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## **Naxalbari at its Golden Jubilee: Fifty recent books on the Maoist movement in India**

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## REVIEW ARTICLE:

### **Naxalbari at its Golden Jubilee: Fifty recent books on the Maoist movement in India\***

Alpa Shah and Dhruv Jain

#### **Introduction**

There are not many other issues in South Asia that have attracted as much scholarly attention in the last decade as India's Naxalite or Maoist movement. At least 50 scholarly or political books, several novels, and numerous essays have been published since 2007. What we hope to do in this article is to ask why this movement has generated such attention at this moment in time, to analyse the commentaries that have emerged and the questions that have been asked, and also to identify some of the shortfalls in the existing literature and propose some lines of research to be pursued by future scholars.<sup>1</sup>

It is now 50 years since the landmark uprising of 25 May 1967 in the West Bengal village of Naxalbari from which today's Indian Maoist revolutionaries derive their name 'Naxalites'. Veteran communist activists, revolutionary minded students, and exploited peasants attacked oppressive landlords, redistributed their land to the landless, cancelled outstanding debts, and tried to end intergenerational bondage. Inspired by Mao Zedong's 1927 'Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan'<sup>2</sup> and the strategy of a protracted 'people's war' against the Japanese in the 1930s, they analysed the Indian social formation as 'semi-feudal and semi-colonial'. Therefore—following Mao's strategy—they sought to lead an armed guerrilla war that, beginning in the countryside, would mobilize the peasantry and eventually encircle the cities in a bid to capture state power in the struggle for a communist society.

\* Acknowledgements: We are grateful to *Modern Asian Studies* for seeing this as an important field of literature for analysis and requesting us to undertake it. We apologize, however, that it has taken more than three years to come to fruition. We hope that in some small way we have compensated for this long wait by the fact that the initial hope of reviewing a handful of books has turned into an article on 50 books. We thank Norbert Peabody for his generosity and his patience, and the reviewers of *Modern Asian Studies* for their helpful comments. The ESRC and ERC have generously funded Shah's research, enabling her to co-author this piece.

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<sup>1</sup> This article focuses on the English language books and edited books on India's Naxalite or Maoist movement published largely between 2008–2016, the latter being the date when the article was submitted for review. Though we have tried to be as exhaustive and as comprehensive as possible, we know that there are potentially several books that have been missed because we do not know about them or because they are difficult to get hold of. We have not included journal articles. It should also be noted that there are many books that have been published in Hindi, Telegu, and other Indian languages that we have not covered.

<sup>2</sup> Zedong, M. (1927). 'Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Move-ment in Hunan'. Retrieved from [https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1\\_2.htm](https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1_2.htm), [accessed 31 March 2017].

Though the initial uprisings were violently repressed by 1972, the Naxalbari movement has continued to inspire new generations of youth in India. It has presented a captivating political imaginary—that of a society free of exploitation and injustice—and has moved thousands to sacrifice their lives for revolutionary change. The revolutionaries have come to represent those neglected by Indian politics: they have given them a voice and are fighting not only for them to have control over their means of subsistence but also for the dignity that has been denied to them for generations.

Elsewhere, with the fall of the Berlin Wall and China's shift to state capitalism, communist struggles have collapsed, but in India, despite periods of intense state repression, the Naxalite movement has continued to grow. In 2004, the two large, armed Naxalite groups—the Maoist Communist Centre and the Communist Party of India (People's War)—came together to form the Communist Party of India (Maoist) (which is why they are now so often referred to as the Maoists)<sup>3</sup> and escalated their war against the Indian state.

By this time the insurgents had retreated from the exposed agricultural plains where they tried to mobilize landless peasants and small farmers against large landlords. They sought refuge in the forested, hilly areas of Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Orissa, and West Bengal as well as adjoining parts of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Telengana. These terrains are better suited to guerrilla warfare: not only is it easier to hide in the jungles, but the Indian state has long neglected these regions and there is a comparatively limited state presence compared to that found in the plains. The hilly forests are also home to India's Adivasis or tribal people,<sup>4</sup> communities who have historically been the most excluded from the developmental processes of the Indian state.

It so happens that the regions around this guerrilla terrain have some of India's largest untapped mineral reserves—iron ore, coal, and bauxite, in particular. And when, from the 1990s, the Indian state began welcoming big business in the hope of becoming the next world superpower, multinational companies began lining up to exploit these resources. The Adivasis who live on these lands, and the Naxalites who made their guerrilla strongholds amid them, were now in the way.

It is perhaps then no surprise that with the formation of the Communist Party of India (Maoist), India's then Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, declared the Naxalites to be the single greatest internal security threat in the country and soon launched unprecedented counter-insurgency measures—dubbed Operation Green Hunt—against them and anyone seen to sympathise with their cause. It was estimated that the Naxalites comprised anywhere between 10–25,000 armed cadres with an additional 100,000 militia members, are present in 190 out of India's 626 districts, and have the capability to strike in 90 districts,<sup>5</sup> though the numbers changed all the time. Tens of thousands of members of the armed forces, police officers, and special police officers from across the country were mobilized in counter-

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<sup>3</sup> In this review article we use Naxalite, Maoist, and Naxal/Naxalite interchangeably.

<sup>4</sup> Adivasis are India's tribal people, seen as the original inhabitants—the aboriginal populations of the country—and officially called Scheduled Tribes by the Indian government.

<sup>5</sup> Mitra, D.M. (2011). *Executive Summary of 'Genesis and Spread of Maoist Violence and Appropriate State Strategy to Handle It'*, p. 4. Available at: [www.bprd.nic.in/WriteReadData/userfiles/file/201608020504121803343ExecutiveSummary.pdf](http://www.bprd.nic.in/WriteReadData/userfiles/file/201608020504121803343ExecutiveSummary.pdf), [accessed 11 March 2017]. Hussain, Wasbir and Deka, H.K. (2011). *Study of Social, Economic and Political Dynamics in Extremist Affected Areas*, p. 4. Available at: [www.bprd.nic.in/WriteReadData/userfiles/file/201608020304142891765Report.pdf](http://www.bprd.nic.in/WriteReadData/userfiles/file/201608020304142891765Report.pdf), [accessed 11 March 2017].

insurgency and sent to surround the hilly forests of central India. Vigilante groups created to clear the area complemented these formal military operations. The most notorious of these was the Salwa Judum (literally ‘Purification Hunt’) in Chhattisgarh. There were gross abuses of human rights. Adivasis were pitched against each other. Villages were razed to the ground, many were raped and killed, with an overall result of more than 40,000 people being displaced. With the escalation of the military war against the Naxalites, the guerrillas claim that their armies have grown. Hundreds of people have been killed in the course of the conflict and the prisons of central and eastern India are now full of Adivasis arrested as Naxalites or for allegedly supporting the Naxalite cause.

The militarization of the landscape of central and eastern India, characterized by bullet-proof vehicles, tanks, buses, and security forces, drew national attention once again to the Naxalite revolutionary struggle and to the long-neglected Adivasi communities in the hills and forests of central and eastern India. Publishers internationally and nationally, from Penguin to Pluto, rushed to commission and quickly bring out books (in the case of some, several) on what has been pitched as ‘one of the most intractable and under-reported insurgencies in the developing world’.<sup>6</sup>

The literature on the Naxalites that has poured out in the last few years is fascinating for the array of writing it represents, the different kinds of interest it has generated, and the questions it has raised. There remains a dearth of first-hand, sustained research on the Naxalites and the people they live among, but the literature is as interesting for its analysis as it is for what it says about the authors and their perspectives on the issues at hand.

We see several trends in the available literature. The first genre—emanating mainly from sociologists, political scientists, security studies specialists, and administrators—sees the Naxalites from within the purview of the Indian state and, as such, a problem to be addressed; they also seek to critically comment on India’s military response to the Naxalites. The second genre—emanating mainly from scholars of political science as well as activists—takes seriously the Naxalite project of revolutionary social change and its proponents are thus compelled to reflect on the nature of the Indian state and its democracy, and to explain—in relation to the Indian state—the spread of revolutionary violence in India. The positions taken are varied—from an enthusiastic defence of the Indian state and a view of the Naxalites as extremists, to those who are more reflective about the challenges posed to the state and democracy which lie at the heart of the spread of the Naxalites. The third genre—emerging mainly from journalists and activists, partly aided by the Naxalites, who are attracted to some degree by the romance of the revolution—seeks to document (through travelogue and first-hand accounts of short trips) what life might be like in the guerrilla territories and armies. The fourth genre comprises the analysis of sociologists and anthropologists, based on sustained empirical research and concerned with the experience of the oppressed communities who have become part of the Maoist fold. There are also novels inspired by the Naxalites, which are notable for highlighting the challenge posed by revolutionary politics and mobilization to ideals of the conventional family structure. The final genre is literature written by participants in the Naxalite movement itself, or by those who have been close to

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<sup>6</sup> This is from the blurb on the back cover of Mukherji, N. (2012). *The Maoists in India: tribals under siege*. London: Pluto Press.

the movement. It is this last genre that we argue provides the richest terrain for further research.

### Seeing like the state

‘What is this Maoist business in India all about?’ ask Robin Jeffrey, Ronojoy Sen, and Pratima Singh.<sup>7</sup> With the Naxalites taking centre stage in Indian politics once again, came a realization that there was a major gap in our knowledge of contemporary India. We did not know much about either the clandestine movement that had existed underground for almost half a century or about the Adivasi populations it lived among, who had been overwhelmingly forgotten in Indian history, despite having a population the size of Vietnam. What emerges, invariably across the board—whether from a political scientist or a government administrator—is a strong critique of the military focus of the Indian state’s response to the Maoists and a call to develop Adivasi areas. These are based on the premise that the Naxalites have gained strength because they have addressed the genuine grievances of India’s tribal communities.

A range of edited collections have been produced, such as those by Jeffrey, Sen, and Singh, and Santosh Paul,<sup>8</sup> driven by the goal of telling us as much as they can about the movement and the people it mobilizes. Though hastily compiled, these collections are useful as they make available in one place a range of material (mainly already published articles) on the Naxalites. For instance, the Jeffrey, Sen, and Singh collection not only includes essays from established scholars such as John Harriss, Sumanta Banarjee, and Nandini Sundar, but also the reflections of journalists who have worked in Maoist areas, such as R.B. Harivansh who for many years edited the *Prabhat Khabar* in Jharkhand. It also contains interviews with Maoists and police officers, including one with the ex-Collector of Dantewada and one with Special Police Officer. Although the volume defies coherence, perhaps this is its strength for it seeks to provide varied perspectives on the Naxalites.

In a similar vein, we have Ranjit Bhushan’s *Maoism in India and Nepal*, based on a series of nine lengthy interviews with Maoist leaders in Nepal, and intellectuals and activists sympathetic to the Maoist movement in India.<sup>9</sup> It is noteworthy for including not only interviews with Baburam Bhattarai and Prachanda, who once led the Nepali Maoists, but also Kameshwar Baitha, the first former Maoist to be elected to the Lok Sabha, and Dipankar Bhattacharya, general secretary of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) [Liberation] (hereafter CPI(ML)) which has its roots in the Naxalites but is now a parliamentary party.<sup>10</sup> The inclusion of these sections on the radical left in India demonstrates Bhushan’s own belief that the Maoist movement in India needs to abandon the armed struggle in order to make the necessary transformations through the parliamentary democratic sphere to further democratize Indian society.

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<sup>7</sup> Jeffrey, R., Sen, R., and Singh, P. (eds) (2012). *More than Maoism: politics, policies and insurgencies in South Asia*. New Delhi: Manohar.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., and Paul, S. (ed.) (2013). *The Maoist Movement in India: perspectives and counterperspectives*. New Delhi: Routledge.

<sup>9</sup> Bhushan, R. (2016). *Maoism in India and Nepal*. New York: Routledge.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. Gayer, L. and Jaffrelot, C. (eds) (2009). *Armed Militias of South Asia: fundamentalists, Maoists and separatists*. London: Hurst and Company, also has a very useful essay by Nicolas Jaoul on the spread of CPI(ML)Liberation in Bihar and in particular their turn from ‘bullet to ballot’.

Santosh Paul's *The Maoist Movement in India* includes the voices of progressive scholarly critics of the Maoists (for instance, Aditya Nigam and Jairus Banaji) as well as those of government officials (notably an interview by Shalini Singh with Jariam Ramesh, India's environment and forest minister, on the collusion of mining lobbies and state forest departments).<sup>11</sup> Here, the overwhelming impetus is to see the Maoist movement as a problem and a threat to Indian democracy, to identify the 'root problems' of Maoist infiltrated areas, and to analyse how to best counter the movement. Paul highlights the government's inability to address economic disparities, raise income levels, and alleviate poverty, and the battle for land as the dominant cause for sustained violence in the Red Belt. In this he sets up a position that is by-and-large a dominant one in the South Asian literature—that it is grievance (not greed) that drives the strength of rebel movements.

Indeed, even the literature emanating from security studies experts who are seeking to understand the Naxalite movement in relation to wider 'armed conflict' and 'unconventional warfare' in order to offer solutions to the 'Naxal problem' reinforce the centrality of addressing the grievances of the people who are joining the Maoists. A distinction is made here—in particular by Scott Gates and Kaushik Roy of the Norwegian Peace Research Institute—between Africa and its 'new wars' and the low intensity conflict of guerrilla armies.<sup>12</sup> Mary Kaldor characterizes what she saw as the 'new wars' (prevalent in Africa) as a mixture of war and criminal activities with large-scale abuses of human rights.<sup>13</sup> But Gates and Roy argue that the insurgency of the Indian Naxalites is very different as civilian groups are not attacked and the guerrillas derive their strength from their intimacy with the local people among whom they move. They critique the failures of late nineteenth-century counter-insurgency doctrine for focusing on the military aspects of crushing insurgencies, and not the social and political dimensions of countering insurgencies. Though their canvas is broad,<sup>14</sup> they advise that the law-and-order component of the state's anti-Maoist responses should only be allocated 20–25 per cent of resources, with the remainder being assigned to development and land reform.<sup>15</sup> The Indian counter-insurgency forces, they say, must 'strike at the contact between the masses and the insurgents', thus emphasizing psychological operations,<sup>16</sup> and military measures must be complemented by 'non-military programmes' that 'aim to win hearts and minds of the populace through welfare schemes and to construct grass-roots level political institutions'.<sup>17</sup>

Perhaps the strongest critique of the Indian state's military approach to the Naxalites emerged from a 2008 Government of India report submitted by a 16-member expert group appointed by the Planning Commission.<sup>18</sup> The report sought to recognize the Maoist movement as a political one, arguing that in its day-to-day manifestation it had to be seen as fighting for social justice, equality, protection, security, and local development.<sup>19</sup> The report, undertaken

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<sup>11</sup> Paul (ed.), *The Maoist Movement in India*.

<sup>12</sup> Gates, S. and Roy, K. (2014). *Unconventional Warfare in South Asia: shadow warriors and counterinsurgency*. London and New York: Routledge.

<sup>13</sup> Kaldor, M. (1999). *New and Old Wars: organized violence in a global era*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

<sup>14</sup> Gates and Roy, *Unconventional Warfare in South Asia*, focus on the Maoist issue in only one chapter, covering both Nepal and India, and it is based entirely on secondary literature (and set among chapters on the Northeast, Kashmir, Pakistan, Afghanistan).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>18</sup> Government of India. (2008). *Development Challenges in Extremist Affect Areas*. Report of an Expert Group to the Planning Commission. New Delhi: Government of India. The first draft was written by Bela Bhatia and the late K. Balagopal.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

during Santosh Mehrotra's tenure as head of the Rural Development Division of the Planning Commission, was later edited by him and published as *Countering Naxalism with Development*.<sup>20</sup> The book usefully brings together the recommendations of the expert group with those of police and intelligence officials (Prakash Singh and Ajit Doval); well-known scholars, Sukhadeo Thorat and Sandeep Sharma (the former having worked tirelessly for Dalit emancipation); and Indian Administrative Services officers with a track record for working on behalf of Adivasis and Dalits.<sup>21</sup> The latter include the former rural development secretary of the Government of India, K. B. Saxena; the late B. D. Sharma, who was once the commissioner for Scheduled Tribes for the Government of India; as well as S. R. Sankaran who, among other things, formed the Committee of Concerned Citizens to mediate with the Naxalites.

The contributors to Mehrotra's volume variously highlight the developmental challenges of Adivasi and Dalit populations who form a core part of the Naxalite movement's mass base. B. D. Sharma, for instance, focuses on various legislative efforts to deal with Adivasis and their subsequent failure to be implemented, which in turn, he says, has further fuelled the conflict. S. R. Sankaran focuses on the failures of forest policy and the circumvention of land reform policies for Adivasis, arguing for a proper plan for displacement (if displacement is absolutely unavoidable) and rehabilitation, and the proper implementation of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act in order to resolve the conflict.<sup>22</sup> K. B. Saxena argues that the lack of enforcement of existing progressive legislation is the result of complicity between large landowners and government officials in the state, the effect of which is that the Adivasis lose out because they are not properly compensated for the sale of their lands, and are taken advantage of by government officials who abuse their lack of literacy to interpret rules in favour of the buyer. Sukhadeo Thorat and Sandeep Sharma further show the denial of opportunities and violence that Dalits and Adivasis face in their assertion for mobility and rights, and call for greater social inclusion.<sup>23</sup>

The failures of the developmental state is nowhere more evident than in the diaries of Chandan Sinha, an Indian Administrative Services officer who between 2004–2005 was district magistrate and Collector of Paschim Medinipur in West Bengal, a region which is the heart of the Junglemahals and which became the centre of media attention for Maoist activity in 2008–2010. Sinha's *Kindling of an Insurrection* is a chronicle of one state failure after another: villages unconnected by roads, without sufficient provision of drinking water, where people regularly die early because of a lack of medical facilities, a situation that is not uncommon in the Adivasi-dominated hills and forests of central and eastern India.<sup>24</sup>

As with Mehrotra's edited volume, the overwhelming message is in favour of a response to the Naxalites that addresses the various developmental problems and—crucially—that moves away from a military-centred focus, which, they argue, can cause considerable collateral damage and lead to the greater alienation of affected communities. The expert report recommended the effective implementation of existing protective legislations for India's Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes; measures to resolve problems of land alienation,

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<sup>20</sup> Mehrotra, S. (ed.) (2014). *Countering Naxalism with Development: challenges of social justice and state security*. New Delhi: Sage.

<sup>21</sup> Most of the government reports use the official categorization of India's Adivasis and Dalits: Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes.

<sup>22</sup> Mehrotra (ed.), *Countering Naxalism*, pp. 152–162.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 170–180.

<sup>24</sup> Sinha, C. (2014). *Kindling of an Insurrection: notes from Junglemahals*. Delhi: Routledge.

bonded labour and indebtedness, and land reform; rehabilitation and resettlement; livelihood security and rural development; universalization of basic social services like education and healthcare; the empowerment of village councils; and the proper extension of good governance to affected areas.

Mehrotra's volume also includes a strong repudiation of state-sponsored vigilante groups such as the Salwa Judum in Chhattisgarh, which the Government of India expert group report says 'delegitimizes politics, dehumanizes people, degenerates those engaged in their "security", and above all represents abdication of the State itself'.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, in *Maoists and Other Armed Conflicts*,<sup>26</sup> Anuradha Chenoy and Kamal Chenoy, respectively professors of international relations and political science at Jawaharlal Nehru University, further argue that looking at conflict through the lens of national security, or even simply underdevelopment, is insufficient. They call for a 'human security approach' to conflict, founded on dignity, justice, equity, rights, and human development that addresses structural inequalities. By human security, they clarify that they rely on the UN definition: 'freedom from want and freedom from fear' and further identify it as encompassing 'economic security, food security, health security, environmental security, personal security, community security, political security'.<sup>27</sup> They suggest that the Indian government has rejected any possibility of such an approach to the conflict and prefers to adhere to a national security and militaristic stance on counter-insurgency that relies on 'fear mechanisms', including torture, encounters, crackdowns, enforced disappearances, the creation of strategic hamlets, and the formation of local militias. They add that this occurs within the context of a network of overreaching undemocratic laws and Acts that legitimize these practices, and create the conditions for impunity.<sup>28</sup> These human rights abuses of counter-insurgency in Chhattisgarh are also the central focus of Nandini Sundar's *The Burning Forest*, discussed later.<sup>29</sup>

These are powerful arguments in the face of what has indeed been an overwhelming military attack by the Indian state on the Naxalites. Sadly though, the Planning Commission expert group report which is the core of the Mehrotra volume was never presented in parliament for debate. Instead it was an Intelligence Bureau report, which described Maoist violence as the 'biggest internal security threat' to India, that grabbed the attention of home ministers and precipitated the security-centred response to the Naxalites and the development of huge numbers of central armed police forces in the tribal belts of eastern and central India.<sup>30</sup>

This security-focused state response is captured in the two books brought out by P. C. Joshi on the Naxal movement.<sup>31</sup> As was the case with the Expert Report, the audience here is clearly the government, but in this case, the books are addressed in particular to the police and security services.<sup>32</sup> The impetus for Joshi's volumes is similar to that of the

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<sup>25</sup> Mehrotra (ed.), *Countering Naxalism*, p. 46.

<sup>26</sup> Chenoy, A. M. and Chenoy, K. A. M. (2010). *Maoist and Other Armed Conflicts*. New Delhi: Penguin. Like Scott and Gates, their canvas includes movements from the northeast to Punjab, and their work on the Maoists is only based on secondary literature.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>28</sup> More generally they propose that, 'State security has to be democratized and broadened to include gendered human security which must also privilege the subaltern sections of society': *ibid.*, pp. 80–81. This would necessitate a 'democratization of policy-making and the expansion and protection of human rights': *ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>29</sup> Sundar, N. (2016) *The Burning Forest: India's war in Bastar*. New Delhi: Juggernaut.

<sup>30</sup> Subramanian, K. S. (2010). 'State Response to Maoist Violence in India: a critical assessment', *Economic and Political Weekly*, August 7, pp. 23–26.

<sup>31</sup> Joshi, P. C. (2013). *Naxalism at a Glance*. Delhi: Kalpaz Publications, and Joshi, P. C. (2014). *Naxalism: how to cope with*. Delhi: Kalpaz Publications.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* See also Goswami, N. (2015). *Indian National Security and Counter-Insurgency: the use of force vs. non-violent response*. New York: Routledge, whose main concern is the threat to national security posed by the Maoists and other armed movements in the northeast, and which proposes policies of location, isolation, and elimination for the Maoists.



Jeffrey, Sen and Singh collection—to provide as much information as possible on the Naxalites—but there is perhaps greater coherence to this work because there is a clear target audience: those who need to know about the Naxalites in order to ‘counter’ them. In the first volume, *Naxalism at a Glance*, the author has compiled information on the Naxalites, with consolidated summaries of each of the various Naxal groups, their frontal outfit, and, as appendices, some important Naxal documents—for example, the first-ever joint interview of the erstwhile CPI(ML) and the Maoist Communist Centre after the merger of 2004 that formed the Communist Party of India (Maoist) (hereafter CPI(Maoist)), and excerpts from the 2004 ‘Urban Perspective Plan’ of the CPI(Maoist).<sup>33</sup> It is almost as though what was being prepared was a manual to better know your enemy in order to fight it. The second volume, *Naxalism: how to cope with*, is a further exploration of the ‘enemy’ with advice on how to eliminate it (for example, how to infiltrate the Naxals, how to turn them against each other, how to use the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM) cadres against the Naxals, how to protect informers).<sup>34</sup> Reading between the lines, Joshi in fact tells us as much about the Indian security forces and the police, and their feudal treatment of locals, their corruption, and negligence, as he does about his perceptions of the ‘enemy’. In *Naxalism: how to cope with*, we read about a man telling the Indian police to stop harassing local women, to stop fighting each other, to use their resources for the purpose they were meant for—to counter the Naxals—and to stop being corrupt; in effect asking them to get their act together.<sup>35</sup> These are what the Naxalites themselves call the ‘contradictions of the ruling elite’ and whose interstices they use to expand their movement.

### **The legitimacy of revolutionary violence**

Though clearly pointing to the deficiencies of the Indian state, the literature discussed thus far affirms the legitimacy of the Indian state, on the one hand, and, on the other, sees the Naxalites as a problem to be solved. There is little attempt to critically analyse the political underpinnings of the Naxalite movement. Another genre of political science literature takes more seriously the ideological project of revolutionary social change itself, though the authors concerned do not necessarily agree with the Naxalite methods or analysis. Here, the questions addressed are much more about the relationship between democracy, the nature of the Indian state, and the place of Naxalite revolutionary violence within that. The premise—explained with the greatest clarity in Neera Chandhoke’s exploration—is that under certain conditions, revolutionary violence is legitimate.<sup>36</sup> The question, then, is whether revolutionary violence is justifiable in the contemporary Indian context (a question which requires an analysis of the Indian state) and, if so, whether the Naxal violence in particular is legitimate.

Chandhoke, a professor of political science at Delhi University, presents herself as a theorist of the problem of revolutionary violence in a democracy. She makes it explicit that she does not wish to intervene with policy suggestions for either the Indian state or the Naxalites but to offer thoughts that might sustain a dialogue. Her book is thus first and foremost an exercise in thinking through the relationship between democracy and revolutionary politics, with the Maoist case being used as an example to explore this relationship. Chandhoke’s premise is

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<sup>33</sup> Joshi, *Naxalism at a Glance*.

<sup>34</sup> Joshi, *Naxalism: how to cope with*.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Chandhoke, N. (2015). *Democracy and Revolutionary Politics*. London, Oxford: Bloomsbury Academic.

that Indian democracy, while robust, is characterized by violence, and thus revolutionary violence cannot be treated as an aberration, in just the same way that democracy cannot be regarded as simply a farce forced upon unsuspecting, innocent people.<sup>37</sup>

For Chandhoke:

*Revolutionaries seek to transform the institutional context in which people live out their lives and make it less unequal and more just, through armed struggle which has as its long-term objective the takeover of the state...*

*Proponents of this form of politics do not see violence as a way of making demands upon the state... [for they]... believe... that the state is not only unwilling, but incapable of institutionalizing the basic preconditions of justice for the most vulnerable: through, say, redistribution of resources, guarantees of a life of dignity and assurances that the political voice of people who are trapped in the clutches of injustices will be heard.<sup>38</sup>*

And:

*'revolutionary violence is based less upon the use of instruments of force and destruction and more on political mobilization of the group of peasants on whose behalf the guerrillas have picked up arms, and in influencing public opinion.*

Chandhoke's overall message is that it is when democracies fail in their responsibilities to democratic justice—as the Indian state so often has—that revolutionary violence can occupy the same space as democracy. She writes:

Even if revolutionary violence is riddled with contradictions between theory and practice, it mounts a powerful challenge to violations of democratic justice and to an unfulfilled democratic agenda. In such cases, it is the responsibility of democratic governments to neutralize the challenge and deliver justice to people whose backs have been broken under the burden of triple injustice.<sup>39</sup>

Though she makes a theoretical space for the legitimacy of the Naxalite cause through her critique of the Indian state, in her final analysis of the revolutionary violence of the Maoists, Chandhoke points to its ambiguities. She ends by noting that the Maoists are in danger of spearheading political violence without the political. She explains that 'given the context of democracy that is considered legitimate by many, and given the military might of the Indian state, the space and time for the political mobilization of the constituency of the Maoists has shrunk dramatically'.<sup>40</sup> The danger, she warns, is that political violence without political mobilization can simply turn into violence alone.

While Chandhoke's book remains at the level of theoretical debate on the relationship between democracy and revolutionary politics, Nirmalagnshu Mukherji purports to provide an empirically grounded overall analysis of *The Maoists in India*.<sup>41</sup> However, it is worth noting that the book is based entirely on secondary sources. Mukherji admits that armed resistance is sometimes necessary—he applauds the Nepali Maoist revolutionary struggle for

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 166.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 148.

<sup>41</sup> Mukherji, *The Maoists in India*.

having overthrown a brutal monarchy—but the overall thrust of his book is to show, chapter by chapter, that the Maoist upheaval does not signify ‘genuine resistance’ in the Indian context.<sup>42</sup> He tips his hat to the Naxalite leaders such as Azad and Kishenji (both killed in ‘encounter killings’), saying, ‘I am honoured to pay my tributes to these noble spirits especially when one examines with disgust the life-histories of most of the official politicians that rule the country’,<sup>43</sup> while simultaneously characterizing the CPI(Maoist) as having degenerated into ‘despotic militarism’ and becoming an ‘instrument for controlling and humiliating the poor and the marginalised’.<sup>44</sup>

Mukherji argues that the prioritization of the annihilation of class enemies that was promoted by Charu Mazumdar, one of the leaders of the original Naxalbari rebellion, persists in the twenty-first century through the brutal killing of informers. The author expends considerable effort in discrediting the public intellectuals and activists—such as Arundhati Roy, Gautam Navlakha, and forums such as Sanhati—who have painted the Maoists and their work among the Adivasis in a favourable light. Even more effort is spent describing the way the Adivasis are stuck between two armies—those of the Maoists and of the state—demonstrated by the number of child soldiers that the Maoists have supposedly recruited. Mukherji further seeks to discredit the guerrillas by showing how the activities of the CPI(Maoist) are detrimental to the efforts of other left-leaning parties who are working within the democratic framework of the Indian state. Though he characterizes India as a ‘fragile democracy’, he says that ‘the genuine case of empowering and ensuring welfare for vast sections of people can only be achieved by enabling people’s militant access to existing forums of the state. And the only civilized method of ensuring such access is to expand the space of electoral democracy in terms of widespread mass movements on basic issues of life and livelihood.’<sup>45</sup> Ultimately the overall aim of Mukherji’s book is to show that the Maoists are an anti-democratic force, to propose saving the Adivasis by creating conditions for their safe and secure surrender from the Maoist People’s Liberation Guerrilla Army, and to expand the scope and space for parliamentary democracy.

Contra Mukherji, Bidyut Chakrabarty and Rajat Kumar Kujur, both professors of political science (the former at the University of Delhi, the latter at the Gangadhar Meyer College in Sambalpur Orissa) present a much more nuanced and grounded analysis of the relationship between Indian democracy and the Maoist movement, and seek to root their arguments by analysing the spread of the Maoist movement in Orissa.<sup>46</sup> Their basic argument is original in that they regard Maoism to be, ironically, the outcome of the steady democratization of the political process in India (beyond mere voting). As the state has become more and more available to people who were left out of it or firmly kept at its margins, and as more of India’s marginal peoples have participated in its democratic processes, democratic aspirations have flourished. At the same time, though, the failure of Indian democracy to leave an adequate space in which a sense of public purpose can be articulated has left vast sections of society disenchanted. In particular, Chakrabarty and Kujur argue that representative democracy has not only failed but also become more oppressive as it serves the interest of the market and

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 156.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 148.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 156.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 138.

<sup>46</sup> Chakrabarty, B. and Kujur, R. K. (2010). *Maoism in India: reincarnation of ultra-left wing extremism in the twenty-first century*. Abingdon: Routledge.

acts as a collaborator of global market-capitalists. For Chakrabarty and Kujur, it is this paradox of Indian democracy that explains the appeal and spread of the Indian Maoists.<sup>47</sup>

‘What then, is Maoism?’ ask Chakrabarty and Kujur. ‘The simple answer is that it is a brand of radical ideology drawing on the political ideas of Mao besides classical Marxism.’ But they also say that Maoism is ‘an ideological response to India’s journey as an independent nation that followed a specific path of development. Hence, Maoism is also an ideological package seeking to articulate an alternative with roots in both orthodox Marxism and also the Chinese variety . . . As an ideology, Maoism addresses the genuine socio-economic grievances of the people in the affected areas by mapping out an exploitation-free social order.’<sup>48</sup> Broadly speaking, Chakrabarty and Kujur summarize Maoism as ‘a political-ideological platform seeking to articulate “the neglected voice” of the peripheral sections of Indian society that have become critical of India’s contemporary development trajectory’.<sup>49</sup>

Having mapped out this ideological framework, Chakrabarty and Kujur then show the ways in which the Maoist movement is democratic by exploring the functioning of democratic centralism within the party. Two chapters are devoted to highlighting the spread of the movement in Orissa in relation to the prevalent socio-economic conditions there—again, though, there is no primary research exploring the overall relationship between the actual spread of the Maoists and what life is like on the ground in areas where the Maoists are present. The chapters are based on general observations that levels of poverty (Orissa has the highest poverty ratio in India), underdevelopment, failure of state governance, and the use of violence and counter-violence in the name of development have all contributed to the growth of the Maoist movement in Orissa. The overall argument proposed by Chakrabarty and Kujur is that the Maoist movement has moved far beyond ‘arm-chair revolutionaries’ and has become an organic movement of the ‘wretched of the earth’.

Manoranjan Mohanty, in his *Red and Green* (which is a republication of his 1977 book, *Revolutionary Violence*, and includes a series of published essays that he has written since), argues similarly that the Maoist movement has shifted focus from armed squad actions around a revolutionary programme that targeted landlords, to an emphasis on a mass movement of Adivasis and peasants around issues like land, forest rights, basic civil liberties, and an alternate path to development.<sup>50</sup>

Contra Mukherji, Mohanty maintains that these latter phases of the Maoist movement are predicated on an ‘Adivasi awakening’, asserting ‘the right to livelihood’, but also the right to dignity and to selfhood. He claims that many Adivasi struggles—for instance, land struggles—started as peaceful campaigns within the framework of the law but when they were suppressed by the security operations of the state, the activists joined hands with the Maoists.<sup>51</sup>

In *War and Politics*, Gautam Navlakha presents a philosophical complement to Chakrabarty and Kujur’s, as well as Mohanty’s, overall analysis.<sup>52</sup> A prominent civil rights activist who has visited the Maoist areas,<sup>53</sup> he explores, like Chandhoke, a place of revolutionary violence

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>50</sup> Mohanty, M. (2015). *Red and Green: five decades of the Indian Maoist movement*. Kolkata: Setu Prakashani.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Navlakha, G. (2014). *War and Politics*. Kolkata: Setu Prakashani.

<sup>53</sup> Navlakha’s *Days and Nights in the Heartland of Rebellion* will be discussed in the next section.

within the Indian context and points to what he sees as the incapacity of the Indian state to address the issues of democratic justice, which is where Chandhoke ends her book. For Navlakha, 'to continue to believe that this predatory state can still be made to work for the benefit of the people may be the opinion of some . . . but there are many who believe that this system is incapable of delivering without an overhaul because it is loaded in favour of the rich, privileged and powerful who do not hesitate to take recourse to tyranny to maintain this system'.<sup>54</sup> Though acknowledging that there are cases of individuals being given justice, welfare policies being enacted, and corrupt political parties being democratically replaced, Navlakha maintains that there is no end in sight to the cycle of oppression and exploitation. He points out that the dominant economic discourse is circumscribed by the imperative of foreign direct investment which entails structural reforms that cut social services and increasing legal and military security for investments, reminding us that the reason for the escalation of the war by the Indian state is to free up the Maoist areas for economic interest, especially mining.<sup>55</sup>

In this context, when the very survival of the population is at stake because of the structural violence being wrought against them, and it is hard to see how a peaceful civil society engaged in electoral democracy could make the Indian state more responsive to their needs, Navlakha argues that force may be necessary. In this vein, and following Clausewitz's and Marxist conceptions of war, Navlakha proposes that the guerrilla war is a political war, given that war is a continuation of politics. Like Chandhoke, he therefore creates the space for the Naxalite revolutionary war to be thought of as a legitimate political force.

Navlakha argues that the Maoist movement has not only highlighted the plight of those who struggle to exist, but has in fact also given a 'sharper profile' to those civil society movements which have relied on non-violent means and which, prior to the armed conflict, were often silent on many of the situations that gave rise to the armed movements.<sup>56</sup> He therefore argues that the Maoist movement has served an important purpose in India by keeping the fire of rebellion smouldering, thereby defying the conventional wisdom which maintains that there is no alternative to the present order of things and which pushes people into either accepting the status quo or, at best, tinkering with it.<sup>57</sup>

With this overall analysis of the significance of Naxal revolutionary violence, the book maps the relationship between peace, war, and a protracted people's war. Peace, he reminds us, if it rests on tyrannical rule, is not in itself a 'positive value' and there can be a virtue to war if it helps in the removal of tyranny.<sup>58</sup> Navlakha points out that modern warfare delegitimizes any opponent who takes recourse to war by relying on a discourse of non-violence, raised as a 'religious dogma', which regards structural violence as being less worrisome than political violence.<sup>59</sup> Navlakha strongly rejects the arguments of those who regard 'civilized' warfare as those conflicts waged by regular armies, and those who see 'barbaric' warfare as the purview of irregular forces.<sup>60</sup> He points instead to the distinction between conventional warfare, typically between states, and sub-conventional warfare that targets a country's own population, and reminds us that in central and eastern India there is in fact a war being waged

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<sup>54</sup> Navlakha, *War and Politics*, p. 2.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 87, 94.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 4–5.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11. Although Navlakha himself notes that one must be careful about this latter claim as it has often been used as a 'facade' to justify the imposition of a 'foreign yoke', as evidenced in Libya and more recently Syria: *ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 18–20.

by the Indian state against the people of India.<sup>61</sup> Navlakha laments that much of current social science research overlooks this propensity of the post-colonial state to wage war against its own people, and argues that the dogmatic rejection of violence and a priori endorsement of ‘non-violence’ often results in an acquiescence to wars prosecuted by the Indian state.<sup>62</sup> The result is that many analysts have not realized that the Indian state, by declaring its internal wars as police actions against ‘problems of law and order’ (rather than war), has not had to follow international agreements like the Geneva Conventions.<sup>63</sup>

Navlakha does not retreat, despite his recognition of the legitimacy of revolutionary warfare, from criticizing the Maoists for unnecessary, or what he calls ‘criminal’, acts of violence, like attacks on public vehicles.<sup>64</sup> The closing chapters of the book are in fact dedicated to critically analysing the role of the Maoists in the Janglemahal and to arguing that the Maoists need to shift away from what could be regarded as a militarist strategy towards a more pluralistic struggle that combines possible electoral openings with mass and legal struggles, all of which require a multi-party pluralistic vision of struggle.<sup>65</sup> Here, it is almost as though Navlakha is warning the Maoists that, given that guerrilla revolutionary war is predicated on its popularity among the people, cruel and reckless conduct must be avoided.<sup>66</sup>

Navlakha urges the Maoists to adopt the Geneva Conventions and to wage their battle, not through a concept of reciprocity—doing what the state does—but with respect for political ethics. In his closing notes, Navlakha reminds the Maoists that, while it is idealistic to believe that change in India will come through peaceful means alone, it is equally idealistic to believe that it will come through military means alone. These more critical comments on Maoist violence are nevertheless laced with a revolutionary optimism: given that the CPI(Maoist) themselves always critically analyse their role and have on several occasions apologized for their mistakes, they do indeed learn from their experiences.<sup>67</sup>

If Navlakha sees the Indian state as ‘predatory’ and ‘coercive’, Ajay Gudavarthy, a political scientist at Jawaharlal Nehru University, in *Maoism, Democracy and Globalisation*, sees it as simply ‘violent’.<sup>68</sup> Though coming from a similar position to Chandhoke and Navlakha in arguing for the necessity of militant class war in certain contexts, Gudavarthy is much less hopeful than Navlakha about the possibilities offered by the Naxalites.<sup>69</sup> The book walks a difficult line between scholarly analysis and what is clearly a message, perhaps even a seminar, to the Maoists.

Gudavarthy argues that although Indian politics has seen a ‘deepening’ and ‘expansion’ of democracy through ‘robust bottom-up mobilization’, it has also been ‘arrested’ through ‘top-down counter-mobilisation, actively aided by insular public institutional structures, promoting globalisation and neoliberal reforms and worsening socio-economic conditions for large sections of society’.<sup>70</sup> He maintains that violence is now endemic in the state system and is no longer used just against the Maoists but has extended to all forms of protest politics

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., pp. 113–148.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., pp. 102–112.

<sup>68</sup> Gudavarthy, A. (2014). *Maoism, Democracy and Globalisation: cross-currents in Indian politics*. New Delhi: Sage Publications India.

<sup>69</sup> Chandhoke, *Democracy and Revolutionary Politics* and Navlakha, *War and Politics*.

<sup>70</sup> Gudavarthy, *Maoism, Democracy and Globalisation*, pp. 1–2.

over the last two decades, and that the state's response to even non-violent protest politics has been largely through its 'coercive apparatus' through a policy of 'exceptionalism'. The latter has 'included the combination of use of extraordinary laws such as the TADA, POTA, AFSPA, and Sedition Laws, among many others, with extra-judicial killings, torture and cases of disappearance, custodial deaths and even sexual violence by the armed forces'.<sup>71</sup> Gudavarthy thus characterizes India as a 'violent democracy'.

In this context, Gudavarthy argues that the Maoist movement has 'waged a relentless battle in favour of some of the most dispossessed "basic classes", including the landless, Dalits, rural poor, workers and Adivasis, and questioned the very nature of the economic model of development and political model of governance'. However, his overall critique is that the Maoist movement has fought this battle through a relatively singular focus on armed violence.<sup>72</sup>

Preparing the ground for his critique of the movement, Gudavarthy accuses the movement of 'statisation' and of becoming a political elite that regards public criticism with contempt and suspicion. He warns that the very structures underpinning India's violent democracy can be reproduced in social movements and therefore calls for the Maoists to welcome public criticism and critical engagement, rather than just demand loyalty and moralization; adopt a new organizational culture other than hierarchy; and value political analysis and not just literary expressions.<sup>73</sup>

Gudavarthy argues that the movement has struggled to implement their idea of the United Front (a point also made earlier by Navlakha in *Days and Nights in the Heartland of Rebellion*: see the next section of this article) and urges them to reorient themselves ideologically, strategically, and organizationally to the realities in the plains or cities where they themselves admit that they have made little headway. The problem, he pinpoints, is that the movement is too worried about diluting its core focus on armed struggle, and the will to take up arms has become 'the final and the most authentic litmus test'<sup>74</sup> in how the Maoists define themselves in relation to other political movements— such as the anti-corruption movement of Anna Hazare. Like Navlakha, Gudavarthy says that this focus on arms results in a tension within the Maoist strategy because, while they recognize these other political movements to be democratic and progressive, they also struggle to form alliances with them.<sup>75</sup> Although he is equally critical of the new political movements of the middle-classes, Gudavarthy opines that the Maoists need to adopt a 'new ideological orientation as much as new and creative modes of building new organisational culture'.<sup>76</sup> He suggests that urban Maoists need to have autonomy from the armed movement if such a culture and organization is to emerge.<sup>77</sup>

Though critical of the Maoist movement to varying degrees, what emerges clearly from this genre of literature written by political scientists and activist intellectuals, is the necessity for revolutionary violence—armed struggle—in the context of highly oppressive state regimes. What also emerges clearly from this literature is a strong critique of the Indian state, pointing

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., pp. 8–9.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

out how its violence, predation, and coercion have threatened the very nature of Indian democracy, thereby creating the legitimacy and space for the Naxalite revolutionary violence.

### **Eyewitnessing days and nights in the heart of the rebellion<sup>78</sup>**

If the aim of the literature covered thus far has been to impart a strong understanding of the problems of the Indian state and a philosophical basis for the legitimacy of revolutionary violence, what is strikingly absent from it is any first-hand research by the authors into the spread of the Maoist movement in central and eastern India (Navlakha is an exception, as this section will show). Those who bring us closest to a flavour of what life may be like in the rebel heartlands are in fact journalists and activists, and as the next section will show, a handful of sociologists and anthropologists.

In 2009–2010, the CPI(Maoist) welcomed a number of activists and journalists into the guerrilla zone in the Dandakaranya region of Bastar, Chhattisgarh. Given that much of India's ideological space was full of voices opposed to the movement, the Naxalites actively tried to fill the information void around them. The 'exposure visits' made by the journalists and activists were intended to show broader sections of Indian and international mass audiences the deeply exploitative and squalid conditions in which the Maoist movement had grounded itself, the movement's goals, and its history.

The Naxalites were finally undertaking the kind of public relations that other revolutionary struggles had paid much greater attention to. Most notable perhaps is the Zapatista movement in the Lacandon Forest of the Chiapas in Mexico which actively nurtured literature that focused on themselves, and were very savvy about the number of intellectuals and activists they invited into the Zapatista-controlled areas and the terms and conditions of their writing. The result was a vast number of books focusing on the romance of the insurgency, made even easier to research and publish when the Zapatistas gave up their struggle for total social transformation and focused on autonomy for their territories, thereby becoming less of a threat to the Mexican state. The Maoists were able to nurture such literature for only a very brief period, after which intense state repression has made it extremely difficult for anyone to attempt any first-hand research among them.

These journalist and activist visits to the Naxalite strongholds were generally short (ranging from ten days to several visits of a few days each over the course of a few months) and the books were written fast—almost as if they were racing to be the first eyewitness account of the hidden heart of India. These include titles by journalists, Rahul Pandita and Shubranshu Choudhary, and activists, Arundhati Roy, Gautam Navlakha, and Jan Myrdal.<sup>79</sup> Satnam's much earlier travels in 2002 (before the unification of the parties into the CPI(Maoist)) to these same areas of Dandakaranya to live with the rebel armies of the People's War Group were translated and published as *Junglenama*.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Days and nights in the heart of the rebellion' is taken from Navlakha, G. (2012). *Days and Nights in the Heartland of Rebellion*. New Delhi: Penguin.

<sup>79</sup> Pandita, R. (2011). *Hello Bastar: the untold story of India's Maoist movement*. Manipal: Tranquebar Press. Choudhary, S. (2012). *Let's Call Him Vasu*. New Delhi: Penguin. Roy, A. (2011). *Broken Republic*. New Delhi: Hamish Hamilton. Navlakha, *Days and Nights*. Myrdal, J. (1986). *India Waits*. Chicago: Lake View Press.

<sup>80</sup> Satnam, (2010). *Jangalnama: travels in a Maoist guerrilla zone*. (V. Bharti, trans.). New Delhi: Penguin. Sudeep Chakravarti also made another attempt, in 2007, though he did not make it to the guerrilla heartlands to meet the rebel armies or their leadership; see Chakravarti, S. (2007). *Red Sun: travels in Naxalite country*. New Delhi: Penguin.



These books are presented as journeys and come from very different perspectives on the Maoists, and at some level all of them are attracted by the romance of revolution. Their virtue is that they make the guerrilla landscape come alive and humanize a movement that is otherwise talked about in abstractions or using the language of terrorism. However, the visits were highly monitored and organized by the Maoist leadership and there was no possibility for deep, sustained engagement with the Adivasis outside of the context of the rebel armies. So although we get a strong flavour of the landscape and daily life in the guerrilla armies, as well as a clearer idea of what the Naxal leadership wishes to show the outside world, what these books cannot do—although some purport to—is give us an analysis of what everyday life is like for Adivasis in these areas, the multiple reasons why the Adivasis might join the rebel armies, and the intimacy, frictions, and contradictions that have developed between the Adivasis and the Naxalites.<sup>81</sup>

The journalists, Pandita and Choudhary, present travelogues into Naxalite strongholds that are pitched at urban, English-speaking, upper middle-class Indians for whom the forests in the centre and the east of the country are a black void, a world imagined as *jungli*, as wild and savage. They seek to answer some basic questions for this audience. Who comprises the Maoist leaders and cadres? What is their alternate vision of development? How do they continue to exert a powerful influence on Adivasis, Dalits, and the disenfranchised?

Although sympathetic to the plight of the Adivasis, and offering critical praise to the Maoists for filling the development gaps left by the Indian state, both authors firmly distance themselves from the aims and objectives of the Maoist movement itself. Choudhary regards the ideological framework proffered by the Maoist leadership as ‘convoluted spiel’,<sup>82</sup> while Pandita offers no significant account nor assessment of it at all (although his perspective is summed up by the name of his book, *Hello Bastar*, which is a play on the song ‘Hello Vietnam’ that opened the film *Full Metal Jacket*, written about the American war in Vietnam by the anti-communist, Johnny Wright).<sup>83</sup> Though Pandita does not support the war launched by the Indian state on the Maoists, he is also not in favour of the Maoist’s protracted people’s war. Indeed, both journalists present a disjuncture between a high-caste leadership and Adivasi foot soldiers, and both believe that the armed movement could be ended if the miserable conditions of Adivasi life were ameliorated. Both argue that, apart from the high-caste leadership, the majority of the cadres are not concerned with revolutionary goals such as the overthrow of the national government. As such both Pandita and Choudhary broadly adhere to what political science literature refers to as the ‘grievance’ theory of conflict—that it is inequality, weak institutions, poverty, and lack of social services that are the root causes of conflicts.

The accounts of the activists—Gautam Navlakha, Jan Myrdal, and Arundhati Roy—invited by the movement into the forests of Bastar, all in the space of a few months in early 2010, are, in contrast, much more sympathetic to the Maoists than their journalist counterparts. The emphasis here is different—rather than arguing that Adivasis are caught up in a war between the Maoists and the Indian state, these accounts stress that the Indian state is waging a war against the people of India, under the guise of a Maoist threat. They all argue that the lower classes, lower castes, and Adivasis have been economically, politically, and socially

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<sup>81</sup> Shah, A. (2013a). ‘The intimacy of insurgency: beyond coercion, greed or grievance in Maoist India’, *Economy and Society*, 42(3), pp. 480–506.

<sup>82</sup> Choudhary, *Let’s Call Him Vasu*, pp. 59–60.

<sup>83</sup> Pandita, *Hello Bastar*.

deprived, and they do not believe that the Indian state has any interest in redressing their situation. Thus they all broadly ascribe to the belief that the Maoist movement challenges the nature of the Indian state and, in particular, demands an alternative, people-oriented forms of governance and economic development.

Navlakha and Myrdal undertook their tour of Dandakaranya together in January 2010, laying the ground for Roy to follow in their footsteps a few weeks later. The books are all fascinating, as much for what they say about their authors and the nature of their tours as they are for their content.

Myrdal ends his 1980s book, *India Waits*, with a vision of a Maoist-inspired revolution, signalling the existence of today's Maoist movement. The Maoists invited him to serve as a kind of Edgar Snow figure of the contemporary movement.<sup>84</sup> Myrdal's nod to Snow is clearly seen in the title of his book, *Red Star Over India*, channelling Snow's classic text about the Chinese revolution, *Red Star Over China*.<sup>85</sup> Then aged 83, Myrdal had the kind of international track record that, perhaps, the Maoists hoped would make their struggle known to the wider world. He has some stature in the international communist movement, was a central European figure in speaking out against the Vietnam War, and has written several books about the continued support for Mao and the Cultural Revolution in China.

Myrdal tries to replicate Snow's narrative structure and style through his interview with the current general secretary of the Communist Party of India (Maoist), Muppala Lakshmana Rao, alias 'Ganapathy', and the party documents he read. Much of the book, though, becomes a meandering journey through international communist history, Myrdal's reminiscences, the current situation in India, and the trip that he made with Gautam Navlakha. In itself the trip was clearly far too short to give Myrdal the kind of depth of understanding that Snow had of the Chinese situation. The book was published by a very small Indian publisher and was therefore only available to a very limited audience; ultimately did not succeed in its mission to introduce the Maoist movement to an international audience.

Where Myrdal failed in attracting international attention for the movement, Arundhati Roy, a Booker Prize winning author who had earlier turned her attention to Adivasi activism in the Save the Narmada Campaign, succeeded. Roy's book was initially published as three essays in the Indian magazine, *Outlook*, and soon after as a book entitled *Broken Republic*, before it was remarketed as *Walking with the Comrades*.<sup>86</sup> One of its three essays is based on Roy's ten-day tour of the guerrilla areas of Bastar, following on from Navlakha and Myrdal's visit. Roy's prose is characteristically sharp, the narrative powerful, the text full of irony, and the overall book is damning of the connections between the interests of large corporations, the Indian government, and police brutality. She does, though, re-inscribe the Maoist movement and its goals within a discourse of indigeneity. She suggests that the Maoist movement is in fact an Adivasi movement, effectively evacuating the Maoist movement of its history of class struggle, its goals, its structures, its leadership, and so on, in favour of a vision of a spontaneous uprising of Adivasis in a struggle against the collapse of their societies.<sup>87</sup> Thus, while Myrdal grounds the Maoist movement's history too neatly within the history of the international communist movement, Roy erases it.

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<sup>84</sup> Myrdal, *India Waits*.

<sup>85</sup> Myrdal, J. (2012). *Red Star Over India: as the wretched of the earth are rising. Impressions, reflections and preliminary inferences*. Kolkata: Setu Prakashani.

<sup>86</sup> Roy, *Broken Republic*.

<sup>87</sup> Shah, A. (2012). 'Eco-incarceration: walking with the comrades', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 47(21), pp. 32–34.

While Myrdal and Roy's books end up being more about the authors' visions than the Naxalite movement in the forests of central India, of all the 'eyewitness' accounts, it is perhaps from Navlakha's *Days and Nights in the Heartland of Rebellion* that we learn most about the war in the Adivasi areas of Bastar.<sup>88</sup> The book is in three parts. In the first Navlakha asks the question: why did the Maoists become such a threat to the Indian state? He establishes the connection with the state's need to cleanse the mineral-rich areas of central India for land grabs by the corporate sector, suggesting that the actual threat of Maoists grabbing state power was negligible. The middle sections of the book seek to show what Navlakha learned while he was in Dandakaranya. This includes the large number of women involved, life in the movement (taking turns to do different chores, from sentry duty to cooking; the importance of study; the films the guerrillas watched; their attitudes to alcohol and smoking), their rules around killing, and their reflections on mistakes. The final section discusses wider issues regarding violence and the challenges and prospects faced by the movement. Written and published against the backdrop of Operation Green Hunt, his overarching agenda was to humanize the movement, to provide a true account of what was going on in central India. For, as Navlakha reminds us, 'truth is the first casualty of war'.

Navlakha's book is written from the perspective of someone deeply enmeshed in the situation in which this war is occurring and the democratic rights movement that is combatting it. He is thus deeply conversant with the different acts and laws that are effected and govern the war, and the contradictions within the political practice of the Indian government and Maoists alike. Even the formal structure of the book reflects this: whereas others have written travelogues, Navlakha has written a report which relies on a deep knowledge of the historical conjuncture in which the war is taking place. On the one hand, we find the development of a state of exception on the part of the repressive state apparatuses themselves: the myth of the politics of development and the necessity of the process of primitive accumulation of mineral deposits found in Adivasi areas sustain this so-called development. On the other hand, there is the history of the Indian Maoist movement and communist movement in general. This knowledge shapes both his eyewitness account of the guerrilla zone and his interviews with various party members and People's Liberation Guerilla Army soldiers about the different aspects of Maoist modality, including a discussion about the functioning of the Maoist state, the role of women, and even economic and agricultural planning. But what truly differentiates Navlakha's book from the other eyewitness accounts is his critique of the Maoist movement from the perspective of a critically sympathetic person situated within the democratic rights movement.

Navlakha makes it clear that he is supportive of the Maoists and their message but has differences with the movement as well.<sup>89</sup> Among a number of criticisms, he points to the dangers of a sole focus on revolutionary violence. Here Navlakha is laying the seeds of the arguments that he later develops as a full-length book (*War and Politics*, discussed earlier). Navlakha notes that, 'It cannot be denied that violent resistance has and will continue to play an emancipatory and empowering role' and that the violence of the Maoist movement is outweighed by the violence of Indian society.<sup>90</sup> However, he argues that if the Maoists want to cease simply being catalysts for state reform, they must rethink their strategy and reorient themselves towards the broader mass movements and build wider alliances (a point taken up

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<sup>88</sup> Navlakha, *Days and Nights*.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 189.

later by Gudavarthy).<sup>91</sup> While acknowledging that the parliamentary left cannot serve as an adequate alternative, Navlakha clearly states:

*... there are several fault lines in the Maoist movement, which threaten them with isolation and obstruct them from spreading and winning over the sections of people, a fundamental requirement for their movement to grow robust. Two major failings stare at them: first they are weak politically and second they display a woeful lack of respect for those who differ with them.*<sup>92</sup>

Navlakha issues a dire warning to the Maoists: if they do not fix these problems ‘all can get nullified and all the patriots who dream of the emancipation of our people from the scourge of exploitation and oppression would become much poorer’.<sup>93</sup>

Though some of the other books are better written, edited, and marketed, it is from Navlakha that we learn the most about the tensions and contradictions within the guerrilla armies of central and eastern India. All of these ‘eyewitness’ accounts give us a flavour of life in the rebel armies and have gone a long way into humanizing a movement that the dominant media accounts only ever present by pointing fingers at its acts of terror. However, what none of them does is give us an understanding of the complexity of the Adivasi communities of central and eastern India, and how and why they have become involved with the Naxalites. Too often the sociological analysis of the caste hierarchies of the plains is superimposed onto the Adivasi communities of the hills. And just as too often the high-caste Naxalite leadership transferred caste-based assumptions from the agricultural plains to the Adivasi communities, many of these authors assume that the sociology of the agricultural plains and the Adivasi forested hills are the same. What is difficult to understand from these books is whether the authors are reporting the comrades’ well-rehearsed answers to the outsider’s questions, their own perspectives on the matter, or the ‘truth’ that they seek.

For instance, Adivasi authority is almost universally vilified in these accounts. It is assumed that their chiefs are the same as the landlords of the plains and eliminating them is seen as one of the achievements of the Maoists in these areas. But we know from the work of anthropologists that ideas of leadership and authority in Adivasi areas can work on highly democratic premises, are vastly different from the societies of the plains, and do not necessarily involve an accumulation of property.<sup>94</sup> Perhaps even more problematic is the assumption that one of the reasons why Adivasi women join the Naxalite armies is in reaction to the patriarchy within their communities. But those who have lived among the Adivasi communities in the hilly forests of central and eastern India have noted how they are much more egalitarian in terms of gender than the societies of the plains,<sup>95</sup> and perhaps even more so than the Naxalite armies themselves. (A strong gender critique of the movement emerges in the next section.)

This is not to say that, for the careful reader, there are not insights into the lives of the Adivasis and into the tensions and contradictions with the Naxalites to be found between the

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<sup>91</sup> Gudavarthy, *Maoism, Democracy and Globalisation*.

<sup>92</sup> Navlakha, *Days and Nights*, pp. 220–221; also later taken up by Gudavarthy, *Maoism, Democracy and Globalisation*.

<sup>93</sup> Navlakha, *Days and Nights*, p. 225.

<sup>94</sup> Shah, A. (2010a). *In the Shadows of the State: indigenous politics, environmentalism and insurgency in Jharkhand, India*. Durham, North Carolina, and London: Duke University Press. Shah, A. (2013b) ‘The tensions over liberal citizenship in a Marxist revolutionary situation: the Maoists in India’, *Critique of Anthropology*, 33(1), pp. 91–109.

<sup>95</sup> Shah, ‘The tensions over liberal citizenship’. Shah, A. (2010b) ‘Alcoholics Anonymous: the Maoist movement in Jharkhand, India’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 45(5), pp. 1095–1117.

lines of most of these books. For instance, Choudhary is very attuned to differences both within and between different Adivasi communities, and explores the tensions between the Koyas and the Dorlas, and how they have become differentially involved in the movement. Navlakha makes perceptive remarks about the tensions between the Maoist attempts at collective agriculture and the Adivasis persisting with their practices of shifting cultivation. The problem is one of time and perspective. The books are based only on ‘days and nights in the heart of the rebellion’; the authors invested no time in immersing themselves in the Adivasi communities, on trying to understand them and their histories, outside the official tours offered by the Naxalites and the authors’ own imaginations. That would have required much deeper sustained first-hand field research and analysis.

### **Empirically researched analysis**

Of the more empirically researched scholarly texts on the Naxalites that have come out in recent years, three monographs stand out. Two focus exclusively on gender and the third on Dalits.

Srila Roy’s *Remembering Revolution* and Mallarika Sinha Roy’s *Gender and Radical Politics in India*<sup>96</sup> both seek to place centre stage women who joined the Naxalite struggle in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and what their experience may reveal about revolutionary violence and politics. Both books focus on research done in West Bengal, and rely on multiple sources, including the personal narratives of women who once were a part of the Naxalite struggle and who were interviewed by the authors, some women’s published autobiographies, and cinematic and literary sources. Both books highlight what Sinha Roy has called the ‘magic moments of Naxalbari’ — the liberation women experienced in participating in the movement and their idealization of it. Ultimately what emerges is an important critique of the gender and sexual politics of a movement that is as intimately tied to the ‘declassing’ of urban, middle-class male activists bound up with refashioning masculinity through self-control and suppressing sexual desire, as it is with the neglect of the specific needs of women in the movement. Srila Roy shows particularly sharply that, ‘the party became the social consciousness of the collective, substituting for parental authority and mimicking middle-class morality in the underground’.<sup>97</sup> The result is that although the Naxalites are fighting for exceptional political causes, including Dalit and Adivasi women’s oppression, and many middle-class women joined it because of the potential for liberation from bourgeois family life, in the everyday life of the movement the patriarchal morality of upper caste, middle-class India was being reproduced.

The hierarchies of caste, class, and gender that thus resurfaced within the movement meant not only that women were more often than not confined to supporting roles through the stereotyping of their roles as mothers, wives, and widows, but also that sexual violence and other forms of women’s oppression within the movement were often ignored. For some

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<sup>96</sup> Roy, S. (2012). *Remembering Revolution: gender, violence, and subjectivity in India’s Naxalbari movement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; and Roy, M. S. (2011). *Gender and Radical Politics in India: magic moments of Naxalbari (1967–1975)*. Abingdon: Routledge.

<sup>97</sup> Roy, *Remembering Revolution*, p. 109.

women, over time, the violence of the state receded into the background because of the violence of the patriarchy they faced within the movement.

Of course, focusing on memories comes with its own pitfalls and Srila Roy, in particular, is acutely aware of the problems of representation and of reading against the grain in the interviews she conducted. Mallarika Sinha Roy's book includes a few transcripts of interviews, which other scholars may read.<sup>98</sup> Together they both contribute to an important gap in analysis of the Naxalite movement through their focus on women and in revealing the central role that patriarchy plays within such revolutionary movements.

Despite the strengths of the two books, there remains the need for much more work. As ambitious as they are, in neither book do we get a broader analysis of whether or not the women who joined and participated in the movement accepted gender oppression for the sake of the 'bigger cause'; what the relative differences may have been between gender oppression within and outside the movement; what these women's present perspectives are on the need for revolutionary movements to place women centre stage; and whether and how these women's collective experiences have led to a gender critique and changes within the movement. (We know from the essays of Anuradha Ghandy—discussed in the last section of this review—that there were activists, like her, who tried to fight patriarchy from within).<sup>99</sup> Above all, what is missing is an in-depth analysis of the gender, class, and caste dimensions of the different kinds of women who are members of the movement, in particular the experiences of the many Dalit and Adivasi women who joined and how their stories relate to those of middle-class women, and, indeed, how participation may have enabled social mobility for some women and, accompanied by this, an increase in patriarchy. But for this, interviews and oral histories are not sufficient and need to be supplemented by more ethnographic research that will enable one to analyse the differences between what people say and what they do.

If Roy and Roy present a nuanced account of gender relations in the early Naxalite movement, George Kunnath's *Rebels from the Mud Houses* gives us a rare analysis of the relationship between the Dalits and the Naxalites in the plains of Bihar in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>100</sup> Based on extensive ethnographic research conducted while living in a Dalit colony in a village in Jehanabad district that was once the heart of the activities of CPI(Marxist-Leninist) [Party Unity] (a precursor to the CPI(Maoist)), Kunnath's book recounts the Dalits' experience of the spread of the Naxalites in the decade before his field research. In a highly feudal context, Kunnath argues that Dalits supported the Maoists not because of an absence of education or health facilities but because of the dignity they afforded in the face of extreme caste violence. As a result of Maoist activities, the lower castes were now able to hold their heads up high in front of higher caste landlords.

However, in areas like Bihar, where the movement has been influential since at least the early 1980s, Kunnath shows us how things have changed over time. Importantly, he points out that in the 1990s, these Naxalites in Bihar shifted their emphasis from mobilizing landless Dalits to uniting the middle peasants by addressing the latter's demands for government subsidies

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<sup>98</sup> Roy, *Gender and Radical Politics in India*.

<sup>99</sup> Ghandy, A. (2011). *Scripting the Change: selected writings of Anuradha Ghandy*. Delhi: Daanish Books.

<sup>100</sup> Kunnath, G. J. (2012). *Rebels from the Mud Houses: Dalits and the making of the Maoist revolution in Bihar*. Delhi: Social Science Press.

and remission of rents, as well as protecting them from the demands of the classes below them. Unsurprisingly, the Dalits in Jehanabad district of Bihar were suspicious of the Maoist alliance with the middle peasantry, and the basic contradiction between the landed Kurmis (the middle peasantry) and the landless Dalits was never resolved. Ultimately, the Dalits were alienated from the movement in the 1990s, and in the village where Kunnath conducted fieldwork they ceased participating in the armed squads, turning instead to religious sects. Kunnath thus shows us, backed by field evidence, the difficulties of forming the wider class alliances that several authors have urged the Maoists to engage in; in this case it resulted in the alienation of the very people who most needed the movement to represent them.

Reflecting the concerns of some of the other scholars, Kunnath shows an ‘uneasy marriage’ between Maoist mass mobilization and armed action. The 1980s mobilization of Dalits in Bihar was accomplished through Maoist mass fronts, in particular the Mazdoor Kisan Sangram Samiti, whereas the 1990s saw a shrinking of the space for mass mobilization and an increasing reliance on armed actions. Such shifts in Maoist policy and practice are noted to have had a lasting, negative impact at the local level. But Kunnath does not suggest that the armed struggle should be dropped: armed action continued to be crucial to Dalit needs as they were necessary for their protection from middle and upper caste peasants. The key issue for Dalits was not the shift from mass mobilization to armed action but the fact that this shift resulted in the decline of a mass politics and the replacement of Dalits’ needs with those of the middle peasantry.

The central arguments of Kunnath’s *Rebels from the Mud Houses* are highlighted in his essay in the collection of ethnographic writings edited by Alpa Shah and Judith Pettigrew, *Windows into a Revolution*.<sup>101</sup> This collection of essays is unique for its consideration of the Indian and Nepali Maoists in one frame, for the in-depth insights they provide into everyday life in areas affected by the Maoists, and, as with the best ethnographic research, they give us new perspectives that we might not otherwise have foreseen.

For instance, several essays provide us with a better understanding of the activists who went underground in the early days of the Naxalites. Henrike Donner’s chapter gives us a feel for the friendship and ideas of the self and masculinity that were cultivated among the activists in the 1970s. Donner argues that rather than reproducing the Gandhian ideal of an activist who is deeply embedded in domestic relationships and hierarchies, the ruptured kinship relations formed as a result of joining the movement created a space for rethinking relationships. In the new context, idioms of reciprocity, exchange, friendship, and egalitarian values between men emerged to challenge hegemonic concepts of masculinity. This chapter is complemented by Sumanta Banerjee’s uncharacteristically biographical ‘Reflections of a one time activist’.<sup>102</sup> Born into a Calcutta communist family, Banerjee found himself drawn to the Naxalite movement while working as a journalist for *The Statesman* in the late 1960s, and eventually joined its cadres in 1973, going underground. Though once a part of the movement, Banerjee’s increasing personal distance from it is also reflected in his analysis of the Maoists.

These chapters about the early Naxalites are complemented by first-hand, long-term ethnographic research in today’s Adivasi rebel areas. For instance, Shah’s chapter, set in rural

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<sup>101</sup> Shah, A. and Pettigrew, J. (eds) (2012). *Windows into a Revolution: ethnographies of Maoism in India and Nepal*. Delhi: Social Science Press. These were first published in 2009 by Dialectical Anthropology.

<sup>102</sup> Banerjee’s chapter. This was later also republished as part of Jeffery, Sen and Singh, *More than Maoism*.

Jharkhand, explores one person's dilemma in their search for certainty in the context of the movement's expansion, and the uncertainty that is created in the shifting lines of funding and territorial control between the state and the shadow state. Set in the forested areas of eastern Maharashtra bordering Chhattisgarh, Amit Desai's chapter shows how the presence of the Maoists has ironically resulted in a police response that aids the agenda of the extreme right. And Jason Miklian charts the rise of Salwa Judum and Adivasi Special Police Officers in Chhattisgarh.

What we have here are refreshing and unique insights gained through first-hand field research that enable us to understand much better the impact and spread of the Naxalite movement as well as its nuances and contradictions, an understanding which take us beyond armchair condemnations, reflections, and speculations.

Although not focusing on the Naxalites but on the impact of the civil war on Adivasis in Bastar, Central India, equally insightful is Nandini Sundar's *The Burning Forest*.<sup>103</sup> Although Sundar has previously known the area through ethno-historical research, this book is based on her field visits as an activist, which led to a public interest litigation in the Supreme Court to ban the Salwa Judum, as well as disbanding the appointment of young (mainly Adivasi) men as Special Police Officers. The book's focus is on Adivasis caught in the midst of the armed conflict and powerfully documents the severe human rights abuses taking place at the behest of the state security forces and their private armies: the forced displacement of Adivasis into desolate camps, the rape of women by the security forces, the government's use of starvation and denial of basic services (such as transportation of rice) as a weapon of control over the people, the burning of villages, and the forced surrender of villagers who were then conscripted as police informers and armed as Special Police Officers. Despite the detailed documentation of gross abuses of human rights and the failure of electoral democracy to stem these abuses in these remote parts of India, Sundar keeps open the possibility of hope for accountability and the rule of law.

## Novels

The initial Naxalbari struggles of the 1970s that once inspired filmmakers and novelists<sup>104</sup> have in recent years once again captured the imagination of award-winning, international authors. The Booker Prize shortlisted novels for 2014 and 2013 included two novels whose central characters are urban, middle-class Naxalites in the 1970s. The first was Jhumpa Lahiri's *Lowlands* and the second, Neel Mukherjee's *Lives of Others*.<sup>105</sup> Interestingly, in both novels the central Naxalite characters are more or less absent from the novels' present timelines. Both books are more focused on the characters' families than on their participation in the movement itself. Both are set within a Calcutta-based Bengali middle-class family—one in Tolygunge (Lahiri), the other in Bhowanipore (Mukherjee).

Lahiri's novel centres on two brothers and the woman they both marry. One brother, Udayan, joins the Naxalites and marries Gauri, a girl he meets through the movement. The other, Subhash, leaves India for Rhode Island in the United States to study for a PhD, but returns to

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<sup>103</sup> Sundar, *The Burning Forest*. We are only able to offer a brief summary here, as this book was published after our article went to press.

<sup>104</sup> Basu, P. (ed.) (2011). *Red on Silver: Naxalites in cinema*. Kolkata: Setu Prakashani.

<sup>105</sup> Lahiri, J. (2013). *The Lowland*. London: Bloomsbury. Mukherjee, N. (2014). *The Lives of Others*. London: Chatto and Windus.



Calcutta when he hears about his brother's murder by the police for allegedly killing a policeman. Subhash then marries Udayan's widowed pregnant wife. The bulk of the novel is set in the United States and focuses on the relationship between Subhash, Gauri, and her daughter, Bela. Their relationship is haunted by the dead Naxalite brother/husband and the effects of Gauri's early activism. The events of the book serve as a metaphor for the idea that Naxalites only kill. The Naxalites were not only responsible for the death of her first husband but also of Gauri herself, for she is unable to feel any emotional attachments and in the end she leaves both her husband and her daughter.

Mukherjee's novel is about a Bengali middle-class family whose protagonist, Supratik, joins the Naxalites. It is a masterpiece of description and analysis of a particular kind of Bengali family life: the head of the household is a businessman who owns several paper mills; there is a daughter who cannot find a husband because she is dark-skinned; several sons, one of whom delights in perverse sexual activities; servants, and so on. Supratik, the grandson of the eldest child, leaves to join the Naxalites. Each chapter concerning the family is punctuated by letters he writes to a widowed aunt (with whom he is in love) about his experience as a Naxalite activist and life in the rural areas where he is mobilizing peasants.

In both novels, the Naxalites form a foil for what are ultimately stories about the crises experienced by Bengali middle-class families, although they are perhaps represented with greater sensitivity by Mukherjee than in Lahiri's novel. Lahiri gives us no insight into the political motivations of the Naxalite movement, and we have no understanding of the wider social context which compels Udayan to join the movement. How and why did so many 'Udayans' break away from general middle-class indifference to fight for the cause of the poor?

Mukherjee is more sensitive to the political appeal of the movement for urban, middle-class youth. He focuses on the contradictions and contrasts Supratik faces between the wealth of his household and the poverty of those he lives among as a Naxalite. Ultimately, though, Supratik's lasting gift to the movement is the making of landmines. The book ends with present-day Maoists setting up a landmine under a train in Jharkhand in what is represented as a terrorist attack. As Amitav Ghosh argues in his review of the book, 'what Neel chooses to celebrate about Supratik's life is not the transmission of a spirit of resistance—something that is more than ever necessary at a time when the environment and the poor are being subjected to devastating violence in the name of "growth"—but rather a particular means of resisting: in this instance a technique of mass murder'.<sup>106</sup> Ghosh calls the movement a 'cult of ritualistic killing'—a damning critique of the movement and one that indeed is close to Lahiri's position.

Ghosh also concludes that the basic premise of Mukherjee's book is that 'the urban student radicalism of that time was in large part a response to the stifling repressiveness of Bengali family life'. He argues that it reflects Rabindra Ray's central message that 'the radicalism of the urban college-going Naxalite was often a response to the 'disjunction between enlightenment in public life and orthodoxy in private'. But perhaps what Ghosh does not take due account of is that the steep hierarchies of Indian society against which the Naxalites are

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<sup>106</sup> Ghosh, A. (2014). 'Neel Mukherjee's *The Lives of Others*: a review'. Retrieved from <http://amitavghosh.com/blog/?p=6400>, [accessed 31 March 2017].

reacting are not just out there in some kind of abstract ‘public life’ but seep into everyday life and especially into the very nature and structure of the family. The stifling repressiveness of middle-class, upper caste family life is itself a reflection of the broader caste and class hierarchies of Indian society, and any movement of social transformation must have at its heart a project of transformation of the family unit. In Lahiri’s book *Gauri* is suspended in a perpetual limbo of an unrealized transformation of family life, which is why her story of isolation and detachment is so tragic and why she is so captivated by suicide. It is perceptive, on Lahiri’s part, that the daughter of the Naxalite becomes an eco-warrior and is depicted as being more proletarian than her parents.

Notwithstanding the virtues of depicting Bengali family life and its contradictions, both Lahiri and Mukherjee’s books are aimed at a liberal readership who would like to see such a movement as extremist. What is significantly missing in both of these novels (though Mukherjee offers a rich description of the plight of the poor) is any deep analysis or understanding of how the Naxalites have attracted so many peasants and Adivasis into their movement and the complexities, nuances, and contradictions that have played out in their lives as a result of this movement.

### **The stories from within**

Perhaps the books that to some extent will determine the shape of future research are those that are emerging from the movement itself or from those working on its fringes. These are fascinating—for the issues they address, the analysis they wish to provide, and the evidence they use to this end. But perhaps, above all, their importance will lie in the fact that they are also, in the long run, historical artefacts that document the continuities and changes of the movement and the experiences and thoughts of the people within it.

First, there are the analyses of intellectuals in the movement whose primary audience was often the movement itself. Perhaps the best example is the essays of Anuradha Ghandy, one of the most remarkable female leaders of the Naxalites. Published posthumously by Anand Teltumbde and Shoma Sen, the first two parts of the book are an insight into, among other issues, the challenges of the theory and praxis on caste and gender within a Marxist-Leninist class struggle in India. The third part is an eclectic collection of the various public political interventions of a Maoist activist in some of the important issues facing the Indian poor, ranging from changes in labour laws, the difficulties of mobilizing contract labourers to deaths in police custody, published most often in the pages of *Economic and Political Weekly*.<sup>107</sup>

Anuradha Ghandy died in 2008 of malaria she contracted in Jharkhand. She was from a well-to-do family, had been a student at the prestigious Elphinstone College in Mumbai, and had held a position as a lecturer in Wilson College in the same city. By 1982, she had moved to Nagpur where she began working among construction workers, coalminers, and towards understanding the Dalit movement. In the late 1990s, with increased state repression in the cities, her journey took her closer to the rebel heart of India—the forests at the centre of the country. When she died she was 54 years old, had been underground for at least 30 years, and was leading the Nari Mukti Sangh (the Women’s Liberation Front) of the Naxalites.

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<sup>107</sup> Ghandy, *Scripting the Change*.

The first two sections of her book contain essays that reflect on caste and gender. In her foreword to Ghandy's essays, Arundhati Roy writes that it is difficult to know how to read these writings and concludes that they must be seen as notes to Ghandy herself. Undoubtedly they are, to some extent, but above all they are notes for her comrades, perhaps especially her argument that caste and gender ought to be central to the class struggle and not, as has happened all too often, left out. The essays contain sweeping (across both time and space) reviews of the literature on caste and gender, placing in the centre the perspective of someone concerned with the revolutionary transformation of society. The essays on gender, for instance, analyse the perspectives of a liberal activist, radical feminist, anarcho-feminist, eco-feminist, feminist autonomist, to ultimately presenting the case for the importance of Marxism-Leninism. These essays leave a remarkable footprint of an intellectual engaged in a political struggle every step of the way, documenting both the revolutionary struggle but also the movement's internal battles.

In the years to come, we will hopefully see the publication of more of such analysis from within. However, security concerns and the emphasis within the movement on decentring the ego mean that it is unlikely that these would be published from the contemporary forests or prisons. It is usually only when someone dies that the concern for de-emphasizing the self, with being egocentric, falls away. In fact, after death, to focus on the individual is to also resurrect the martyr for the revolution.

Indeed, a collection of Azad's writings, similar to those of Ghandy, was published by his friends after his death in 2010. As with an earlier book on the martyred Central Committee leader, Naveen Babu, the tributes by Azad's friends provide a fascinating insight into the sociology and remarkable character of the revolutionary leader.<sup>108</sup> Born in 1954 in Krishna district, Andhra Pradesh, Cherukuri Rajkumar (Azad) moved with his family to Hyderabad where he went to primary school. Like so many of the leaders of the CPI(Maoist) who came from the People's War Group, Rajkumar was born into a higher caste, middle-class family (his father had once been in the Indian armed forces) and was radicalized when he went to the Regional Engineering College in Warangal to study chemical engineering. He went on to pursue postgraduate studies in ore dressing at Andhra University in Vishakapatnam. At the Regional Engineering College, he was a member of the Radical Students Union and spent a few months in jail when he was 21 during Indira Gandhi's emergency in 1975. Five years later, he went fully underground and for the next 30 years, worked in different parts of the country, from Gujarat to Karnataka, becoming a key leader in guiding the peace talks of 2004. Within the movement, he was widely known as an important intellectual figure.

Unlike the first two parts of Ghandy's book, the essays edited by Azad's friends are primarily texts that had already appeared in the public domain because Azad was the Maoists' spokesperson. They therefore address an external audience, and range from correcting various misinformed positions on the Maoists in the public realm (such as a response to a special issue of *Economic and Political Weekly* on the Maoists which takes up central issues such as the criticisms of violence, the treatment of tribe and caste, the misconceptions of being 'caught between two armies') to commentary on the various stages of the Nepal movement, the Maoist position on peace talks, and a substantive interview he gave to the

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<sup>108</sup> Azad, (2010). *Maoists in India: writings and interviews*. Hyderabad: Friends of Azad. Babu, Y. N. (2008). *From Varna to Jati: political economy of caste in Indian social formation*. New Delhi: Daanish Books.

*Hindu*. Chillingly, they also contain two accounts of the killing of comrades who were brutally tortured and murdered by the police and then placed in a forest as if killed in an encounter (examples of India's infamous 'encounter killings'), as though Azad was foretelling the story of his own death several years later.

There are also a few books by those who have worked on the fringes of the movement, which have not been published posthumously, but by the authors themselves and provide important insights into the movement.<sup>109</sup> Venugopal's book, for instance, is aptly described by its subtitle, *Notes from a participant observer*, as it is literally a compilation of notes from someone who worked for years on the fringes of the movement in Andhra Pradesh, mainly through the Revolutionary Writer's Association (Virasam), once banned along with the Naxalites.<sup>110</sup> As well as a chapter on this banning, the book also includes published and unpublished essays (many for *Economic and Political Weekly*) that Venugopal categorized under five headings: Context, People's movements, Repression, Culture, and Departed friends. As is characteristic of much of the literature on the movement, they don't make up a coherent whole nor are they comprehensive, but for anyone interested in learning more about the history of the Andhra Pradesh-based Naxalites, they are crucial reading.

As with much of the political writings of anyone closely associated with the movement, it is what one reads against the grain of the text that is perhaps the most revealing. A case in point is the paper Venugopal prepared for a seminar, 'The Maoist analysis of agrarian transition in India',<sup>111</sup> for which he valiantly undertook to restudy two villages in Karimnagar district that were initially surveyed by the Radical Students Union of the Maoists in 1981. These then formed the basis of the Maoist analysis of semi-feudalism and semi-colonialism that guides their Maoist Protracted People's War strategy. The restudy evidence shows that much has changed since 1981 and that the agrarian transition to capitalism is well underway in these villages. But Venugopal cannot come to this conclusion as such, perhaps because his position on the fringes of the movement does not allow him to do so, as it would undermine the movement's own analysis. The research itself is not exhaustive nor 'impartial', but what is most interesting about it is that it was undertaken at all, what it reveals, and what Venugopal could not say about it.

As the collection proceeds, it becomes more explicitly political and includes a lot of information on the Andhra movement and its reception. Some of the most valuable parts are the documenting of the various people's struggles in Telengana and the Naxalites' involvement with them: Sikasa–Singareni coalminers, the Rhythu Collie Sangham, Tendu Leaf Labourers, the Revolutionary Writers' Association, the Radical Youth League, the

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<sup>109</sup> We include here only the books that directly address the movement. But for those interested in a wider literature that has been written as a result of the impact of the Naxalites on the authors' lives (though they don't say much about the Naxalites per se), the following work by one of India's most important civil rights activists and lawyers will be of interest: Balagopal, K. (2011). *Ear to the Ground: selected writings on class and caste*. New Delhi: Navayana Publishers. Also of interest is Sen, I. (2011). *Inside Chhattisgarh: a political memoir*. New Delhi: Penguin, which begins as an account of the police harassment the author's family faced following charges brought against her husband Binayak Sen, a doctor, for being a Naxalite.

<sup>110</sup> Venugopal, N. (2013). *Understanding Maoists: notes of a participant observer from Andhra Pradesh*. Kolkata, Delhi: Setu Prakashani. Venugopal now edits *Veekshanam*, a Telegu monthly journal, published from Hyderabad.

<sup>111</sup> This was prepared for a seminar convened in Oxford by Shah and Harriss-White. See the edited collection: Shah, A., Lerche, J. and Harriss-White, B. (2013). 'Agrarian questions and Left politics in India', *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 13(3), which brings together essays that provide an analysis of the Maoist political economy in relation to field-based evidence of agrarian change in India.

feminist movement, the Dalit movement, the Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee formation in 1973, and so on. These different struggles of the 1970s laid the foundation for the formation of the People's War in 1980 and have important lessons about the significance of mass struggle for the Naxalites today. Equally valuable are the documentation of fake encounters; attempts on various people's lives, including the revolutionary balladeer, Gaddar; and the cultural literature being produced underground. The obituaries are moving, and the two on Azad and Kishenji are extremely insightful for the information they provide, probably for the first time, on the lives of two important leaders of the movement of the last two decades.

Contributing to this genre are the historical accounts of the Naxalites from intellectuals who are close to the movement or were once part of it. The work that claims to present the most comprehensive critical history of the movement (from 1972–2014) is Amit Bhattacharya's *Storming the Gates of Heaven*.<sup>112</sup> Though it covers many different topics such as 'Women and the revolution' as well as a chapter on guerrilla activities in Dandkaranya and Gadchiroli, it is perhaps most useful for bringing to wider public attention some of the inner party history and sources. For instance, it outlines the many different splits and mergers within the various factions of the Indian communist movement that lay claim to the heritage of Naxalbari and which led to the formation of CPI(Maoist). It has some details on the Naxalites' various mass organizations, and an explanation of its transition from Mao Zedong's thought to Maoism.

A different angle on understanding the Indian Naxalites is an attempt to understand the intellectual history of Maoism. This is the focus of Bernard D'Mello's works *What is Maoism?* which identifies Maoism, at its broadest, as a commitment to radical democracy.<sup>113</sup> Incorporating essays by Marxist scholars such as Paul Sweezy and William Hinton, D'Mello charts how the idea of Maoism evolved from Marxism, Leninism, and Stalinism, thus providing the ideological backdrop for its adoption in India. For any serious scholar of radical politics, understanding this intellectual history is as important as tracing the history of the Naxalites themselves and D'Mello takes us some way towards this task.

Just as useful are the books that focus on one moment in the movement written by civil society members and activists practically involved in the region or the issues. Good examples are the Lalgarh case in the western hinterlands of West Bengal where an Adivasi-led movement against state-police excesses and land dispossession resulted in a direct confrontation between the CPI(Maoist) and the Indian state, and the failed peace talks between the CPI(Maoist) and the West Bengal government in 2011, which produced two useful and complementary collections. The first, edited by Biswajit Roy, is *War and Peace in Junglemahal*.<sup>114</sup> It is invaluable to scholars interested in the movement because it reflects the broad-based discussion within civil society about the incidents in Lalgarh, the resulting Operation Green Hunt (consisting of joint operations by the central and west Bengal state governments), and the rise of Mamta Banerji's Trinamool Congress Party in the state, which effectively ended nearly 40 years of Left Front rule. Roy's collection does not include in any

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<sup>112</sup> Bhattacharyya, A. (2016). *Storming the Gates of Heaven: the Maoist movement in India. A critical study 1972–2014*. Kolkata: Setu Prakashani.

<sup>113</sup> D'Mello, B. (ed.) (2010). *What is Maoism and Other Essays*. Kolkata: Cornerstone Publications.

<sup>114</sup> Roy, B. (2014). *War and Peace in Junglemahal: people, state and Maoists*. Kolkata: Setu Prakashani.

meaningful measure the voices of those most affected by the counter-insurgency measures in Lalgarh.

It is these voices of the leadership of the People's Committee Against Police Atrocities that are the focus of *Letters from Lalgarh*, a joint initiative of Sanhati and Setu Prakashani.<sup>115</sup> The six letters, written between 27 March and 6 August 2010 in the midst of state-authorized violence in the region, were sent (with great difficulty) to civil society members and organizations. They were made available to the public online through the sanhati.com website, which led to widespread discussion within Bengali civil society, and translated into English.<sup>116</sup> The letters are a fascinating source for those seeking to map out the relationship between the state and the indigenous populations of Junglemahal as well as that between the People's Committee Against Police Atrocities and, variously, the Maoists, the Trinamool Congress Party, urban civil society, and the indigenous population. They also provide data about numerous individual arrests and acts of state violence against the indigenous people and People's

Committee Against Police Atrocities activists, which would be near impossible to gather from official government sources. Together they demonstrate that the Lalgarh movement, although at times overlapping with the Maoist movement, was on the whole autonomous from the latter. State violence in the form of Operation Green Hunt against the Lalgarh movement may have been triggered by Maoist military actions; however, it was not unique inasmuch that it reflected a long-standing historical practice of police brutality against the local inhabitants, and was a symptom of the nexus of corruption between the Communist Party of India (Marxist) leaders and activists in the region, elements of the indigenous local leadership, and the police. Despite claims by the West Bengal government that the People's Committee Against Police Atrocities was a mass Maoist organization, the authors of the letters clearly point to its autonomous nature and the influence it developed, and how it competed with the Maoists for political hegemony. The authors demonstrate sympathy for several Maoist campaigns in the area, but that is because those campaigns reflected core issues that concerned the People's Committee Against Police Atrocities as well. The letters also reveal the tenuous relationship between the latter and Bengali civil society, often lurching between angry accusations and calling for greater help and aid from it. Finally, as the editors of the collection themselves note in their useful, but brief, introduction, the People's Committee Against Police Atrocities' relationship to the Trinamool Congress Party evolved in the period the letters were written. Initially the People's Committee Against Police Atrocities did not differentiate between the Trinamool Congress Party, the Congress, and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and discussed them as a political alliance which was opposed to the indigenous peoples of Junglemahal. However, by the time one comes to the end of the letters a new relationship is evident. It is apparent that the People's Committee Against Police Atrocities reconsidered their relationship towards the Trinamool Congress Party, perhaps because of the incapacity of Bengali civil society—largely centred in Kolkata—to do anything that would positively affect their situation, and eventually endorsed them. This was especially the case when Mamta Bannerjee herself called for an end to police

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<sup>115</sup> People's Committee Against Police Atrocities (2013). *Letters from Lalgarh: the complete collection of letters from the Peoples' Committee Against Police Atrocities*. Kolkata: Setu Prakashani.

<sup>116</sup> sanhati.com, [accessed 1 April 2017].

brutality and for the release of all political prisoners. *Letters from Lalgarh* are thus a raw testimonial of the changing trials and tribulations of the indigenous peoples of Junglemahal.

In recent years we have also seen the publication of accounts from people who joined the early Naxalite movement and helped in founding the struggle. Part (auto)biography, part diary, part chronicle, these memoirs of people's participation, though often written decades after their authors' involvement, are invaluable for the insights they provide into the movement. They are, of course, overwhelmingly, from the literate, well-to-do classes who were mobilized and must be read as just one type of account of mobilization. The experiences of the poor villagers, for instance, the Dalits and Adivasis, who were influenced to join the Naxalites are likely to be very different and would shed an important light on the movement, but it is much harder for these voices to be published.

Two recent examples are *The First Naxal: an authorised biography of Kanu Sanyal* by Paul Bappaditya and Abhijit Das's *Footprints of Foot Soldiers*.<sup>117</sup> These accounts are interesting to consider together as they are both written from the perspective of two men born into middle-class, upper caste Bengali families, one generation apart. Sanyal was born in Kuroseng in Darjeeling in 1929 and Das, less than 20 years later (in 1948), in English Bazaar, Malda district. Both books begin with observations of the injustices that surrounded the authors which led to their political mobilization, both describe the ways in which they came into contact with radical comrades from similar backgrounds who inspired them, how they in turn inspired youth from middle-class, upper caste families to become politicized, the ways in which they went to work in the villages to organize and mobilize peasants and workers behind the revolutionary cause and through that process 'declassed' themselves, and their experiences in prison (which for Sanyal was a time of greater political mobilization). Both ended up parting ways with Charu Mazumdar's legacy. While Sanyal, who had originally worked very closely with Mazumdar in founding the movement—so much that he was seen as Mazumdar's lieutenant—split from the Mazumdar line in his revolutionary work, Das eventually gave up altogether and left the movement to work in Mumbai. The details are fascinating for anyone wanting to know more about the sociology, psychology, and experiences of middle-class, upper caste youth who were central to the initial Naxalbari struggle.

Interestingly, both accounts were written right at the end of the authors' lives. Das died a few months after his book was published, while Sanyal did not live to see the publication of his biography. What comes across overwhelmingly in both accounts is their desire, right at the end of their lives, to set the record straight in relation to any doubt about their commitment to the revolutionary struggle. There are of course differences in the way they do this. Sanyal is (perhaps understandably) more bitter than Das, and his narrative focuses on the organizational work that he did in the villages and tea plantations in the years before and after Naxalbari which were crucial to the spread of the uprising. Das, in some ways, gives a more straightforward account—almost a diary—of his involvement in the movement. His book is a testimony to the sincerity with which he worked for it, his increasing concern about the party line, and his disappointment at meeting with Politbureau members who either disregarded his concerns or told him that now was not the time to question the movement. Despite these

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<sup>117</sup> Bappaditya, P. (2014). *The First Naxal: an authorised biography of Kanu Sanyal*. New Delhi: Sage. Das, A. (2015). *Footprints of Foot Soldiers: experiences and recollections of the Naxalite movement in Eastern India 1960's and 1970's*. Kolkata: Setu Prakashani.

differences, both books critique Mazumdar's focus on the annihilation of class enemies for the way this alienated ordinary villagers, arguing that it was the struggle among, and with, the masses that was crucial. What comes across strongly in both accounts is the authors' commitment to the revolutionary cause—even if Das eventually set up a bookshop in Calcutta—and the overwhelming passion they continued to have for the Naxalbari movement.

It is worth mentioning here the republication of Suniti Kumar Ghosh's Naxalbari, *Before and After* for its similar contribution, though it is perhaps much more clearly a political appraisal of the revolutionaries in the immediate aftermath of the Naxalbari rebellion and until the death of Charu Mazumdar.<sup>118</sup> In the aftermath of the Naxalbari upsurge, Ghosh, who had been closely associated with the 1946–47 Tebhaga Struggle, became a member of the All India Coordination Committee of the Communist Revolutionaries and, later, a member of the Central Committee of the CPI(ML). From the perspective of someone deeply committed to the legacy of Naxalbari, the book charts the rise of the CPI(ML), beginning with the ideological differences that arose within the communist movement in India, and explores the initial spread of the Naxalites. Perhaps the most interesting parts are his critical account of the revolutionaries based on his personal experience of being a member of the Central Committee. He explores how it was formed, the tensions around whether Mazumdar should have been a revolutionary leader or a revolutionary authority, the roles allocated to each member, and then the growing differences between them. Ghosh accused some of the other members of political careerism, which eventually led to him being accused by Mazumdar of bringing 'bourgeois influences' into the party. Ghosh himself criticizes Mazumdar for having been theoretically weak, for pursuing the annihilation of class enemies, which led to terrorist acts, and giving up on mass mobilization, and for having had a blind faith in Mao Zedong and the Chinese path, despite instructions from China that India needed to create its own political line. There is a fascinating appendix on the comments of Zhou Enlai and Kang Sheng on the CPI(ML)'s political line as told to one of the Central Committee members when he visited China. For Ghosh, the overwhelming motivation in writing the book, as it is for some of the other authors reviewed here, may also have been to set the record straight about what actually happened from his point of view. Unfortunately, he neglects or chooses not to discuss his role in the 1970s in the Central Organising Committee (CPI(ML)), which emerged post-1972 and was the precursor to the CPI(ML)[Party Unity] and CPI(ML)[People's War Group]. Nevertheless, what comes across is a deeply sincere account which tells us as much about the history of the initial movement as it does about the emotional life of the leadership, and the kinds of issues that caused inner-party divisions and led to accusations of betrayal, buttressed by Ghosh's own commitment to the legacy of Naxalbari and the revolutionary cause in India.

Thus far these kinds of biographical accounts or memoirs of middle-class activists have been written by men, but we may also see the emergence of those by middle-class women. A precedent has been established by K. Ajitha from Kerala, whose memoirs were serialized in the Malayalam magazine, *Kala Kamundi*, in 1979 and which have recently been translated into English as *Kerala's Naxalbari: Ajitha, memoirs of a young revolutionary*.<sup>119</sup> Born at around the same time as Das, in the early 1950s, she was from a middle-class communist

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<sup>118</sup> Ghosh, S. K. (2009). *Naxalbari, Before and After: reminiscences and appraisal*. Kolkata: New Age Publishers.

<sup>119</sup> Ajitha (2008). *Kerala's Naxalbari: Ajitha, memoirs of a young revolutionary* (S. Ramachandran, trans.). New Delhi: Srishti.



family. Unlike many of the other comrades from her background who broke with their pasts, it was her parents who encouraged her participation in the movement. She writes that she was influenced by the books she read—many on Mao’s China—and began by participating in demonstrations and distributing pamphlets and books disseminating

Mao’s ideas, although her parents also loom large in her mobilization. She describes how when she went to mobilize peasants in the countryside with her mother, she fell in love with another comrade; however, her father discouraged her from getting married, as it would have harmed both the movement and the couple.

In 1968, together with her lover and 300 armed guerrillas, and barely 19 years old, she was involved in a series of attacks on police stations in Waynnad, Kerala (with the aim of stealing arms) and on two local landlords whose food reserves were distributed to the Adivasis. The details of the attacks—as told from Ajitha’s point of view—are fascinating for they reveal not only the spirit of adventure and revolutionary zeal of the mobilized youth but also their tragic inexperience and the mistakes they made—one comrade was seriously injured when he fell with a hand grenade he had made himself and another similarly blew himself up with his handmade bomb. They are a rare insight into what it must have been like on the frontline.

In the raids that followed, her lover was killed and Ajitha was captured, tortured, and sentenced to nine years of solitary confinement. The latter part of the book focuses on the humiliation and torture by the police and her grim life in jail. When she came out of prison, at the age of 27, she married a Muslim comrade eight years her junior and turned away from the armed class struggle to set up a women’s rights NGO.

Though it is one of the few books written by a woman, and the only one by a woman involved in the attacks, it tells us very little about gender relations. It is only when we consider where Ajitha has ended up—working for women’s issues outside of the class struggle, that we get a stronger sense of her looking back on how women were discriminated against within this leftist movement and why she felt the need to prioritize working for the cause of women’s oppression once she came out of prison. Despite these internal critiques, what is underwritten in Sanyal and Das’s texts is explicitly stated here—her motives in writing her memoir were to reinforce her commitment to the ideology of the movement. Clearly we need more such books and further analysis to explore the gender paradoxes of class struggle.

As Indian prisons fill up with Naxalite prisoners, we see an emerging genre of books in the form of diaries and reflections of inmates who have been arrested under charges of being Maoists. An excellent recent contribution is Arun Ferreira’s *Colours of the Cage*.<sup>120</sup> Vividly illustrated with the author’s drawings, the book documents his experiences of custodial torture, fighting the battle against false charges, the grim conditions of Indian prisons where corruption is endemic, and the everyday life that prisoners create in these dismal conditions.

Ferreira, a middle-class Roman Catholic from Bandra, a well-to-do neighbourhood of Mumbai, was arrested by the Nagpur police on charges of being a Naxalite under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act 2004. He was accused of being the chief of communications and propaganda for the Maoist party and charged with murder, criminal

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<sup>120</sup> Ferreira, A. (2014). *Colours of the Cage: a prison memoir*. Delhi: Aleph Book Company.

conspiracy, rioting, and possession of arms. Fighting these charges with the help of his family and lawyers, while undertaking postgraduate study with the Indian Institute of Human Rights in Delhi by distance learning, he was acquitted of all charges in 2011. But— as seems to be common—he was abducted at the prison gates and re-arrested.

The book begins with an unsentimental description of the torture that Ferreira faced while under arrest—which include medieval techniques of stretching the body (which the complicit hospital doctors did not record), as well as narco-analysis, lie-detectors, and brain mapping tests. It is interspersed with Ferreira's brilliant ink drawings of the prison. These illustrations, which other prisoners referred to as 'the colours of the cage', are meant to give the outside world an idea of what life is like in Indian prisons. The letters he sent back to his family (it is not always clear whether they are to his parents or his wife) also paint a picture of the anxieties his family suffered and the work they did to get him out of prison. The book is a lucid account more generally of jail life—the awful food, the rapid spread of disease, coping with the shortage of water, and the physical beatings received by prisoners, which were a daily affair.

Ferreira's account is important because it provides us with an insight into the everyday life that prisoners jailed in the name of Maoism have tried to create in prison—whether in Madhya Pradesh (as in this case) or Jharkhand. This involves the struggles they have undertaken to improve the conditions of prison life, backed by hunger strikes; the ways in which more educated, better-off prisoners tried to help illiterate, lower caste inmates by teaching classes and sharing out their food. Ferreira's book is also scattered with fascinating reflections on some of the other prisoners he met along the way—the accused in the Bhotmange massacre, the Dalit writer and cultural activist, Sudhir Dhavle (also a Naxalite undertrial), and other Naxalite undertrials such as Vernon Gonzales. Also included in the book are ruminations on the plight of a very poor man, who has had no contact with his family who live 300 kilometres away, sentenced to life imprisonment because a boy accidentally died of pesticide poisoning, having eaten from a crop that the man had grown.

One wonders about what—if anything—has changed since the days when Mary Tyler wrote her 1973 book, *My Years in an Indian Prison*, about the five years she spent in a jail in Jharkhand awaiting trial, accused as a Naxalite.<sup>121</sup> The torture of prisoners, the dismal prison conditions, and the indifference of the authorities to the legal and civil rights of prisoners all seem to still be in place. Tyler described in great detail the poverty of life in prison, but also the poverty and oppression of the women warders at the hands of the male chief wardens and jail superintendents.

If Ferreira's imagination and political messages escape the iron bars of the prison through his drawings, others do the same through poetry. His account joins the remarkable *Captive Imagination*, written by the revolutionary poet, Varvara Rao.<sup>122</sup> This is a collection of Rao's meditations written between 1985–89 from Secunderabad jail in what is now the state of Telengana. They were originally published as regular columns for the Telugu daily newspaper, *Andhra Prabha* (now part of the *New Indian Express*), and recently have been translated from Telugu into English and published with a foreword by Ngugi Wa Thiongo. (The Maoists have long admired the Kenyan writer for his writings and especially the novel,

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<sup>121</sup> Tyler, M. (1977). *My Years in an Indian Prison*. Letchworth, Hertfordshire: Garden City Press.

<sup>122</sup> Rao, V. (2010). *Captive Imagination: letters from prison*. New Delhi: Penguin.

*Devil on the Cross*, which was written on toilet paper when he was in prison.) Rao, who has been in and out of prison several times, has spent more than ten years of his life behind bars for his bold criticisms of the violence of the Indian state and his open sympathies for the Naxalite movement. Ferreira's book was written after his release, but Rao's letters were written and published while he was in prison. Despite the censorship Rao faced (he is unable to write directly about the social history of his time in prison and those around him in the way Ferreira can), his letters are remarkable for the emotional and political sentiment and sensibility they are able to convey about being a political prisoner. Rao shows how those who imprison him cannot hold captive his imagination which slips through prison bars as poetry.

Part poetry, part prose, Rao's writing takes the reader into his solitude and his profound inner thoughts which are metaphors for the inner strength and defiance against the life in prison which is faced and embraced, according to him, by all political prisoners. Through his poetry—which he sees as synonymous with suffering but also with the struggle to end suffering—we learn about the emotional fight to endure the endless waiting and hope for news of encounters and friends who have been killed or are dead; the cultivation of patience and equanimity in the face of grief as well as joy; and the keeping at bay of despair and frustration in even the most trying of times. Though Rao suggests that grief is meant to be hidden (pondering on his daughter who comes to visit him in prison), those who spend time reflecting on his poetry and his prose are very likely to be moved to tears.

*How long  
Can prison walls  
And iron bars  
Cage the free spirit?*<sup>123</sup>

Rao tells us that the late human rights lawyer, Balagopal, sent him a copy of D. D. Kosambi's historiography in jail, with a note, 'While not in a position to participate in events that shape history, you may make use of this temporary rest period in studying history.' What both Ferreira and Rao's books show us is that, contra Balagopal, through the social life of the prison and the power of imagination, prison bars cannot indeed cage the political prisoner who is making history from within.

### **The literature that is making history**

The formation of the Communist Party of India (Maoist), which marked an intensification of the revolutionary struggle in India, combined with the government's declaration that the Maoists were India's greatest internal security threat, has accentuated Indian public attention on the Naxalites and what they reveal about the Indian state. This attention has resulted in an astonishingly large number of books being published in recent years. Though there are exceptions, most are hastily written, perhaps understandably so, and very few are based on serious empirical research. It is difficult to find a contemporary parallel to Sumanata Banerjee's *In the Wake of Naxalbari*; there is no one book that stands out.<sup>124</sup> The strength of

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., p. 102.

<sup>124</sup> Banerjee, S. (1980). *In the Wake of Naxalbari: a history of the Naxalite movement in India*. Calcutta: Subarnrekha.

this literature rests in its cumulative effects, in the combined intellectual and political contributions of all the books taken together. They have greatly deepened our understanding of the world's longest standing revolutionary struggle, the dilemmas of revolutionary violence, and the nature of the Indian state.

In this article we have tried to map the general terrain of this literature, the questions addressed, as well as point to some of the gaps. First, there are those who have tried to understand the Naxalites from the purview of the state and therefore regard the revolutionaries as a problem that must be solved. Whether in the form of edited collections or authored books, these writers have tried to understand the underlying factors that have led to the spread of the Naxalites, and fall into two broad camps of analysis. On the one hand, there are those who de-emphasize and are critical of a solely military solution to the conflict and stress the need for a complementary social development solution. On the other hand, there are those who focus on how best to defeat the Naxalites using military means who, sadly, have most influenced the response of the Indian state. This overall literature has a rather superficial understanding of the Naxalites because of the authors' over-reliance on secondary literature and, in particular, not treating the Naxalites as a political entity. The second body of literature has focused more on the question of the necessity of revolutionary violence and its role in Indian politics. At stake here are different conceptions of the Indian state, and the authors take different positions on the need for revolutionary violence within India, while laying out the tensions in the relationship between mass movements and armed struggle. The third group of books that have emerged are travelogue or eyewitness accounts of the Maoist movement in the jungles of central India, written by journalists and activists. These give us a greater flavour of the contemporary guerrilla armies and the issues that face them, and also take seriously the revolutionary project, but remain limited in substantively exploring the relationship between Adivasis and Naxalites in the affected regions. The fourth body of literature is more empirically grounded: these studies rely on field research, interviews, and ethnographic research. They have perhaps produced the most sophisticated analysis of the relationship between the Naxalite movement and the minorities it has sought to mobilize, though all the books discussed here have been researched only after the Naxalites have essentially left the areas or people being studied. A few well-respected novels have been produced on the Naxalites in recent years. They do suffer from an over-reliance on well-worn clichés about peasants, Adivasis, and revolutionaries. Creative works by the Adivasis, affected minorities or the Naxalites are notably missing, and other works written by the Naxalites remain largely unavailable. This has resulted in a rather poor understanding of the Naxalites' political imaginary. The few books we do have by party activists and leaders, or fellow travellers, are valuable inasmuch as they reflect some of the debates that have animated the inner-party life of the Naxalite movement. What is sorely lacking is empirically grounded studies of the contemporary guerrilla strongholds that focus both on the Maoist armies and the people they mobilize and move among.

Despite these shortfalls, what is truly remarkable is the vast and diverse literature that the Naxalite movement has inspired, the reflections on the Indian state and parliamentary democracy that it has nurtured, the open debate it has provoked on the necessity for revolutionary violence in the contemporary world—a debate which is dead in most other parts of the world—and the imagination of a different and more equal world that it has kept alive. Though we may not agree with all of their methods, it is hard to imagine that there is

another movement in the contemporary world that is playing as significant a role in keeping open the spaces for challenging and asking questions about our common future. It is therefore a tribute to all the authors who have come together to publish on this movement—as varied as their perspectives, experiences, and analyses are—such that India will keep alive the challenge to inequality with revolutionary struggle for a more equal society on the global agenda. Whether wittingly or unwittingly, those who have taken the interest, time, and dedication to publish on the Naxalites have participated in the making of history, against the grain of history.

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