolution. Historically these Adivasi areas had systems of spiritually endowed *pahans* and *paenbharras* who presided over dispute resolutions in a tiered system of local councils (from village to intra-village level) called the *parha* (Shah 2010). The Maoists replaced these sacral polities with their people's courts, consisting of a secular village council, which in many cases were presided over by Maoist commanders and their armed squads. The effect was to strip the *parhas* and *paenbharras* of their divine authority. Instead they were either re-incorporated in an entirely secular fashion into the new Maoist courts or they were considered corrupt and defunct. Accusations of witchcraft were condemned as backward superstitious practices (see Shah 2006, 2009). Though households still sought the guidance of witchdoctors and other spiritual healers, this was against the decrees of the Maoist leaders. Malaria attacks were to be treated with doses of mefloquin, not with the hocus-pocus of witchdoctors. In this process the Maoists became the temporal authorities and anything that looked like religious life was to become a private affair, hopefully not an affair at all.

It is perhaps then no surprise that my sister's turn to Shiv Charcha was in large part a direct consequence of the inability of the Maoist courts to deal with the charges against her family made by her partner Bimal's ex-wife. The ex-wife had filed cases against them with the police, demanding their lands on the grounds that Bimal had left her for my sister when she was pregnant with their son. The charges caused considerable distress to the family; for several years Bimal had fled thousands of miles away to Chennai to work as construction labour in order to escape jail. By the time I got there, all misfortunes – such as my sister and niece falling sick with malaria – were explained away as the ex-wife casting spells on them. Whereas in the past the spiritually endowed courts would have handled the matter, the Maoists courts failed to address my sister and her husband's problems. So when Bimal returned for a brief trip back from Chennai, they decided that it was to Shiv Charcha that they should turn. The desire for the involvement of spiritual authority in the trials and tribulations of their daily lives is what then made my sister join the Shiv Charcha.

Though with different inflections, in both the case of the missionaries in the 1900s and the Maoists in the new millennia, the attempt was to separate religion from the politico-economic sphere.

### Youth, agrarian change and processes of capitalism: Missionaries and Maoists

Tracing the precise local effects of the separation of religion from the politico-economic domains is one part of the story of alienation. The other was the great strain on social relations, particularly inter-generational ones, brought by agrarian change and the acceleration of processes of capitalism in the region.

In the contemporary Maoist strongholds, these changes were encouraged by the dialectical relationship between the Maoists and the Indian state. In the region of the Birsa movement, they find a parallel in the colonial era in the relationship between the Jesuits and the colonial state. Although clearly the Maoists and the Jesuits have a different relation with the state (the Maoists wanted to seize the power of the Indian state while the Jesuits represented no ultimate challenge to it), in practice the agendas of both have been against the state. Both have fought the state *in the terms* of the state, acting as catalysts for the very penetration of the state in these areas.

### Missionaries (1900s)

The missionaries sought converts against the backdrop of dramatic agrarian changes introduced by the colonial government – the breaking up of communal tenure systems into private property from which the state could extract revenue. As Adivasis faced losing access to lands they once roamed and cultivated, the missionaries educated Adivasi youth and encouraged them to fight for their rights to the land. In this process the missionaries became one of the main drivers of Adivasi recognition of the language of property rights in land. Those Adivasi youth who joined the Jesuits thus increasingly co-opted the language of the colonial state, representing very different values and aspirations to their parents.

### Maoists (2000s)

In the Maoist case, if their support amongst Adivasis was initially enabled by the continuities rather than rupture that the movement represented with village life – the movement provided a home away from home (Shah 2013a) – those who stayed as full time revolutionaries with the Maoists and increasingly *became* Maoist also marked a more visible manifestation of the alienation of local life. As in the case of Jesuits, here too these transformations infiltrated the fabric of everyday life through the youth. Like the Jesuits, it was the youth who were attracted to and joined the Maoists. But for many others, especially for the older generations, it was through these youth that the state was brought closer and the forces of capitalism accelerated in the area. Amidst people who had sought to keep the state at bay from the intimacies of everyday life, the Maoists unwittingly nurtured both the increasing presence of the state and created a greater desire for processes and values promoted by the state (see Shah 2013b).



The Maoists increased state infiltration into the areas as counterinsurgency operations came not only in military terms but also via developmental schemes and jobs targeted at Adivasis. Moreover they created a greater desire for the state by a double process of calling the Indian state to account, and by creating a parallel state. Youth who joined the Maoists thus became part of new processes involving the collection and redistribution of Maoist taxes, the increased monetisation of the economy, ownership of new forms of technology (not least mobile phones and guns), and new disciplinary and bodily practices. Youth who joined the Maoists were thus caught in processes of state formation. They increasingly sought to differentiate themselves from their kin, wearing Nike shoes and skin-tight salwar dresses rather than saris, replacing the grass mats with plastic chairs, and mud houses with brick ones. Through the youth, the Maoists were bringing a change in values and an ever increasing commodification into Adivasi lives (Shah 2013b).

Thus people who joined Shiv Charcha, and I suspect the Birsaities, were also collectively reacting against the forces of alienation brought by their youth into their communities, whether it be the result of the spread of notions of private rights in property nurtured by the Christian missionaries and the colonial state, or the increasing monetisation and commodification of Adivasi lives in the case of the Maoists and the Indian state.

The periodic conversion of local people to millenarian, prophetic or devotional sects were then their creative imaginative attempts at stitching it all together in the face of at least two forms of alienation. One was the alienating effect of the conflicts in values and aspirations associated with agrarian change and the related acceleration of processes of capitalism brought into Adivasi communities by the youth that joined both the Maoists and the Jesuits. The second was the alienating separation of religion from the politico-economic domain and the fear of being left simply to the mercy of the temporal domain. Fearing the institutional forces of change – Maoist, Jesuit or State – breaking their lives apart, transformations to these sects became imaginative and creative moments of collective solidarity to put it all together. I do not wish to claim that they were successful in these attempts to reorder their lives nor do I wish to say that they recreated something they once had, but simply that they *tried*. It was in and through possession that disputes could once more be resolved. It was in and through spiritual calling that the sick would be cured. While they need not last forever, the temporary collective moments these sects nurtured were important for a rebalancing and reordering of people's lives in times of great politico-economic change.

### SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

Of course, there are significant differences between the so-called 'anti-colonial' Birsa Munda movement of a century ago and the contemporary spread of a devotional sect in Maoist strongholds. However, what I have tried to show here are the less obvious and more subtle similarities between these seemingly politically opposed movements. People who became a part of the Birsa Munda movement, variously described as anti-colonial, millenarian or prophetic and today appropriated by the revolutionary left in India, are comparable to those who are involved in a contemporary devotional sect (Shiv Charcha) easily harnessed by the extreme religious right. I have argued that both of these movements – Birsa Munda and Shiv Charcha – marked people's creative search for order in a time of rapid social transformation, disintegration and alienation caused by institutional authorities, whether it was the Jesuits and the State at the beginning of the 1900s, or the Maoists and the State a hundred years later.

My hope is that the analysis presented here may help us better understand one of the crucial paradoxes of the contemporary world. This is the question of why the decline of radical left wing secular movements is so often accompanied by the flourishing of religious movements that can be harnessed by extreme right wing forces.

In the late nineteen sixties, India was not seen as one of the places that produced a great twentieth century peasant revolution. It was not mentioned in Eric Wolf's (1969) monumental study, *Peasants Wars of the Twentieth Century*, nor were India's peasant rebellions of significance in Barrington Moore's (1966) *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*. But against the dominant image of a caste-ridden Hindu country harbouring a stasis-prone and self-repressive mass of people, the early subaltern studies scholars reacted by showing instances of peasant insurgency in India, such as that of Birsa. What my analysis suggests, however, is that rebellions like the Birsa Munda one were, in that period, mere bush fires for the British Raj. Since independence, the Indian state has declared that the greatest threat to the country is the Maoist insurgency. Notwithstanding the occasional show of expert guerrilla tactics in blowing up an MLA and his entourage here or a busload of Central Reserve Police Forces there, my analysis suggests that the Maoists are by no means the kind of threat that the Indian State has conjured them to be. In fact, the movements that are really capturing people's imaginations in the face of rapid social transformation are devotional sects like that of Shiv Charcha which in the past have taken prophetic or millenarian forms. It is such sects which the secular left disregard but whose creative force is being harnessed, all too successfully, by the extreme religious right.

In his *Art of Not Being Governed*, James Scott (2009) traces the numerous rebellions of hill peoples in Southeast Asia – in particular those of the Hmong, Karen and Lahu – and characterises these people as *Prophets of Renewal* against encroaching states. The analysis from the hills and forests of central and eastern India suggest that Scott's analysis is relevant not only for people running away from the state, but even for those living under the influence of a highly extractive and military regime – in my terms, those who have sought to keep *In the Shadows of the State* (Shah 2010). There are two further points that emerge in relation to Scott's analysis. First, that it is not only the state per se that prophetic, devotional or millenarian movements such as the Birsaites or the Shiv Charchites were reacting against. They were reacting against the alienating effect of institutional authorities – whether in the form of the state, organised religion (in the case of the Jesuits) or organised Marxist Leninist movements creating a parallel state (here, the Maoists). Second, such movements were not just about people seeking to not be governed. They provided an imaginative avenue of creative rejection of institutional authorities *and* a search for a different order. If you like, they represented artists attempting to create a more holistic and ordered world.

It is far too easy to dismiss these movements as fanatic or appropriated by fanaticism (indeed these are the allegations against Birsa by the Jesuits, and against Shiv Charcha by the Maoists). As Alberto Toscano (2006) argues in his brief history of the concept, the common perception of "fanaticism" as simply the encroachment of religion into a secularised public sphere must be made more complex. It can allow for a politics of abstraction and an attached boundless drive for a universality or egalitarianism (Toscano 2006). I argue that it is this search

for an abstraction, for the holism of religious-economic-political life in particular, that reunited people in action against the disintegration brought into their lives. It is these processes that enabled the spread of millenarian or prophetic sects that have been resurrected by the institutional left but are also all too easy a prey of the extreme institutional right.

In their appreciation of such sects, Guha and his early subaltern studies collaborators contested the Marxian approaches which saw religious practices as regressive at worst, reformist at best. Instead, they drew on Gramscian interpretations of religious action which understood religion as produced by material conditions and holding the possibility of leading to political action towards social transformation. Religion therefore had real revolutionary potential. Guha argued, 'Not to face up to the religious aspect of rebel solidarity and ascribe it to a phoney secularism is to falsify the intellectual history of the peasantry and eliminate, by a mere stroke of the pen, the discrepancy that is necessarily there at certain stages of the class struggle between the level of its objective articulation and that of the consciousness of its subjects' (Guha 1999: 173). Nevertheless, religion in these accounts was still to be seen as simply a medium of class struggle. 'The mediation of the practical and social aspects of insurgency by myth articulated itself as a mediation of the ideology of class struggle by religion,' argued Guha (1999: 251).

Vivek Chibber (2013) has recently targeted Guha and the subaltern studies scholars for marking out a space of dominance without hegemony represented by sects like that of Birsa and has charged these scholars with being orientalist. On the contrary, I suggest here that perhaps Guha did not go far enough. Not only did the elevation of class struggle and class conflict per se remain the Marxian goal of Guha's theoretical analysis, as it does that of my Maoist friends. It is also the case that religion remained, for Guha, a separate or 'special' domain. In evoking religion, my point is not to turn Birsa (or for that matter Shiv Charcha) into a religious force (see Derne 1985), but to bring back the possibility of thinking about religion, economics and politics in one conceptual realm. For in times of great social transformation and an institutionalised segregation of religion from economics and politics, it is the desire to become whole again that the people in the Adivasi belts of India have consistently pursued.

Again, in focusing on people's imaginative and creative attempt to reintegrate their lives I am neither claiming that they were successful nor that they were restoring or renewing what they once had. It is not only the evolutionary notion of time and change, the temporal register in which we understand politics, and the question of how to relate to the nonsynchronous, that disable the Left from giving due recognition to the significance of what the followers of Birsa or Shiv Charcha were doing. It is also time to recognise people's needs, against the dualisms and the disorder thrown upon them, to creatively seek the integration of religion, politics and economics in the face of their alienation.

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[1] This is of course exactly what happened in China but was not at all the case in India where the Maoists are banned. [📄 \(#to-religion-secular-left-subaltern-studies-birsa-munda-maoists-n-1\)](#)

[2] Board of Control Collections. IOR/L/PJ/6/540. File 869. 19 April 1900. [📄 \(#to-religion-secular-left-subaltern-studies-birsa-munda-maoists-n-2\)](#)

[3] Board of Control collections. IOR/L/PJ/6/540. File 869 – 19 April 1900. [📄 \(#to-religion-secular-left-subaltern-studies-birsa-munda-maoists-n-3\)](#)

[4] Not only does one of the Birsa type prophets of the 1880s appear in the colonial records as 'John the Baptist' but the millenarian prophets Sidho-Kano of the Santhal Hul in 1855 covered two copies of the Book of John in white and gold cloth and placed them in a kind of shrine (see Chandra 2012).

[📄 \(#to-religion-secular-left-subaltern-studies-birsa-munda-maoists-n-4\)](#)

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