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Humaneness and Contradictions

India's Maoist-inspired Naxalites

ALPA SHAH

Based on long-term ethnographic field research in the Adivasi-dominated forests of eastern India, this article explores how and why the Naxalites have persisted in the subcontinent and the challenges that beset revolutionary mobilisation. The focus is on how communist ideology for a casteless and classless society translated into the humaneness of revolutionary subjectivity, creating relations of intimacy between the guerrilla armies and the people in its strongholds. Crucially, also analysed are a series of contradictions that constantly undermine revolutionary mobilisation, tearing the Naxalites apart and destroying them from within.

The arguments presented here are part of the author's forthcoming book on the Naxalites provisionally entitled, *Nightmarch: India's Hidden Revolutionary Maoist Struggle*.

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This year in England, from where I write, revolution is being commemorated everywhere—exhibited, curated and sold—through the records and rebels of the late 1960s at the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Royal Academy of Arts exploring Russian art in the aftermath of 1917, or through themed events, seminars and conferences. The story of the world's longest-running revolutionary guerrilla insurgency, though, remains largely outside of the global imagination; silenced from within its country of operation (except when it is to focus on the numbers dead) and silenced out of this renewed international interest in revolution. It seems we are happy to sell revolution or discuss a bygone era of social change and its dystopic demise than we are to get our hands dirty with the issues raised by those who are still fighting for a more egalitarian future, the challenges they pose and face. So, it is a pleasure to participate in this special issue by reflecting on some of the insights I have been fortunate to have gained by studying India's Maoist-inspired Naxalites.

During 2008–10, as the latest counter-insurgency operations were launched, I had the rare opportunity to live for a year and a half as a social anthropologist and a reporter in what was then one of the two strongholds of the Communist Party of India (Maoist), in the Adivasi- or tribal-dominated forests of Jharkhand. I had become interested in this movement for

revolutionary change from the time I had come across it trying to recruit my village friends some five years before in a different part of Jharkhand where I had lived for doctoral research (Shah 2010). I returned to Jharkhand with modest ambitions; to undertake the classic methods of long-term ethnographic fieldwork centring on participant observation (Shah 2017). I was there with the anthropologist George Kunnath (2012), who had researched the Dalits in the plains of Jehanabad, Bihar and their memories of the Naxalites. Our plan was to live with the Adivasis to understand how life for them had changed in the face of this movement. I never expected to see a guerrilla, let alone meet one. But, the guerrillas were everywhere; in every house, in every village, and in every forest. We had ended up living in what the Naxalites considered their Red Capital.

Based on this research, in this article, I shed some light on how and why the Naxalites have persisted in India and consider the challenges that beset them, outlining some of the contradictions at the heart of revolutionary mobilisation.

Humaneness

To understand the persistence of revolutionary mobilisation in India, we must explore the confluence of the dominant-caste Naxalite leaders, some of whom have been underground for 30 years or more now, and the low-caste and tribal people amidst whom they have mobilised. One of the striking things about the Naxalite leaders is their ability to renounce the world around them, break with their pasts, and sacrifice everything, including themselves, to fight for their ideals of human emancipation. Indeed, the continuities between communist revolutionaries and a long history of renunciation

and sacrifice for liberation in the Indian cosmos are, perhaps, part of the reason why the ideal of communism thrives on in this form in India despite its demise in most other parts of the world. It is, perhaps, the very hierarchies of Indian society that have produced some of the world's most committed pursuers of a more equal society (Shah 2014).

How and why, then, have these leaders—from dominant-caste backgrounds, historically shunning and shunned by lower castes—spread amongst India's lower castes and tribes, particularly its Adivasis? In the absence of adequate reporting and research, the situation infamously referred to as caught “between two armies” in Guatemala (Stoll 1993), became known in India as the “sandwich theory;” people were sandwiched between the fire of the state and that of the Maoists (D'Souza 2009). Accusations included the charge that the Maoists controlled areas by terrorising people, revealing both their anarchism and extreme vanguardism, making them comparable to fascists, and suggesting they co-opted non-violent resistance movements through secret terror operations, expressing total indifference for human lives. Whereas, for the Maoists' the Adivasis were fodder for their revolution, for the government, they were a minor expendable detail in the quest to sustain economic growth. The forest dwellers lived above mineral reserves promised by the state to national and multinational corporations; they needed to be cleared off their land. A “war of attrition” was what India faced, predicted Ramachandra Guha (2007: 331), one which would take the lives of policemen, Maoists, and unaffiliated civilians. The latter, ordinary citizens, or “the people,” became separated from the state and the Maoists.

Slowly, first-hand accounts of these regions emerged, giving more agency to people's participation in the movement. (A review of 50 recent books on the Indian Maoists is found in A Shah and D Jain 2017.) Just as S Popkin (1979) drew attention to the rational, cost-calculating economic peasant of Vietnam participating in revolution to improve his future position, and P Collier and A Hoeffler (2004) emphasised the role of “greed” in

their econometric analysis of worldwide civil conflicts, some stressed the significance of utilitarian benefits in driving the Indian movement. The most explicit of such arguments mapped the Maoist spread onto mining areas to show that the mines served as a cash register for a loose confederation of militias whose local commanders were in it for money alone.

Rejecting the role of “greed,” others stressed the role of “grievance” and the significance of the “moral economy” (Scott 1976; Thompson 1971), granting to the people the agency to participate in insurgency. The message here was that those on the margins of survival joined the guerrillas because the insurgents addressed their grievances. In India, a powerful focus on grievance came through the 2008 report of an expert group to the Planning Commission of the Government of India, led by intellectuals/human rights activists Bela Bhatia and the late K Balagopal (GoI 2008). Analysing development from the perspective of Dalits and Adivasis, the report explored the discontent of the people arising from state failure to deliver in “extremist”-affected areas. Maladministration, extensive poverty, low literacy rates and limited employment opportunities were juxtaposed with political marginalisation, social oppression and human rights violations, which included forced evictions for development (such as mining operations), and the denial of justice and human dignity. Together, these factors created the space for Naxalite activity, as in their day-to-day manifestations, the insurgents were seen to be fighting for social justice and local development.

An extreme version of the grievance argument turned revolutionary mobilisation into a politics of identity, and in recent years focused on the dispossession of the Adivasis by mining developments, turning the Naxalite struggle into an Adivasi movement. A spontaneous uprising of India's last original inhabitants was produced, consisting of Adivasis who had nothing left but to take up arms to fight for their land and prevent their own annihilation. The politics of communism was superseded by the politics of indigeneity. Roy (2011), the most powerful example of this position, even claimed that

since the movement is 99.9% Adivasi, we can argue as to whether it is Maoist or Adivasi.

‘Relations of Intimacy’

Based on research done while living with the Adivasis in the Maoist guerrilla strongholds, the theoretical propositions of “between two armies,” “greed,” “grievance,” or a “politics of identity,” strike me as partial explanations at best. They cannot explain why so many Adivasi youth ran to the rebel armies, treating them as a home away from home. In what follows, I argue that the development of “relations of intimacy” between the guerrillas and the people in their strongholds was central to revolutionary persistence. Communist ideology for a classless and casteless society translated into the humaneness of revolutionary subjectivity, treating the people they came across with dignity, as equal human beings, over time making them a part of an extended family in the region (Shah 2013a).

Many youth moved back and forth between the guerrilla armies and the villages, often escaping a domestic problem, even if just for a while. Take for instance, Kanta, a 16-year-old Adivasi girl who ran away from an arranged marriage to live with the squads, enchanted by them because her cousin Chanda had become a platoon member some 10 years before. There was also Kanta's brother, Pramod, who fought with his father and went to live with the squads for six months; and Kanta's cousin, Lila, who followed her elder sister. Others include Geeta, the Dalit girl who fell in love with a Yadav local area commander; and Reena and Rakesh, who were in love with each other and joined the squads to get married because their inter-union was prohibited in the village. Most people joining the guerrillas had similar stories of running away from one home, the village home, for inter-personal reasons and being welcomed by what had already locally become another home for whoever sought it: the underground Maoist party.

Indeed, analysing the social histories of the households in the guerrilla zones, it made little sense to speak of the Maoists as separate from the people. This did not mean that everyone was a Maoist, but that

almost every family either had or knew someone who was involved as an armed cadre, worker or sympathiser, or who had a dispute addressed in the Maoist courts. Many had lived with the guerrillas for a few months, left, and sometimes got back. Many learned to read and write in the revolutionary armies. Maoist leaders were often treated with respect as one would one's mother's brother, father's brother or, in some cases, even father. Moreover, people had developed individual social relations with Maoist cadres and leaders, the sum of which could not be reduced to a simple love/hate, support/reject attitude towards the movement. Perhaps, the Maoists were aided in this embedding because Adivasi society had an elective affinity with their communist values, a point which the Maoists did not fully recognise, and to which I will return. My point, though, in drawing attention to the relations of intimacy between the party and the people is that it is not just the policies, but the humanity of the people who made the party that had given them credibility and embedded them in local social relations. Communism was not simply a utopian dream for a future society, but crucially influenced the remaking of humane revolutionary subjects and social relations amongst the guerrillas and those who came close to them.

In contrast to the Maoists, the Indian state had historically dominated these regions through economic and extra-economic exploitative extraction and, in this process, oppressively treated its populations as subjects (not citizens) who were expendable. The modern state, with the arrival of the British East India Company, followed by the government under the British crown, and then the independent Indian government, penetrated the area through taxation and exploitation of the forests for military purposes and railway sleepers. Historically, the state was experienced primarily through the police and forest guards, both repressive outsiders from whom Adivasis sought to keep away (Shah 2010). It was not just the indifference to humanity entrenched through the bureaucracy from which the Indian state suffered (Herzfeld 1992), but also the ideology of domination through which it ruled and which manifests itself

in oppressive social relations between the officers of the state and the people of the area. The high-caste northerners (often Biharis) who formed the state were notoriously distanced by the villagers because they both looked down on the people of this area as jungli, that is wild and savage, and treated them as such, as barbaric (Shah 2010).

In everyday life, it was often the small things that mattered: the tone of voice with which one was spoken to, the way one was greeted, the way one's house was entered, whether one sat on the floor like everyone else or demanded a chair, whether one washed one's plates and helped with the household chores or not. In contrast to the state officials, the Maoists (whose leaders were also outsiders, often higher-caste Bihari men in these areas) did not want special treatment, had made it a point to be gentle and kind in everyday interactions, and had built relations with respect and dignity, but also the equally important relations of joking and teasing. They had become part and parcel of people's lives in these remote regions, in a way in which the Indian state never had.

We are so used to seeing the Maoists as terrorists, displayed on our news screens through the latest round of security forces blown up, the trains they have derailed, or violent summary justice delivered in kangaroo courts. Therefore, it may come as a surprise that for the people I got to know in the guerrilla strongholds the Naxalites had become their "jungle sarkar," their forest state, and what was important to them was the decency with which they were treated and the resultant kinship relations that had developed between the villages and the guerrilla armies. Though it is obvious that there are limits to humanity in the practice of armed revolutionary movements, what the Indian Maoist case seems to suggest is the importance of the humaneness of revolutionary subjectivity in nurturing the development and persistence of revolutionary mobilisation. Founded on the ideology of communism that promoted the development of social relations superseding the hierarchies of caste and class, the Naxalites were able to build relations of intimacy between the guerrilla armies

and the people in their strongholds, and this was one of their main strengths.

Contradictions

Such radical struggles to create a more egalitarian future by changing the structures of the present, though, are beset with some interlocking contradictions that constantly undermine them and pull them apart. Leaving aside the military might of the Indian state that is bent on eliminating them, the Maoists face at least five such contradictions, carrying the seeds of their own destruction within their ranks.

The first contradiction is that, while the making of emancipatory futures requires the creation of new communities representing the values of imagined ideals, there is also the need to rely on the support of pre-existing family relations, which anchors one to the present and the past. For the Naxalites, their egalitarian values enabled them to form kinship networks into Adivasi communities, but it also led to a constant stream of youth walking in and out of the guerrilla armies, as though they were simply the home of an uncle or an aunt. Immersion in local communities through kinship can be the strength of such movements, but it can also become an Achilles' heel when the same battles and betrayals within families that bring people to the guerrilla armies emerge in those very armies (Shah 2013a). Moreover, in the end, even those leaders who seemed to live like ascetics, apparently having subverted and left their pasts behind, found it difficult to totally break from their families and submitted to their demands to the detriment of the revolutionary community.

The second contradiction is that the creation of a more egalitarian future requires smashing the structures of capitalism that generate inequality, but immersion in the capitalist economy is necessary to fund and sustain such movements. It is then, perhaps, inevitable that any such movement will create cadres who get integrated into the imaginations and values of the very societies they are working against, conflicted by the desire to accumulate wealth and status for their personal gain, eventually turning them into betrayers (Shah 2014).

The added problem for the Maoists, the basis of the third contradiction, is their adherence to an outdated analysis of the Indian economy as semi-feudal and semi-colonial (Shah 2013b). Elevating this economic analysis to what seems akin to a religious ideology that is hard to question may be one reason why a core group of leaders have stayed together in a kind of transcendental purity of collective commitment to the idea of the execution of the struggle. But, it has also meant that challenges to the economic analysis from within are cast as a betrayal to the revolutionary cause, losing potential allies and establishing a dogma.

Though, on the ground, the Maoists interpreted actions based on local conditions, the untouchable status of the economic analysis also disabled them from fully addressing major issues concerning the reach of capitalism across the country and, therefore, the concerns of much of the Indian poor; for instance, the vast sections of the rural poor who were migrating seasonally from their small parcels of land to work as informal sector casual labour in faraway construction sites, brick factories or agricultural fields of large capitalist farmers. It also meant they were not able to give due recognition—except through violent measures, such as suspension, expulsion or killing—to how capitalist values were seeping inside their movement, affecting their cadres, and destroying the movement from within.

Moreover, in the Adivasi areas that were neither feudal nor dominated by capitalist values, the adherence to the ideology of semi-feudalism disabled them from taking full account of the relatively egalitarian economic systems and values that already existed amongst the people with whom they were living. These, perhaps, not only had much in common with the egalitarian utopia that they were fighting for, but the Maoists' neglect led them to the acceleration of the destruction of those values within the Adivasi communities (Shah 2013c).

The fourth contradiction is that mobilising people to fight against inequality and injustice may require the use of arms, but violent resistance will bring the violence of state repression. The danger is that mastering the art and discipline of

guns becomes the focus of the struggle, overriding and, thus, destroying the mobilisation of people towards new ideals and new communities. For the Maoists, this problem became acute when one of the world's most powerful states began to send their military apparatus to destroy them and the communities they lived amidst. The Maoist retreat into the Adivasi heartlands of India and their analysis, which led them to carrying out a protracted people's war from there, trapped them—in the face of the Indian security force battalions—to focus on their military strategy at the expense of working with the people for a new imagined future.

The final contradiction is that such movements seek to create new casteless, classless communities where women will be equal to men, but are most often led by men from elite backgrounds. In their challenge to the structural inequalities of society, they neglect the incipient inequalities within too often. In the Maoist case, although many Adivasis and, in some areas, women joined the revolutionaries, the higher-caste leaders not only failed to give sufficient space for the nurturing of lower-caste, Adivasi and women leaders, but also seemed to neglect the fact that the societies they worked amidst had more egalitarian gender relations than the ones from which they had come.

The most sophisticated explanations of the appeal of the Naxalites have suggested that they are the combined outcome of the steady democratisation of the political process in India and the failures of its developmental reach. As the state has become more and more available to people who were kept on its margins and more of India's marginalised communities have participated in its democratic processes, democratic aspirations have flourished. At the same time, though, the failure of Indian democracy to give adequate space in which a sense of public purpose can be articulated has left vast sections of society disenchanting, and their resulting grievances have made them turn to the Naxalites.

Living in the hills and forests of eastern India, however, it strikes me that, in fact, the opposite is as true. The irony, it seems, is that a movement fighting against the character of Indian democracy

has expanded its reach amongst people who had previously been left on the margins of the state, alienated from it. By fighting for their human rights on an equal footing with dominant and higher castes and classes, the Naxalites have nurtured Dalits and Adivasis who would ultimately not seek a withering away of the state, but would want a greater share of the state, as a part of it. Indeed, in many countries of Latin America, class-based guerrilla wars eventually gave rise to indigenous movements that sought not to challenge the state, but to have greater control over it (as in the case of the rise of Evo Morales in Bolivia) or of the territories within it (as in the case of the Mexican Zapatistas).

The Future of Such Armed Struggles

With the ongoing state repression and the contradictions and conflicts that beset the Naxalites, one wonders about the future of such armed struggles for a communist society in India. Historically, even in times of extreme repression, India has continued producing educated, well-to-do leaders from its universities and its prisons who are repelled by the inequalities that surround them, seek to fight them, and organise amongst the masses, espousing communist ideals of a society where caste and class will disappear, laying down their lives for the cause. The Naxalites have provided a rare alternative vision of a commitment and sincerity to a way of life and a future, rejecting and fighting against the spirit of individualism, accumulation, and competition based on exploitation and oppression that prevails in our globalised world. Whether India continues to produce such revolutionary spirited youth remains to be seen. Whether the revolutionary ideology and practice can be reformed in the prisons and the jungles to take full account of the changes and challenges that beset the country today also remains to be seen.

The Indian Maoist-inspired Naxalite struggle for a communist society will, however, have given rise to Dalit, Adivasi and women's movements, demanding their human rights to be treated on equal terms as the dominant classes and

castes, seeking a greater share of and space within Indian democracy, keeping alive a dream for a better, more equal world. Undoubtedly, one of the furthest-reaching long-term consequences of the Naxalite struggle will have been, thus, as a democratising force in India, producing those who want to fight for a more equal world, who have been mobilised by the spirit of their revolutionary struggle, even if they have been, at the same time, disappointed and disillusioned by its practice.

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