

# **Revolutionary Violence Versus Democracy**

Narratives from India

**Edited by  
Ajay Gudavarthy**



Los Angeles | London | New Delhi  
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First published in 2017 by



**SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd**  
B1/I-1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area  
Mathura Road, New Delhi 110 044, India  
www.sagepub.in

**SAGE Publications Inc**  
2455 Teller Road  
Thousand Oaks, California 91320, USA

**SAGE Publications Ltd**  
1 Oliver's Yard, 55 City Road  
London EC1Y 1SP, United Kingdom

**SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte Ltd**  
3 Church Street  
#10-04 Samsung Hub  
Singapore 049483

Published by Vivek Mehra for SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd, typeset in 11/13 pt Century Schoolbook by Fidus Design Pvt. Ltd., Chandigarh and printed at <<Printer Name>>, <<Printer Location>>.

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Available**

**ISBN:** 978-93-864-4695-4 (HB)

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**SAGE Team:** <<CE Name>>, <<PE Name>>, <<Copyeditor Name>> and <<Designer Name>>

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# Maoism and the Masses: Critical Reflections on Revolutionary Praxis and Subaltern Agency

Lipika Kamrfa and Uday Chandra

*The Naxalite movement is not a movement of landless peasants and tribals seeking to overthrow state power. It is a project defined as such by those who are neither peasants nor workers nor tribals; but who claim to represent their interests.*

—Dilip Simeon (2010).

*We have taken up arms for the defence of people's rights and for achieving their liberation from all types of exploitation and oppression. As long as these exist, people will continue to be armed.*

—Azad (2010), former CPI (Maoist) Spokesperson.

## Introduction

The Maoist movement in India has, broadly speaking, invited two responses that are mutually opposed to each other. On the one hand, there are those who believe that the movement merely claims to represent subaltern interests but does not, in fact, do so (Guha 2007; Nigam 2009; Simeon 2010). On the other hand, there are those who believe that the Maoists exist for the sake of subalterns (Azad 2010; Navlakha 2010; Roy 2011). The two epigrams above encapsulate the contrast between these two positions on Maoism in contemporary India. But there is also a curious common ground between these positions. Both speak unambiguously from the perspective of subaltern. Which one is correct?

In response, we answer that, although both positions tell us much about dominant tropes to represent subaltern politics in Indian civil society today, neither tells us why ordinary men and women outside privileged metropolitan centres joined the movement, and how they engaged with the internal contradictions of the movement. In this chapter, we wish to demythologise subaltern agency, which has been imbued with a transcendental ontology in India since the publication of Ranajit Guha's *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (1983). Myth making around the figure of the subaltern has become, in Bronisław Malinowski's sense, a 'charter' for a wide range of political projects. It is no surprise then that both defenders and critics of the Maoists have turned to the mythical subaltern in order to lend credibility to their arguments. For the defenders of Maoism, subaltern agency propels revolutionary praxis, whereas for its critics, Maoists mute the agency of subalterns and render them hapless victims.

Yet defenders and critics cannot be treated realistically as political equals. It is true that the imagined figure of the subaltern is believed by both sides to be 'caught between two armies' of the state and the Maoist revolutionary party (Guha 2010; Menon 2009; Mukherji 2012; cf. Stoll 1993; Sundar 2014). Radha D'Souza (2009) has labelled this portrayal of subalternity, the state and a revolutionary party as the 'sandwich theory' of Maoism. If this portrayal features prominently in propaganda put forth by Maoist leaders and sympathisers, it is because they can point to the Indian state as the principal perpetrator of human rights abuses, which, of course, justifies its affinities with subaltern communities. Equally, this convenient fiction permits Left-liberal elites in 'civil society' to characterise the Maoists as illegitimate for their use of violence and to remind the Indian state of its constitutional commitment to protect subaltern citizens. But, since the state

and the Maoists are not equally matched in any sense, an attempt at parity necessarily favours the state, of which civil society then becomes a handmaiden (Giri 2009; Shah 2013). Indeed, we can clearly discern the statist allegiances of a number of academics and activists in a report published by the Planning Commission of India (2008), which presents Maoism as simply a 'problem' to be tackled through state-sponsored development initiatives in the so-called Red Corridor of Central and eastern India. This is, of course, how the mythological figure of the subaltern as victim has become the mascot for a fresh round of post-conflict statemaking in areas in which the Maoists enjoyed popular support (Kamra forthcoming). Much is at stake, therefore, in competing representations of subaltern agency, and the state ought to be recognised as a middle term in the equation between the Maoists and the masses in contemporary India.

In steering away from dominant representations of revolutionary praxis and subaltern agency, we rely on close-to-the-ground ethnographic perspectives on Maoism in contemporary India, focusing on how ordinary men and women have engaged with the revolutionary party-led movement. These bottom-up perspectives on Maoism push us to rethink the nature of both revolutionary praxis and subaltern agency. In this chapter, revolutionary praxis emerges less as a vanguardist imposition on the masses than a site of ongoing negotiations. By the same token, subaltern agency may be seen to be shaped by the structural constraints faced by a militant leftist movement. The dialectic between subaltern agency and revolutionary praxis is, of course, a key tenet of Maoist political thought. But since our task here is not to reinforce Maoist principles, we demonstrate in this chapter how subaltern agency operates as an unstable, even contradictory, force within the Maoist movement and steers it in unanticipated directions within Indian democracy.

## Subalterns in the Maoist Movement

Since 2004, the Communist Party of India (Maoist; CPI [Maoist]) has called for a New Democratic Revolution. Rejecting democratic elections, the Maoists see the Indian state as ‘reactionary’ and ‘autocratic’, and seek a ‘worker–peasant alliance’ to overthrow ‘imperialism, feudalism and comprador bureaucratic capitalism’ through an armed revolutionary struggle of subaltern men and women. The Maoists are active primarily in pockets of rural eastern and Central India, where human development levels rank among the lowest in the world, forest cover and rugged terrain facilitate guerrilla tactics and protracted low-intensity insurgency and Dalit, and Adivasi populations are preponderant. The Indian state has portrayed the Maoists as the ‘greatest internal security threat to India since independence’ (see Sundar 2011 for a sharp critique of this claim). However, that portrayal sits oddly with the fact that Maoist cadres are estimated to be anywhere between 10,000 and 40,000 in a country of around 120 crores (Harriss 2010, 11). These thinly spread cadres are concentrated chiefly in what journalists, policy-makers and scholars have termed the Red Corridor, running from the Nepalese border through the states of Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Orissa, Chhattisgarh and Andhra Pradesh. In these areas, it should be noted, regular elections are held, state and non-governmental organisations routinely participate in rural development and state police and forest officials coexist with armed rebels and rural populations. Just as the state’s portrayal of the Maoists misleads us, so, too, does the self-image of the Maoist movement as the sole or leading political authority in areas swayed by their influence.

In referring to ‘subalterns’ in the Indian Maoist movement, we follow Ranajit Guha (1982) in defining subalternity as a ‘general attribute of subordination in



South Asian society' (see also Arnold 1984). The word, literally referring to subordinates in the pecking order of an army, follows Antonio Gramsci's (1996, 52) usage to refer to groups located outside of the ruling political classes that seek to exercise hegemony over them. In the annals of Subaltern Studies and its legacies today in India, the subaltern has typically been portrayed as a 'suffering subject' (Robbins 2013), which is forever condemned to resist the forces of modernity (see Bayly [1988] and O'Hanlon [1988] for classic critiques of this proposition). It is not surprising to see how in much recent scholarship on the Adivasis, for instance, they are made to fit the slot of the 'suffering subject' in order to represent them as hapless victims of state-directed development, dispossession and 'everyday tyranny' (see, e.g., Kela 2012; Nilsen 2010; Padel 2010). Such representations are problematic because, in the process of representing the suffering subaltern subject, they strip her of any meaningful political agency (Spivak 1988). Undoubtedly, the dearth of rigorous empirical studies of subaltern politics in India reinforces this problem. It is a deep irony, therefore, that subalterns are widely represented in Indian academia and beyond as suffering subjects even as both scholarship and activism end up silencing their voices (Chandra 2013a).

In the context of the Maoist movement, we find two dominant sets of representations of the suffering subaltern subject. One treats subaltern subjects as victims of Maoist vanguardism and seeks to rescue them from those who challenge the state's legitimate monopoly of violence within the nation state's territory. This perspective is seen most clearly in former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's (2006) statement that the Maoist movement is the 'biggest internal security threat every faced by our country'. A later variant of this security-centric perspective may be seen in the Planning Commission report (2008) on 'Development Challenges in Extremist Affected Areas', which identified underdevelopment as the root cause

of Maoism and urged development initiatives to wean subaltern populations away from the Maoists in the Red Corridor states. In this revised statist perspective that brings in the lens of 'development', endorsed by prominent activists and academics who contributed to the report, the Maoists appeared only as an 'epiphenomenon', merely a consequence of the state's failed development policies (Giri 2009, 466–68). Thus, security and development became two prongs of the Indian state's counter-insurgency strategy since 2009. P. Chidambaram and Jairam Ramesh literally became the two faces of this new strategy to save the subalterns from what newspapers commonly described as the Maoist 'menace' or 'problem'.

The Indian state's new strategy received support from an unexpected quarter when a number of prominent Left-liberal academics and activists based in New Delhi proposed the so-called 'sandwich theory' of Maoism (D'Souza 2009). The sandwich theory ought to be seen as a more sophisticated version of the 'human security' perspective (Chenoy and Chenoy 2010) outlined in the Planning Commission report. Whereas the 2008 report berated the state for its neglect of subaltern populations in Red Corridor states, sandwich theorists such as Dilip Simeon (2010), Nirmalangshu Mukherji (2012) and Aditya Nigam (2009; 2010) went a step further. These are representatives of the Indian Left who regard the more radical and militant Maoists as ideological enemies. Their interventions stemmed primarily from internal conflicts within leftist ranks. Notably, none of them has any first-hand empirical understanding of the relationship between subalterns and Maoists today. They criticised the state for its human rights abuses, besides its neglect of human development, but they also appealed to it to remedy these acts of omission and commission. Hence, although the Indian state was deemed to be a problem on par with the Maoists, sandwich theorists on the Left addressed the state in order to resolve their internecine conflicts with the Maoists.

The sandwich theory also came to be received enthusiastically by liberal defenders of human rights such as the Independent Citizens' Initiative, the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) and the People's Union for Democratic Rights (PUDR). It would be unfair to treat all of these diverse groups along with their complex histories (Gudavarthy 2008) as proponents of a single perspective. But, as Alpa Shah (2013, 94–95) has recently argued, what binds them together is their commitment to 'working within the constitutional guarantees of liberal citizenship laid out in India, and with a claim to their own independence as activists'. It is in this spirit that we may read the activist-academic Nandini Sundar's (2014, 471) recent statement: 'The Indian state impersonates guerilla [sic] tactics in order to fight the Maoists, while the Maoists mimic state practices of governmentality'. Subaltern populations are represented, therefore, as 'innocent civilians' who are 'collateral damage' in a clash of 'mimetic sovereignties' (2014, 470). Compelling as it is, what is striking in Sundar's narrative is the absence of the voice of a single 'innocent civilian', in whose name she urges the Indian state to fulfil its constitutional obligation to protect its citizens. The only direct quotations in the chapter are attributed to a policeman and a sarpanch, both of whom have their own stakes in the conflict as local state representatives. The rest of Sundar's evidence, nestled amidst perfectly reasonable theoretical propositions adapted from recent cutting-edge work in anthropology and political science, does not examine the nature of the subaltern agency within the Maoist movement. In this most refined version of the sandwich theory, the liberal activist-academic reifies the suffering subaltern subject even as she renders the subject voiceless. The emphasis on competing 'sovereignties', moreover, posits a false equivalence between the mighty Indian state and the militant fringes of the radical Left. This serves no other purpose except to signal the independence of the author from either side. Lastly, it systematically depoliticises

the contexts in which ordinary men and women negotiate the state and the Maoists in their everyday lives. While Nandini Sundar (2013) has been pushed to articulate a different view elsewhere, as we show further, the analytical sleights of hand in the chapter under consideration here, ultimately, appeal to the benevolence of the state towards the suffering subaltern subject. Such benevolence can, of course, be concretely demonstrated only via a 'humane' solution to the Maoist 'problem' from above.

If the Indian state and its allies among the Left-liberal elite deny the possibility of subaltern agency vis-à-vis the Maoist movement, a second set of representations ascribe an already existing revolutionary consciousness to subaltern agency. Arguably, the most poignant representation of the Maoists until date was the one penned by Arundhati Roy for *Outlook* magazine in 2011. Roy appealed to the 'liberal conscience' of her readers to recognise that the 'tribal people in Central India have a history of resistance that predates Mao by centuries' and that '[i]f they didn't, they wouldn't exist'. She then proceeded to highlight rebellions in colonial India by 'the Ho, the Oraon, the Kols, the Santhals, the Mundas and the Gonds' directed against 'the British, against zamindars and moneylenders'. If this triad of British rulers, zamindars and moneylenders sounds familiar, it is because we know it from Ranajit Guha's (1983) classic work on peasant insurgency in nineteenth-century India. The 'tribal' subject in Guha's account is the quintessential subaltern, exhibiting extreme suffering as well as an ever-present propensity to rebel against his suffering (see Chandra [forthcoming](#) for a critique). The suffering tribal subaltern, in Guha's as much as Roy's account, is a victim and an insurgent. Comrade Azad (2010), alias Cherukuri Rajkumar, an ex-spokesperson for the Maoists, also articulated the same perspective in essays addressed to civil society prior to his death. In all of these accounts, the denial of agency curiously coexists with an excess of it, albeit in different historical moments. Implicit in such

a proposition is a causal argument: extreme provocation incites tribal subjects to rebel against authority. For Roy, this causal sequence is repeated ad nauseam in colonial and post-colonial India to the extent that subaltern agency in the Maoist movement today is the congealed form of rebellions bygone. The birth of Indian Maoism, she asserts, took place in a 'tribal village' named Naxalbari, and since then, 'Naxalite politics has been inextricably entwined with tribal uprisings, which says as much about the tribals as it does about the Naxalites'. This assertion, too, has a source: it follows the work of the Australian anthropologist Edward Duyker (1987), who saw the Naxalite movement of an earlier generation mirroring long-standing tribal grievances in the foothills of north Bengal. It is worth noting that Duyker cites Ranajit Guha's *Elementary Aspects* and early Subaltern Studies approvingly in support of his own arguments in *Tribal Guerrillas*. Thus, we find an unspoken, uncited kinship between Roy's claims and those by Guha and Duyker that binds together the perpetually suffering yet revolutionary tribal subject with radical Left-wing insurgency in post-colonial India. The already existing revolutionary consciousness among tribal subalterns is, in other words, evident to these writers in multiple historical moments, but as Roy's essay shows us, its rhetorical appeal lies fundamentally in its ability to transcend history altogether.

A closely related claim put forward by Maoist sympathisers is that the armed movement is a direct response to the alienation of the Adivasi lands or development-related dispossession by the post-colonial Indian state. This is, simply put, an intellectual justification for taking up arms. The activist Gautam Navlakha (2010, 39), for instance, offered three reasons to explain why 'Adivasi peasants' in a Maoist guerrilla zone in Bastar had taken up arms: (a) the state was at war with them 'on behalf of big corporations to grab adivasi land'; (b) Adivasi land grabbed in this manner, along with its trees and livelihoods,

could not be compensated merely in monetary terms and (c) 'development that the government talked of was bunkum (*bakwas*) having seen what was done in [the mines of] Bailadila'. Each of these three reasons is a part of Maoist propaganda in the Bastar region (see Azad 2010). They are reproduced faithfully not only by Navlakha but also by Arundhati Roy (2011) and Bernard D'Mello (2010). Roy, for instance, writes:

Having dispossessed them and pushed them into a downward spiral of indigence, in a cruel sleight of hand, the government began to use their own penury against them. Each time it needed to displace a large population—for dams, irrigation projects, mines—it talked of 'bringing tribals into the mainstream' or of giving them 'the fruits of modern development'.

D'Mello writes, similarly, of 'neo-robber baron capitalism', which is both challenged by the Maoist movement and, in its latest avatar, a response to it. To argue that Maoism is a legitimate Adivasi response to the predations of the post-colonial state involves two moves: first, Maoist politics is inseparable from that of the suffering tribal subaltern subject, and second, the state's role in Adivasi suffering makes it a legitimate target of revolutionary violence in much the same way that tribal rebellions were justified as responses to colonial policies. Both moves are problematic. The former wishes away the relationship between the Maoist vanguard and tribal subalterns instead of elucidating it, and the latter fails to explain why the sites of major dams and mines across the scheduled areas elude Maoist control. If we scour the Narmada valley, the villages of the Dongria Kondh or the steel towns of eastern and Central India for Maoists, we will find that the Maoists are few and far between. Propaganda and reality are clearly at odds on this count. Why some Adivasis joined the Maoists, therefore, remains inadequately answered in the writings of their leading sympathisers in civil society. By overstating the nature of subaltern agency in the movement, ironically,

the Maoists and their sympathisers overestimate their own influence over subaltern lives.

If we turn to social scientific explanations for why ordinary men and women join the Maoist movement, the anthropologist Alpa Shah's recent writings are a good starting point. Shah has not only been prolific but also attentive to issues of subaltern agency in the movement. Her earliest work dealt with 'markets of protection' that Maoists, analogous to the state, extended to rural Adivasi communities in Jharkhand (2006). This account, it ought to be noted, leaves no space for Adivasi agency. A subsequent essay described the uncertainty about future social relations in the minds of potential revolutionaries and how joining the Maoist movement produced relative certainty (2009). Arguably, this chapter marks a tentative moment in Shah's own trajectory in understanding Maoism in the Indian countryside. After another stint of fieldwork, she changed her mind. She argued now that kinship ties drew Adivasi women and men into the Maoist fold and could also potentially persuade them to leave it (2013b). Elsewhere, Shah (2014a) claimed that the Adivasis' distrust of an unresponsive, exploitative state attracted them to the Maoist movement. Combining the latter two explanations, she wrote: 'After more than two decades of the Maoist presence in these regions, kinship relations weaved in and out of the villages and the party, blurring the boundaries between the revolutionaries and the people' (2014a, 346). By moving from a portrait of no subaltern agency to one of subaltern agency subsuming revolutionary praxis, Shah now offers a sophisticated version of the perspective articulated by the likes of Roy, Navlakha and D'Mello. A recent essay goes further to compare the Maoists with Birsa Munda and his followers, encouraging the former to follow the latter in fusing together religion and political economy (Shah 2014b). She suggests that Ranajit Guha, much like the Maoists, did not go far enough to incorporate subaltern religious practices into his understanding of rural insurgency.



The intertextuality evident in Shah's or Roy's writings points to a shared canon of images and ideas about the agency of the suffering tribal subject in the Maoist movement. This shared canon permits individual writers to abandon their own misconceptions over time, as Shah appears to have done, in order to posit a seamless integration of subaltern politics and Maoist revolutionary agendas. Unlike most Maoist sympathisers who cling to simplistic notions of a pre-existing revolutionary consciousness, Shah is keen to suggest that an anti-state orientation may exist already among the Adivasis but it transforms into revolutionary agency within the movement. It is hardly surprising, under the circumstances, that Alpa Shah has clashed recently with Nandini Sundar over the Adivasis and their relationship to the Maoist movement. Whereas one appeals to the Maoists to take Adivasi lifeworld seriously, the other appeals to the Indian state to fulfil its constitutional commitment to Adivasi welfare. A knotty scholarly debate thus turns out on closer inspection to be little more than a sophisticated version of an ongoing propaganda war in Indian civil society.

To sum up, both sets of representations speak on behalf of subalterns, yet one depicts them as victims of Maoist politics and the other as victims of the Indian state's policies. The former may be associated with the state and its Left-liberal allies in civil society and the latter may be identified with the Maoists and their sympathisers in civil society. These competing representations are, of course, mirror images of each other, and to this extent, they sustain a false binary in the realm of political propaganda that has little space for subaltern voices. As such, a basic interpretive error seen in writings on contemporary Maoism in India is the inference that this binary opposition within civil society to reflect on-the-ground realities. Recent research on the micro-politics of 'civil wars' suggest that intense polarisation at the level of macro-political propaganda usually coexists with messy political realities at the local level and



fuzzy allegiances on the part of subaltern actors (Kalyvas 2006). This kind of micro–macro disjuncture during insurgencies or civil wars often leads us to believe that subaltern populations targeted by both the state and insurgents are on neither side. In reality, however, as we shall see later, subaltern populations may be on both sides. Another key interpretive error noticeable is that the warring parties in the Maoist insurgency in India tend to be conceptualised typically as fixed, bounded institutional actors that are more or less comparable. Here again, the propaganda for the Indian state or the Maoists constructs a macro-level reality that distorts micro-politics on the ground. Whether in the Red Corridor or in insurgent zones in Kashmir and north-east India, democratic elections are regularly held and local government functionaries and NGOs coexist with armed insurgents and their supporters. The norm is thus shared, overlapping sovereignty, which sustains what Sanjib Baruah (2005) has termed ‘durable disorder’. To cut through the thicket of propaganda and misinterpretation that dominates writings on Maoism in India today, suggest an alternative theoretical lens on revolutionary praxis and subaltern agency in the insurgency and flesh it out in the light of recent ethnographic studies along the Red Corridor.

## Rethinking Revolutionary Praxis and Subaltern Agency: Perspectives from the Field

By agency, we mean the capacity to fashion one’s self or existence at the intersection of different sociocultural and political–economic forces. Conceptualising ‘agency’ vis-à-vis processes of self-making (Chandra and Majumder 2013), we understand it in intersubjective terms as a shifting property of social actors. To us, ‘agency’ does not necessarily imply a liberal–individualistic ethos or a propensity to

resist social structures of power. Ours is a minimalist notion of ‘agency’, in other words, that avoids a common tendency in earlier iterations of peasant studies and Subaltern Studies to impute ‘resistance’ to acts of self-making, especially by subaltern actors (see, e.g., Guha 1983; Scott 1985). As Rosalind O’Hanlon (1988, 191) has argued:

At the very moment of this assault upon western historicism, the classic figure of western humanism—the self-originating, self-determining individual, who is at once a subject in his possession of a sovereign consciousness whose defining quality is reason, and an agent in his power of freedom—is readmitted through the back door in the figure of the subaltern himself, as he is restored to history in the reconstructions.

For us, agency is ‘non-sovereign’ (Krause 2015) and ‘socially structured’ (Sangari 1993). We accept the Foucauldian premise that subjects are produced by the intersection of multiple discourses and structures of power (Foucault 1995), and hence, see the agency of subjects emerging within these structures of power rather than autonomously (Butler 1990). Moreover, insofar as agency may be associated with both self-making, it is also linked to ‘worlding’ in the Heideggerian sense through processes of ‘structuration’ (Giddens 1984; Sewell 1992). Thus, agency and structure are not opposed, as social scientists often assume, but mutually constitute each other. Yet there is a sense in which we also depart from these socially embedded conceptions of ‘agency’. Self-making is far from coherent. Nor is agency free of internal contradictions. Agency and even resistance ought to be seen as embedded in structures and discourses of power, sometimes even reinforcing the very structures being challenged (Abu-Lughod 1990; Haynes and Prakash 1991; Mahmood 2005; Mitchell 1990). One may, in fact, exhibit ‘agency’ in ways that subordinate oneself to prevailing hierarchies. The ‘antinomies of agency’ (Kamra *forthcoming*), therefore, lie at the heart of our conceptualisation here.

These antinomies are particularly evident in subaltern interactions with political authorities. This is because the state, which is often taken to be a unitary actor, turns out to be a rather fuzzy entity that is hard to distinguish from the wider society in which it is embedded (Abrams 1988; Fuller and Harriss 2000; Hansen and Steputtat 2001; Migdal 2001; Mitchell 1991). The state is, of course, hardly unique in this respect. Insurgent groups, NGOs and religious bodies may be said to have similar 'blurred boundaries' (Gupta 1995) with society at large. Indeed, what is blurry here is the nature of sovereignty itself that is a property of states, but not exclusively so (Hansen and Steputtat 2005). We do not, of course, mean that states are somehow equivalent to all the other actors that exercise sovereignty over well-defined territories. Indeed, the sovereignty of the state is distinctive insofar as it is able to transcend scale vertically and to encompass society horizontally in ways that its rivals typically struggle to match (*cf.* Ferguson and Gupta 2002). In a locality or region, the state may be equally matched by its rivals, but rarely throughout its entire territorial domain. This is especially relevant when considering the relationship between the Indian state and Maoist insurgents, both fuzzy rather than fixed entities, which are frequently treated by scholars and journalists as equivalent or comparable. In the uneven topographies of sovereign power that we find in the Red Corridor, for instance, the antinomies of subaltern agency are manifested in zones of negotiation with the state and the Maoists. These zones of negotiation seek to rework power relations and transform the conditions in which subaltern selves are produced. Zones of negotiation with subaltern agency, in turn, shape the nature and limits of revolutionary praxis for the Maoists. As such, those who deny subaltern agency in the Maoist insurgency as well as those who assume an excess of it are both misled into error. By mistaking the terms of propaganda to be descriptions of empirical reality, as we have shown, a vast swathe of

writings on the Maoists tends to paper over the complexity of micro-political realities. To remedy this state of affairs, the ethnographic evidence below fleshes out the theoretical propositions sketched so far.

Let us begin in rural Jharkhand,<sup>1</sup> where Uday Chandra has been conducting fieldwork for nearly a decade. The modern state has a long history in the region dating back to the 1830s, and successive waves of statemaking have been intertwined with various forms of subaltern claim-making (2013b). Here, as in other scheduled areas in India, colonial and post-colonial states have collaborated with Adivasi village headmen and elders to produce a body of customary law that governs land and forests as well as social relations within 'tribal' communities and between these communities and resident aliens (*dikus*; cf. Cederlöf 2008; Karlsson 2011; Sen 2012; Sundar 2009). If the state has been committed to an 'ideology of tribal economy and society' (Corbridge 1988), its 'tribal' subjects have also partaken of statist notions of 'primitivism' (Chandra 2013c) in defining themselves and their communities. Class, intergenerational and gender hierarchies within rural Adivasi communities have emerged within the ambit of these customary arrangements buttressed by a primitivist ideology of rule (Chandra 2013d). While class differences have arisen recently due to variations in educational attainment, employment in the industrial economy and reservation policies, Chandra also found during his fieldwork in Munda villages that class differences also emerge from customary land ownership patterns that favour earlier over later settlers and dominant lineages of the village headmen and priests over others. Intergenerational and gender hierarchies pit male village elders against young men and women whose agricultural and domestic

<sup>1</sup> An extended version of this argument may be found in Chandra (2015).

labour sustain Adivasi villages. Challenging and reordering these intra-community hierarchies lie at the heart of the Maoist insurgency here.

In Jharkhand, over the past decade, the Maoists have offered non-farm, non-traditional livelihood options for young men and women. A young Christian Munda man, Benjamin, pointed me to widespread discontent with the elders in Munda villages:

In every village, the young and the old are at odds with each other nowadays. Our tradition is simply to listen to what the elders say. We must farm for them, our wives and sisters must cook and prepare rice beer for them. What is so good about such traditions?

If customary law and tradition have been powerful resources in the hands of village elders, especially from dominant lineages, young men today are keen to move away from farming, and young women, who are prohibited by custom from even touching agricultural implements, have been especially keen to leave their patriarchal homes. Maoism and migration to megacities have emerged as the two principal alternatives for Adivasi youth. Victoria, an Oraon domestic worker in Delhi, pointed this out to a researcher recently: 'Young women like me only have two ways of coming out of the household before marriage, to migrate for domestic work to a large city or join the Maoist movement' (Wadhawan 2013, 47). Accordingly, young women have numbered a clear majority among the armed Maoist cadres in Jharkhand, a significant anomaly in its operations across Central and eastern India. Away from their homes in the Maoist movement or in distant urban environments, young women frequently find themselves in romantic liaisons across tribes (*jatis*) or within clans (*killis*) in the same tribe, both of which are prohibited in the customary gerontocratic order of their villages. By contrast, the Maoists not only do not object to, but actively encourage marriages across class, ethnic and religious lines. The simplicity of Maoist marriages, too, contrasts with the more

ritually elaborate traditional ceremonies overseen by the *pahan* or village priest. In matters of domesticity and work alike, therefore, powerful incentives have attracted young women and men to the Maoist movement.

Within Maoist ranks, Adivasi youth enter a parallel universe of ‘modern’ comradeship, in and of itself a critique of ‘traditional’ village society. Maoist cadres participate in campaigns to raise the minimum wage, to ensure Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA) funds are paid fully and in timely fashion, to help build homes for the poorer villagers and to redistribute lands illegally held by non-tribals among the poorest. In Chatra district, at one point, the Maoists were even offering cheap loans at 2 per cent interest per annum (*Hindustan Times* 2009). NGOs working in central and southern Jharkhand have rarely, if ever, been prevented from working for grass roots development, even when their activities dovetail nicely with New Delhi’s counter-insurgency plans. The fiscal structure depends almost entirely from local forms of taxation (*rangdari*). The need to resort to ‘selective elimination’ of an odd policeman, forester or local trader is less common than is assumed. Fear of the gun typically works just as well, if not better, than the gun itself. Unsurprisingly, the greatest critics of Maoist youth are the village elders, natural defenders of the traditional Munda way of life. When discussing the raging Maoist insurgency in rural Jharkhand in 2009–10, Soma Munda, the Lohajimi-based leader of the well-known Koel-Karo anti-dam movement, spoke to me of ‘misguided youth’ and the ‘romance of violence’. Others such as Sukhram Hao, a retired school teacher in the nearby town of Khunti, adopted a harsher tone to condemn Adivasi youth who joined the Maoists:

These party people are destroying our culture [*sanskriti*]. They don’t care at all for the past or for us elders. When we were young, we always listened to our parents. But our children will not do so. This is the sad state of affairs today.

There can be little doubt that village elders, recognised by colonial and post-colonial states as bearers of customary or traditional authority, have found themselves under attack from young men and women who refuse to accept their authority as legitimate. The elders' politics must, perforce, be anti-Maoist.

The story of Masi Charan Purty, one of the best-known Maoist icons in central Jharkhand, neatly illustrates the aforementioned points about Adivasi youth politics and the desire to erect new forms of legitimate political authority. Masi's fame attained the status of folklore after he contested the Jharkhand state elections in December 2009. A shy, intelligent boy educated by Catholic missionaries in the highland village of Bandgaon in West Singhbhum district, Masi went on to the capital city of Ranchi to pursue a B.Com degree. By all accounts, he was a good student, and a bright future lay ahead of him. However, in 2003, a couple of years into his degree, he found his family embroiled in a land dispute with the village headman or Munda. With the headman's contacts in the local police, the Purty family faced the risk of losing its family plot. So, when the local Maoist unit offered its help, Masi could hardly refuse. He took on the village headman, literally, and ensured his family could hold on to their land. But there was no going back for Masi. He joined the Maoists in Khunti district and rose swiftly to become a key lieutenant of the area commander, Kundan Pahan.

A couple of years into his new job, Masi led a Maoist operation to rescue his female comrades from a detention facility for women in Hatia, barely 5 km from the state capital of Ranchi. These young women, mostly Adivasis from nearby villages in Ranchi and Khunti districts in central Jharkhand, had been arrested for their participation in local Maoist party activities. Like Masi, they, too, had escaped the traditional patriarchal and gerontocratic set-up of their rural homes in pursuit of new forms of comradeship within the Maoist movement. One of the women arrested and then

rescued in the Masi-led break-in at the Hati detention facility was his future wife, Protima, who hailed from a faraway village on the Assam–Meghalaya border. Both Masi and Protima had seemingly entered the local Maoist ranks by accident rather than design, a fact that both repeatedly emphasised to me. Theirs was a shotgun marriage. Protima could not, as she put it, refuse him.

Masi, by this time, had run into a glass ceiling within the local Maoist organisation. He had served as deputy to the area commander, Kundan, who himself had not risen up the organisational ladder in nearly two decades. With his ambitions frustrated within Maoist ranks, Masi had been keen to find alternatives. Protima did not look forward to a life dictated by Maoist discipline and jungle warfare. She told me:

We couldn't even talk to each other like we are now. We didn't feel a personal connection with them. One day, five of us, including Masi and me, ran away from the [Maoists] and came back to our village here in Bandgaon. We started our own [rebel] group, settling old scores with the local *munda* and ensuring people like us could hold onto their land without the elders deciding everything.

This new breakaway group was named the Jharkhand Liberation Tigers (JLT), though they now call themselves the People's Liberation Front of India (PLFI) to indicate their national ambition. In reality, however, the PLFI operates primarily in Khunti and West Singhbhum districts, where it enjoys an uneasy, fractious relationship with its parent organisation. Masi has been in jail since 2008; the PLFI supports his wife and two sons, paying for their daily expenses and school fees.

Many believe locally that Masi actually won the Khunti MLA seat on a Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) ticket in December 2009, but bribery and rigging helped his BJP rival Neelkanth Singh Munda win officially by 438 votes. Protima says,



[W]e were celebrating at the election center at 4.30 [p.m.], and went off to the village to tell everyone. Later, we were told that cash filled in boxes meant for sweetmeats were taken into the office by BJP party workers, and the ballot boxes [sic] were subsequently tampered with.

Four hundred and thirty-eight votes is a slender margin of victory by Indian standards, and popular rumours of electoral fraud say as much about how the Mundas today see the state as about the actual course of events on election day. Today, Masi is a modern Munda youth icon: he married whom he wishes regardless of ethnicity or religion; he used the power of his gun to fight for the poor; he settled land disputes extrajudicially against the interests of the rural elite and policemen in their pay and he avoided what his followers call ‘mind-numbing’ rituals. This is the example through which the PLFI endeavoured to remake village communities in central Jharkhand today. Despite being in jail, Masi remains confident of an outright victory the next time he contests elections.

Masi is far from unique, of course, in rural Jharkhand. During the 2009 national elections, I discovered that it was common for the PLFI to campaign for the JMM during elections. Pamphlets distributed by identifiable PLFI members asked voters to choose JMM candidates over their local rivals. So, when the PLFI second-in-command Carlos, alias Lawrence Mundri, had earlier contested elections on a JMM ticket too, it surprised none. On his arrest in late October 2008, widely assumed to be the handiwork of rival PLFI factions, Carlos defiantly told his jailers that he had the ‘blessings’ of the JMM supremo Shibu Soren, then the chief minister of the state. As Sukhram Hao, a retired headmaster in Khunti, told me back then: ‘Who are these Maobadis? They are just the *netas* of tomorrow’. Sukhram’s words have turned out to be prescient. In December 2010, panchayat elections were held for the first time in rural Jharkhand. Protima explains how several of her husband’s

ex-comrades contested the elections directly, themselves, or, indirectly, through their kin:

They are now fighting these panchayat elections ... [name redacted] because there is so much money now in panchayats. The money comes straight from Delhi, you know, right? With Green Hunt [counterinsurgency operations], it is now possible to lay down arms and fight elections .... Our fight against the village elites has succeeded.

What she did not mention is that those who fight and win panchayat elections also have the greatest incentive to provide intelligence to the police on their former comrades in rebel groups. Indeed, PLFI leaders such as Masi and Carlos were victims of precisely these games of ambition played by them and their rivals.

It is important to recognise that Masi and other Adivasi youth in rural Jharkhand are as much in dialogue with the post-colonial Indian state as with the elders of their own communities. Of course, as Philip Abrams (1988, 82) pointed out long ago, the state–society binary is itself illusory: ‘the state is not the reality which stands behind the mask of political practice. It is itself the mask which prevents our seeing political practice as it is’. The same could be said for the Maoists, of course, though they cannot match the verticality and encompassment of the state. The state and the Maoists, far from being coherent macro-political entities, emerge in textured ethnographic narratives as fuzzy, socially embedded actors in a social ‘field of struggles’ (Bourdieu 1984, 244) and its contestation therein, whether on the basis of class, gender or intergenerational differences. Subaltern agency emerges from the interstices of rural communities and re-negotiates everyday power relations therein. Insofar as the Indian state and the Maoists may be said to share sovereignty in rural Jharkhand and beyond, they both define and limit the scope of subaltern agency and are, in turn, defined and limited by it. The contours of revolutionary praxis as well as statemaking

today, as we have suggested, are shaped by subaltern agency. Yesterday's rebels may be tomorrow's legislators, and 'state' and 'society' are both transformed simultaneously in the radical upheavals of this historical moment.

In the Bastar region of southern Chhattisgarh, where Chandra has conducted stints of fieldwork since 2009, shared sovereignty is undoubtedly the norm. Here, in addition to the state and the Maoists, Right-wing Hindu organisations also operate in Bastar's villages. Ordinary villagers, far from being sandwiched between rival political authorities, have grown accustomed over time to approach each authority with a particular set of demands and expectations. Hindutva is deeply invested in mass education, Maoists assist in raising the market rate for tendu leaves and the state provides heavily subsidised food grains via an efficient public distribution system. Nandini Sundar, despite laying out a sophisticated version of the sandwich theory on one occasion (2014), has reached a similar conclusion elsewhere.

Against the view that being sandwiched or being only on the insurgent side exhausts the possibilities, my experience shows that people want both the Maoists and the state but for different reasons. They need open parliamentary parties and civil liberties groups who can help them when they get arrested, as well as a party like the Maoists who can help them keep their land (2013, 366).

There are overlaps, of course, between different sovereigns. The BJP government in the state is certainly sympathetic to the grass roots educational and cultural agendas of Hindutva groups. But it is also striking that Maoist guerrillas and Hindutva groups do not clash with each other. Often, sovereignty shifts between night and day, and even overlaps within a single household. One of Chandra's interlocutors in Darbha tehsil, Hareram, is a school teacher who situates the Adivasis within a wider Hindu nation, weaving local folklore into creative retellings of

the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and recasting Bastar as a Hindu kingdom under Muslim and British imperial rule. His younger brother, however, is a key informant for the Maoists in Darbha and, in particular, helps organise nightly meetings in villages. Both subaltern agency and revolutionary praxis are co-produced here under conditions of shared, overlapping sovereignty. This state of affairs may also explain, at least partly, the BJP's puzzlingly impressive electoral performances in Bastar over the past three state elections. Equally, Bastar's peculiar circumstances may help us understand why the Maoists are able to hold their ground over three terms of a BJP state government. Betwixt and between lie the contradictory nature of subaltern agency.

In the Lalgarh region of the Jungle Mahals of West Bengal, where Lipika Kamra conducted her doctoral fieldwork, the contradictory nature of agency is similarly apparent. In response to the high-handedness of the police and the communist party-state in the area, ordinary men and women, including those from Adivasi households, participated in the People's Committee Against Police Atrocities (PCAPA) under the leadership of Chhatradhar Mahato. Over time, the membership of the PCAPA came to overlap partially with the local unit of the Maoist party, which, under the leadership of Kishenji alias Koteswara Rao, had been expanding its organisation in and around Lalgarh. The PCAPA also, however, came to be supported indirectly by the Trinamool Congress (TMC), which set out to replace the CPI (Maoist) government in Kolkata and eventually succeeded in doing so. As popular fronts, party politics and revolutionary praxis became oddly enmeshed, subaltern agency played an ambiguous role in uncertain times. Far from being sandwiched between rival authorities or led by kinship relations to one side or another, subalterns committed themselves to multiple allegiances and hedged their bets to ensure their physical security. Although the Maoists proclaimed Lalgarh as a 'liberated

zone' and drew the attention of New Delhi to this remote forest region, these macro-political developments masked the micro-political calculations by which subaltern actors manoeuvred a political landscape characterised by shared, overlapping sovereignty. Those who had once supported the PCAPA and the Maoists subtly transferred their loyalties to the TMC in their fight against the CPI (Maoist) cadres. The TMC itself cast a blind eye towards Maoist operations in Lalgarh and, in fact, benefited from the decimation of the CPI (Maoist) in the region. By the time the new TMC government assumed power in May 2011, subaltern groups were keen to display their commitment to their new patrons, the TMC government and the local administration. From their role in creating a Maoist liberation zone, the people of Lalgarh subsequently turned into willing participants in counter-insurgency operations directed by the state and central governments. In the words of Durga, whose village of Netai that shot to prominence briefly during the Lalgarh agitation:

We would go to their [Maoists'] meetings at night then. The CPM cadres would harass us. We had to fight back. But now, it is different. We are looking for the government to help us.

Thus, subaltern agency proved to be slippery over time in Lalgarh. Insofar as it breathed life into revolutionary praxis at one moment and snuffed out the revolutionary flame in another moment, subaltern agency displayed its inherently contradictory character. Neither entirely autonomous nor wholly determined by macro-social forces, the agency of ordinary men and women in times of conflict ought to be recognised at the heart of social and political transformations in Lalgarh.

The ethnographic evidence presented so far pushes us to rethink the nature of both subaltern agency and revolutionary praxis in contemporary India. By laying bare the contradictory nature of subaltern agency and its relationship to shared, overlapping forms of sovereignty in the

Red Corridor, we have sought to avoid the problems that typically beset Maoism's critics and supporters in India today. For us, subalterns are not hyperreal or mythical beings available for political or theoretical appropriation. We refer to the flesh-and-blood narratives of ordinary men and women from our field sites in order to understand what Maoism means on the ground to them. The few existing ethnographic accounts of Maoism from Bihar and Telangana arrive at conclusions similar to ours (see Kunnath 2012; Suykens 2010). Yet empirical research that offers bottom-up perspectives on Maoism in India is remarkably limited. A large swathe of writings on Maoism has been simply armchair commentary by academics and journalists based in Delhi, and a number of promising fieldwork-based accounts have been unfortunately compromised by their reliance on either the state or the Maoist party for access. Accordingly, we call for further field research and reflection on Maoism and its impact on the Indian countryside today. Our knowledge at present is, at best, partial and fragmentary.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we have deconstructed the notion of subaltern agency and its relationship to revolutionary praxis in the Maoist movement in contemporary India. We have critiqued existing commentaries on Maoism and the masses in India for either ignoring subaltern agency or exaggerating its effects. We have further shown that both critics and supporters of the Maoist movement misrepresent subaltern politics in the Red Corridor, albeit in different ways. These dominant top-down representations of the movement fail to see revolutionary praxis as a site of ongoing negotiations between the party and the people. Equally, they fail to account for the shared, overlapping

sovereignties that close-to-the-ground ethnographic narratives from the Red Corridor inevitably reveal. Thus, a focus on micro-politics helps us uncover the complexities and calculations that define subaltern politics in eastern and Central India today.

What does the contradictory nature of subaltern agency mean for Indian democracy? We believe that the Maoist insurgency has brought a renewed focus on these margins of modern India, paradoxically deepening democracy even as it is contested from the 'outside'. Local, state and national elections are regularly held in insurgent areas. Despite its stated antipathy towards Indian democracy, the Maoist movement has not subverted or diminished it in any sense. Indeed, as we have shown, some Maoists themselves may find the lure of democratic life to be inescapable. This state of affairs persists because subaltern agency is an unstable, even contradictory, force. On the one hand, it is shaped and constrained by a complex political environment in which multiple sovereigns overlap. On the other hand, it draws and redraws the porous boundaries between state and society as well as revolutionary praxis and everyday life. Insofar as modern 'democracy' retains its original meaning as the rule of the demos, the antinomies of subaltern agency ought to be regarded at the heart of popular democracy. Rather than destroying the so-called 'sham' of mass democracy in India, Maoist revolutionary praxis may have, in fact, revitalised it. Vigorous debates over mythical subalterns in the public sphere, however misled, have deepened the state's commitment to its putative margins. The Maoists, in turn, have proved to be able patrons of the masses, albeit not the only ones. If the militancy of Maoist revolutionaries has been transmuted into an unsettling force within the cauldron of a vibrant democracy, democracy, too, has thrown up radical possibilities beyond the constitutional limits that supposedly shackle it.

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