

# **Revolutionary Violence Versus Democracy**

Narratives from India

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### Coming to be 'Maoist': Surviving Tropes, Shifting Meanings



Chitrlekha

*I was twelve .... They used to come to the village to hold meetings. They would call us and talk about Chandrashekhra Azad, Khudiram Bose, Marx, Lenin ... they said let's fight for the poor, make a new world order. I had no second thoughts. What could be better than a krantikari (revolutionary)? Agriculture was not for me ... and what good is it to be a teacher or a doctor?*

—Rinkuji, area commander, Maoist Communist Centre (MCC), personal interview, 2003

Left extremism in India has been amongst the most extensively researched subjects of political and academic interest, inspiring study through its various phases and shifts. The available literature ranges from landmark works in the early years of the movement (Banerjee 1984; Mohanty 1977; Ray 1988), studies in central Bihar in the 1990s (Bhatia 1998; 2005), attention towards continuities between the informal economy of the state and the political economy of Maoism (Mukherji 2010; Prasad 2010; Shah 2006; also see Shah 2013 on agrarian transitions, Maoist strategy and mobilisation) as well as discussions around the now increasingly complex questions of violence and counter-violence, democracy, justice and development in the Maoist areas (Balagopal 2006; Gudavarthy 2013; Guha 2007; Mohanty 2009; Navlakha 2006; Sundar 2006, 2016). In addition, we now also have available several documents in the public sphere that draw attention to ideological positions of the Maoist leadership (Azad 2006; Ganapathi 2010; Ghandy 2008).

In an intellectual and political atmosphere often charged with (sharply divided) positions, this chapter reflects on

an ethnographic work with Maoists in Jharkhand and Bihar that brings into the discourse voices of those in the armed movement, not its highest leaders or ideologues but its unknown and virtually unheard of foot soldiers (Chitralkha 2010). Over several months in 2003 and across seven districts in Jharkhand and Bihar, I gathered histories of the armed cadre of the Maoist Communist Centre of India (MCCI) and People's War (PW), travelling with their *dastas* (armed squads) or living with their families in remote villages.<sup>1</sup> I met Rinkuji, a 16-year-old area commander with the MCC (whose memories I start this chapter with), in Mahuadanr, a small, remote village in Latehar, Jharkhand, set in the midst of mountainous, heavily forested terrain, with no electricity, limited water resources, no public healthcare, secondary or high school. In the course of my stay there, and before my own meetings with him, I encountered different aspects of the mosaic of 'reasons' that had drawn a 12-year-old to the MCC: his younger brother's feelings that he joined the 'party' *shaukiya* (of his own wish) because he enjoyed being with them; his childhood friend's memories of how he had taken the party's help to get someone beaten up (and had to join); an elderly relative's pointing out that 'for young boys here, there was nothing else to do'. Rinku's family owned a large pukka house, 30 acres of land and rare amenities like a self-owned well; his father had a permanent job as a teacher in the city, and his three brothers and one sister were all school going. They were Rajputs, the dominant caste in the village.

My unsuccessful attempts to relate those reasons and Rinku's own memories with meanings ascribed often to association with Naxal parties in the academic discourse (and in the wider public sphere) were amongst the early links to the recognition of 'drifters' as a significant ideal-typical

<sup>1</sup> MCC was renamed MCCI after merger with the Revolutionary Communist Centre of India (Maoist) in 2003.

category of participation in the movement. This can also be located in histories of those who joined in the late 1980s and early 1990s but now dominates the contemporary phase of the Maoist movement, straddling a dispersed caste, class and gender profile. If Rinku joined from a landed family, was upper caste and male, many drifters were also Dalit or Adivasi, female and poor. While the chapter is by no means an attempt to universalise the relationship with the Maoist cause, its findings do suggest that some of the most critical things young people seek from the movement today stretch across caste, class and even gender divides. I argue here that entry into the *dastas* for many not just acts as a means of access to the public sphere but they also serve as sites for construction of individual identities along pathways not always predictable by the imperatives of the collective. Quite different from dominant discourses on Naxalite politics and goals that emanate from or revolve around narratives of the Maoist leadership or ideologues, narratives of guerrillas, including those from the most oppressed classes, often ruminated with urgency, not so much on the formal struggle for the equalisation of group identity or resources, as on a deeply individual quest for recognition and self-actualisation. Within this context, the following sections engage with certain tropes that have for several decades been traditionally associated with the Naxalite movement, exploring through this reading of narratives of armed cadre meanings ascribed by participants to their practice, and in relation, the troubled and shifting relationship of the movement with caste and izzat, livelihood, occupational choices and 'success', violence, death and martyrdom.

## Revisiting Izzat

The struggle to regain izzat or human dignity has in many ways been the pivotal element of Naxalite mobilisation in

Bihar and Jharkhand—experienced, posited and remembered as fight for equal social status and honour centred in caste identities. While the CPI (ML) groups theorised the class aspect as primary and caste as secondary, derivative or superstructural (PUDR 1998, 4–5), popular political speech in central Bihar in the period of mobilisation tended to express the conflict in primarily caste terms, placing caste at the centre and property relations or class in a derivative or secondary position. What the organisation theorised then as agrarian struggle was for many of its participants most fundamentally a struggle for izzat. While the historical overlap between the caste and class dimensions has been undeniable in central Bihar, the two are nevertheless not identical. Not all of those who fight for izzat, whose denial springs primarily from caste, though also secondarily from economic disability, need be poor or interested in *gair mazarua* (village commons) land, though many in fact are. Conversely, not all the landless or poor are from the lowest castes and therefore involved in a fight for dignity that their caste status has denied them, though once again most are. Apart from the lack of total physical overlap, the predominance of izzat in the popular discourse in central Bihar at the time points towards the fact that the nature of economic and caste deprivations while entangled are qualitatively different and perceived and experienced differently.

Narratives of cadre who joined the movement in its heydays—in the 1980s and early 1990s—mostly those of Dalit, landless peasants in central Bihar, carry overriding vivid memories of zamindari oppression—a deeply remembered experience of social and economic subjugation at the hands of the landed, dominant castes in the village. Anil joined the MCC in the first flush of the movement in Bake Bajar in Gaya in the early 1980s. He was 25 then and vividly recalls the day he took part in his first ‘action’ against the archetypal cruel landlord as a thrilling, heady experience. ‘The landlord was overconfident that no one

will be able to harm him .... Because his crime was that he had humiliated our women, we castrated him ....' His participation in that remembered evening of blood and brutality was premised on neither any personal enmity nor dreams for himself but to put an end both materially and symbolically to the humiliation his people had endured over the years. 'Since I came to my senses, this is what I saw .... If I am a poor man, you don't allow me to reap my crops, you misbehave with my family, with female members'. Party Unity (PU) cadre Pranav Vidyarthi too had led the struggle to acquire and redistribute *gair mazurua* and ceiling surplus lands in and around his own village. Paying the price for his political practice in dehumanising conditions in Aurangabad jail, he too had no regrets. The years of bloodshed had for him a core and local purpose, which he recounted fervently, '*Aisan gaon banavan jai / Jahan sapno me julmi jamindar na rahe / Sabke bharpet mele khana, aur rahe ke thekana / Koi koi ke kuboliya bolen har na rahe ....*' (Let us make a village/where even in your dreams there is no cruel landlord/where everyone has enough to eat, and a roof over his head/where no man can talk down to another man.)

While Anil and Vidyarthi were deeply committed cadre, Vijay, Dalit zonal committee member of the MCC who also joined the movement in its heydays in Aurangabad, had gone on to amass considerable personal wealth with the party and was finally 'betrayed' by his own peers in the party. Arrested and 'broken' under severe torture in police custody, the Latehar jail superintendent recalled that when he was brought in, both his legs had fractures and it took months of treatment before he could walk again. When I met Vijay in jail, he reminisced that MCC had been his first (and only) chance at 'success'.

When I was small, the zamindar's men would give me roti (bread) and salt and tell me, this is it, now eat it up fast .... By the time I was in the 9th class I had realized that nothing would become of me like this .... I completed my matriculation ... everyone has

dreams of becoming a doctor, engineer ... don't you? But in these areas, nobody lets you do anything even if you want to.

The matter of *izzat*, or its perceived deprivation, was again recounted somewhat differently in narratives of MCC cadre who participated in the brutal massacre of upper castes in Dalelchak Baghaura in Aurangabad district of Bihar in the late 1980s; an entire village of Rajput women and children were beheaded here by MCC cadre on a rudely improvised chopping block. Convicted on the testimony of a sole survivor (a four-year-old child) who witnessed the carnage that night, Suraj Yadav was serving a life sentence in Gaya central jail at the time of my fieldwork. Thirty-six years old and now a postgraduate with an additional degree in law (LLB), he reiterated that the '*ghatna*' (event) occurred as it was a matter of '*izzat*'; the Rajputs had to be taught a lesson, and they (the Yadavs) merely did what had been done to them over the years. In conversations with other members of Yadav's (visibly affluent, landed) family, several other imperatives emerged, including those of pending disputes between two sets of rich farmers (one of whom was Yadav's family), confusing attempts to locate the killings within the meanings traditionally ascribed to the seeking of *izzat*. Nevertheless, the scale of the killings, the brutality with which they were executed and the absence of regret in Yadav's and his family members' recall of the events of the day are also—as in the bitter recall of Vijay's memories—still markers of the repertoire of collective memory and historically remembered angst of oppression or discrimination that are related to the specific way in which *izzat* was then framed: as honour and perhaps as recognition sought to be wrested from the (vilified and long hated) other castes.

Much had changed, however, by the time of my fieldwork in Jharkhand and Bihar soon after the turn of the millennium. Wage struggles and Naxalite mobilisation pivoted around the idea of *izzat* over decades of struggle

had yielded by now visible gains; the dignity of the poor and the landless was not as easily played around with as was earlier (Bhatia 1997, 58; Mukul 1999, 3465–70; Wilson 1999, 343). Caste wars as well as the internal conflict and confusion of the 1990s was also by now more or less a thing of the past. The PU had merged with the CPI (ML) PW, and the CPI (ML) Liberation had almost disbanded its armed guerrilla operations to enter electoral politics. MCC and PW in Bihar and Jharkhand had grown significantly in strength and spread, and since 2001 shared manpower, resources and skills. Some of the areas of my fieldwork (in 2003) were in fact already manned by joint *dastas* of the two groups. In 2004, this working alliance between the (by now renamed) MCCI and the PW was consolidated by a formal merger into a single entity, the Communist Party of India (Maoist). By the time of my fieldwork, Jharkhand was already the epicentre of the strongest (till then) consolidation of Naxalite strength and activity, and the conflict in the region had deviated quite radically from the original Naxalite agenda. From a movement once deriving local allegiance around issues of land redistribution, fairer wages and human dignity, it was often framed by cadre across areas of my fieldwork (in both Jharkhand and Bihar) as an 'international struggle' pitched now almost completely against the police and state apparatus. Recurring battles with security forces and sharply heightened surveillance on Maoist activity further marginalised already weakening mass front activities. As opposed to memories of cadre who had joined the movement in central Bihar, it was difficult to locate the Naxalite 'enemy' in discourses of armed cadre I met in Jharkhand, conceptualised variously as (still) exploitative zamindar, brutish police, corrupt contractor, partisan state and so on (Chitralkha 2012; see Shah 2013 on the historical specificity to this realignment in the hills and forests of Jharkhand).

Within this context of flux and deep changes in the movement, this section locates manifestations of identities

of cadre (from across various castes and communities) being re-negotiated in multiple ways. Caste consciousness, certainly not absent in contemporary times, rested uneasily amongst these changing, often dislocated identities, especially amongst the young in the movement. Based on my own extended fieldwork in the region, I suggest that *izzat*, the pivotal idea for mobilisation to join the movement in the past, has assumed different meanings for contemporary practitioners of Maoism. In this transformed context, while the reason young people—not all poor or underprivileged—join still perhaps has more to do with *izzat* than *zameen* (land) or *roti*, *izzat* now is not so much about the respect or honour demanded from the enemy or the hated other as about the recognition sought from peers, amongst one's own community in locations which have not been able to provide too many other avenues of differentiation or fulfilment. It does not help that these political 'choices' are mostly made at an average age of 12–15 years, an age where young people, in their own recall, found guns and the power that came of holding them undeniably attractive.

Manishji,<sup>2</sup> 22-year-old deputy commander of an MCCI *dasta* I met with in the early hours of the morning in Kotila village (Hariharganj, Palamu), recalled that he joined at 14. He said he had had 'no problems of his own' but was influenced by '*partywallahs* who used to come and go' in his village in Hazaribagh district. Rinku's home village, Mahuadanr, was also in many ways prototypical of the kind of life conditions within which young people from even ostensibly 'prosperous' families became 'Maoist'. His neighbour Brijesh who joined the PW was also of the Rajput caste, with lineage going back to the erstwhile raja (king)

<sup>2</sup> My meeting with Manishji and his *dasta* was not an appointed one. Fraught more than usual by problems of pre-judgement, performativity and imminent disruption, many specificities of his history (caste, for instance) were not gathered. On questions of pre-judgement in fieldwork, see Chitrakleha (2017).

of the region. The family had 25 acres of land but (despite the grand lineage) was barely able to make ends meet. Low rainfall, poor irrigation and inability to pay for wage labour had over the years reduced most of their fields to wastelands. Rice procured from their rain-fed fields barely lasted a few months, and dwindling income had taken its toll on basic nutrition and healthcare among other things. At the time of my fieldwork, PW cadre Brijesh's mother and her two youngest sons (aged 10 and 11) had been, for instance, suffering from untreated malarial fever for many months. His mother said they had been facing penury and humiliation at every front, and Brijesh's decision, or sacrifice as she saw it, in fact, changed everyone's stance towards them.

In the late 1980s, two of Brijesh's own uncles were tortured and hacked to death by the PU (later merged with PW in Jharkhand) in full sight of immediate family members. But in current circumstances, Brijesh's grandfather does not think it strange that his own grandson Brijesh had joined those who were his family's bitter opponents not so long ago. 'The school here is only till the eighth, and the quality of education is very poor. The boys have nothing else to do. Naturally, they get excited by the *aavo-bhaav* (demeanor) of the Naxalites'. If committed cadre like Vidyarthi and Anil joined Naxal parties with the hope to transform not just their own but others' lives riddled by caste humiliation and extreme deprivation, Rinku or Brijesh did not see a future for themselves. Joining the MCC or the PW, on the other hand, brought instant rewards, social and economic. For Rinku, the transition from life as a village bully to life as a guerrilla was not easy, but area commander after four years with the MCCI, he does not think he has got a bad deal. 'We communists get a lot of izzat from the people .... Anyway it's not as if all of us will get jobs now if we leave the party'.

Rinku's story was not unusual but indicative of the shifting logic of association with Maoist groups, where

joining MCCI or PW was often an outcome of real or perceived failure of other avenues of occupation, achievement, 'success' or 'profitable enterprise'. Most of those I encountered were at least matriculate; several were students or unemployed when they joined front organisations but went on to become hard core armed cadre. Suresh, 25 years old when we met, from the Kahar caste, was a pure science graduate and at the time of my fieldwork one of the five members of the Bihar Jharkhand State Youth Committee of PW. 'I had different dreams. Soon after college, I took the help of the MLA (member of legislative assembly) and started a loan banking company ... Collections were good, but the Bihar government banned it in 1994'. Pandeyji, a Bhumihar youth from Panki (village) in Palamu, postgraduate in history, had also been looking much like Suresh to 'make something' out of his life when he met the party.

I was drifting around after Matric—doing nothing for a while. Those days, big (MCC) names like Vinod Yadav Vidrohi, Jugal Pal, Gopalda, Gautam Paswan used to come to our area ... In one meeting, they asked me to speak ... said you must contribute ... we are not forward virodhis, we are against oppressors ... they said would help me study further.

Romeshji, commander of sub-zonal rank, had completed his intermediate from Lohardaga. After several failed attempts to secure employment with the Bihar Police (he could not put together the required bribe money), he left for Delhi and after a few years of hard labour finally got a 'prestigious job' as a 'machine operator' in Wazirpur, the industrial belt of the capital city. The factory, however, closed down some years later; he returned to his village, got involved with the Adivasi revival organisation *Oraon Sarna Samiti*, national political party Congress (I) and finally with (then) MCC. 'I didn't think so much. I felt if I help them they will help me.' His education and diverse experience was valued in the party, and he made it through the ranks relatively quick. Hesitant about what

the 'international struggle' aims to change ('I don't study anymore, how can I know?'), Romeshji is nevertheless loyal and takes pride—much in the manner of a successful professional—in his role in the party. 'Don't you realize there is politics even in MCC? I have struggled very hard to reach this level. I can lose it all with one mistake.'

## Death, Martyrdom and Acceptable Risk

What does death mean for a Naxalite? Are the torn, bullet-ridden and blood-splattered bodies of young people—frequently splayed on regional news cover pages, occasionally on national television screens—evidence of the Maoists' willingness to give up life for political ideas?

Death itself has been the subject of rich anthropological scholarship, yet work on its political aspects is still recent. Early scholarship in this domain includes Taussig's examination of colonialism in South America, its creation of the 'space of death' (Taussig 1987), the corpse as origin of taboos, and in relation, power that accrues to the modern state—'great machine of death and war' (Taussig 1997). Around the same time, Agamben's *Homo Sacer* (1988) contended that what characterises modern politics is not that life becomes object of the calculations of state power but that the exception becomes the rule: bare life gradually coincides with the political realm. Besides anthropological interest in flows between state power, politics and the symbolic capital (and cultural apparatuses) of death (see particularly Robben 2000; Verdery 1999), early influential attempts to theorise death for politics included its interpretation as psychological learning (Binmore 1994; Hoffer 1951) and the dominant security perspective to 'terrorism studies' (Pape 2003; Primoratz 1990; Sprinzak 2000; Weinberg 1991). In many ways, it was 9/11 (or the terrorism of the spectacle aka Baudrillard) that, however,

brought human mortality decisively into the discursive realm of the political.

The aftermath of the September 11 suicide bombings in the United States saw not just a spate of writings in American and European newspapers on martyrdom (jihad), it inspired substantial academic work, mostly coalescing around its comprehension as pathology of contemporary Islam (Juergensmeyer 2003; Strenski 2003). The violence itself was seen as nihilist, in that the Islamic militant was assumed to 'seek' a decisive encounter with death, evoking horror in the deliberative use of his or her own body as weapon. Euben was amongst the earliest in this milieu to draw attention to the chasm between scholarly reflections on the premises of politics and the proliferation of rhetorical gestures and practices in which death, martyrdom and the remaking of politics are uneasily yet decisively conjoined. Martyrdom in this context, she points out, is abstracted from the ethico-political contexts through which it is defined and made to signify a general eruption of the irrational, archaic and pathological; she deliberates instead on jihad and shahada as political action seen as necessary to the founding of a just political community on earth (Euben 2002, 5–6). In engagement with these arguments, Asad reflects that the absolute right to defend oneself by force becomes, in the context of industrial capitalism, the freedom to use violence globally: the suicide bomber belongs, in an important sense, to a modern Western tradition of armed conflict wherein to save the nation (or to found its state) in confrontation with a dangerous enemy, it may be necessary to act without being bound by ordinary moral constraints (Asad 2007, 62–63).

Far removed as 9/11 and the context of suicide bombings may seem to be from the Naxalites in Bihar and Jharkhand, none of all this is too distant from the acridity of contemporary public, deeply mediatised discourses on Naxalite practice in India. The Maoist unlike the suicide bomber is in the main (recognised even in popular speech)

as 'willing' to—as opposed to 'intending' to—die; nevertheless, in recent years, the Maoist's readiness to die (more appropriate—be killed) is seen as closely entangled with the intention to take as many lives as possible. My interest in this chapter, however, is not with detailing of popular perception of Maoist violence/death or utility of that death to the cause or to the functioning of the organisation (see Suykens 2010, however, for a careful analysis of the ideological basis and functionality of martyrdom for the Maoist movement) but instead to attempt an understanding, however tentative or frail, of what such (violent) death may mean to the Naxalite soldier. What meaning/s does 'martyrdom' hold for those intended to be its likely recipients? How is the possibility of imminent death, in so far as it can be confronted, leave aside told, described by young people in the movement today? Acknowledging the important distinction that must be made between seeking motives for and the circumstances of death (see Asad on how motives themselves [in the context of suicide bombing] are rarely lucid, invested with emotions and may not be clear even to the actor [Asad 2007, 64]), my attempt here is a limited one. The intention in this section is to document meanings ascribed to (prospective) death, in so far as the actor of violence 'knows' or can name his practice—and wishes to tell it. In this effort, I have been often limited but also sometimes enriched by the absence of verbal articulation (with in lieu, the speaking poignancy of silence) in this ethnographic engagement (for detailing of the wider historical/sociopolitical context that renders such death as a critical tool of class struggle, see Chitralkha 2012).

I have previously attempted to place narratives of armed cadre I met with over several districts in Jharkhand and Bihar within the ideal—typical categories of committed, opportunists and drifters framed to clarify (shifting) Naxalite practice and relationship to cause (Chitralkha 2010). Across contexts of my fieldwork, I found neither caste nor class background and not even life experience had

a determining relationship with ideological commitment. Even from amongst the poor, only a bare few had joined and engaged in violence ‘for’ the cause but many more associated as drifters (even committed cadre sometimes ‘joined’ for reasons not very different from those that drew the drifters in). I argue that the committed are not created by Left (or other) extremist organisations but ‘tapped’, so to say, by them in time: cadre like Vidyarthi or Anil were ‘found’ by the movement (Chitralkha 2010, 327–28). This innate sincerity or commitment to cause, despite being located in the probable nature of a predisposition or bent of mind, is, however, as far from being located in caste/class/religious locations as from psychological theories of assumed predisposition to violence or death (Fromm 1977; Hoffer 1951). It also complicates Shah’s conceptual separation of the motivation of the ideological renouncer (upper caste Maoist leadership) versus Adivasi rank and file (see Shah 2014). In continuity, the committed Naxalite also cannot be identified by the ‘willingness’ to die; even the opportunist factors in this probability into his calculations as he negotiates what he wants out of the movement and its affected parties (the state, the poor, etc.): the unpredictable and likely imminence of violent death is implicit in the very nature of Naxalite work. Yet significantly, it is only the rare few committed cadre who see (the possibility of) death as honourable loss or willing sacrifice in pursuit of a cherished cause.

Jopani Manjhi of village Gangapur in the Dhanbad district of Jharkhand remembers that he started ‘working for’ MCC when he was 10. Initially in awe of the ‘*partywallahs*’ who supported his family in a (land) dispute with relatives, he recalls he was drawn to the ‘*samajik*’ (socialistic) vision of Marx and Lenin, and a few years later, he left home with them for good. By the time of his capture and arrest in 1996 (he was 21 then), he had risen to the rank of senior commander in charge of two districts in Jharkhand. Despite sustained interrogation and inhuman torture,

Manjhi (his compatriots said) never 'talked' to the police, and at the time of my fieldwork, he was amongst the rare few that the party was still actively trying to get back into its fold. The years of torture and struggle, he said, had only strengthened his resolve. 'I like to endure .... I enjoy this struggle .... I want to do it the hard way'. Different from his comrades, most of whom too had reconciled with (the possibility of) death, Manjhi seemed to voluntarily and eagerly almost embrace pain, sacrifice and the possibility of death for a larger cause: 'I am a highly respected cadre. If something happens to me, they will make me a martyr'. For Manjhi too, death is then justified by hope of (having contributed to the creation of) a just world; however, 'immortality' is sought in the symbolic, more nebulous and somewhat paradoxical terms of retrospective honour and recognition in 'the world left behind'. Martyrdom in this context is not an otherworldly reward but constitutes the elevation of an ordinary cadre into an idealised hero 'within the party'. In the highly mediatised post 9/11 discourses, martyrdom or *shahada* has often been sought to be understood or rationalised by rewards prospectively associated with political death: for the suicide bomber who dies fighting, in this (popular, televised, digitised) imagination, the death of the physical body is, paradoxically, sought to be compensated by promise of 'this-worldly rewards' such as *houris*, *jannat* or the pleasures of heaven (see Engineer 2010, however, for the Koranic meaning of *hur*).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The Koranic meaning of 'hur' has reference to morally pure men and women who will be companions of those who enter paradise (*jannah*). Engineer, whose take is that the popular belief on 'houris' (beautiful, virginal women) is used by vested interests to recruit young people to die in the 'cause of Islam', quotes from the Qur'an (56: 22–26) to clarify how the discourse on *hur* (*houris* in popular parlance) has, in fact, no reference to sex or lust, but rather richness of soul and moral purity (2010).

Manjhi's reading of martyrdom is placed in a secular framework quite different from that of religious sacrifice; his imagining of immortality can hardly be comprehended in terms of the vast body of work surrounding the human quest for continuity through death of the physical body or its actualisation in forms of religious symbolisation (Becker 1973; Lifton and Olsen 1974; Malinowski 1954 [1925]). I was in some moments reminded of Hoffer's timeless perspective on dying and killing as ceremonial performance, or make-believe, that masks the grim reality of death for actors in armies: when the individual (cadre) faces torture or annihilation, his only source of strength is in not being himself but part of something mighty, glorious and indestructible (Hoffer 1951, 65–67). Performativity, while an aspect of Manjhi's (as anyone's) ontological survival, nevertheless does not exhaust the range of complicated meanings he ascribes to his practice and possible death. With the party since he was 10, his association with the cause was hardly chosen, but he trusts the MCC leadership and holds on doggedly to his faith in the Maoist agenda, keeping what he says is his 'mission' alive through painstaking reading in jail of (by now torn and dog-eared) texts provided by the party about the political history of 'successful' communist regimes. Deeply trusted by the party, he is an insider; if unexposed to the world outside the party, he is aware of that vulnerability and shies away from facing contradictions in the worldview or practices of MCC, seeing it as treason, recognising that such deconstruction could tear away legitimacy from work that he had not just killed and risked his life for, and outside which he knew no other, and knowing that within the choices he had had, he contributed (Jopan's self-aware, reflexive consciousness of his own vulnerability is quite different from Hoffer's 'true believer's' unwillingness to qualify the certitude and righteousness of his holy cause [Hoffer 1951, 84]). Vidyarthi, whose body by the time I met him was already evidently frail, wasted away

by decades in jail, had no regrets about a youth lost in struggle, only jubilation that he could contribute to huge changes in land ownership in his village. Anil believed it is because people like him risked their lives that others (of his caste) in his village are asked to today 'sit side by side' with the upper castes and not on the ground. Mahato said he had never feared death and (even though troubled by changes in the functioning of the party) would return to contribute. Manjhi, too, believes his death would not have been in vain. 'It is not as if we have done nothing .... Wherever we are active, it is those districts that have seen development'.

Manjhi (or Vidyarthi or Mahato) was deeply committed to the cause, pursuit of which also imparted meaning to his own life, making it worthwhile to have lived—and when necessary, died; but for most in the party, life (and its death) is not 'for' the Naxalite cause. What is it then for? Why do those who join as children stay on with the party, often long after the first flush of life change has faded and lost its charm? Can (the probability of early) death be discounted without ideology? In a journey—or perhaps, adventure—embarked on in a bid to improve one's life chances, can the possibility of an end to life itself be calculated for as acceptable risk? What is the relationship of killing without ado, or trauma or regret—to dealing with one's own death? Manishji had explained (in the watchful presence of both his commander and *dasta* comrades) how he had no troubles of his own but joined 'this line' to 'help his poorer brothers'; the party's enemies, he said, were zamindars, but he was uncomfortable when asked about the party's work in Kotila, where there were none. Deputy commander of an evidently important *dasta* at 22 (unlike the well-worn and recycled arms of most I met, Manishji carried with evident pride a gleaming machine gun), his parting words, as he left in the darkness of night to continue miles of trek in hard terrain, were a jaunty, smiling '*zindagi rahi, to fir milenge*' (see you again if I am alive). Sixteen-year-old Rinku too

says dismissively that he may be shot down one day but it does not matter.

If we die, what is the problem? But if we leave the party, the police will certainly hold us under POTA (Prevention of Terrorism Act) ... so what dreams .... My dreams have been fulfilled .... I will never bow my head to the police .... I would prefer to die in an encounter.

Rinku's young cousin Brijesh, who had joined PW (and in whose home I lived in Mahuadanr), came home abruptly one night in the course of my stay and cross-questioned me about the purpose of my visit, but despite my efforts did not speak much himself. Brijesh left in the early hours of the next morning, citing important work; I was informed of a landmine blast in the adjoining Saranda forest later that day which PW had claimed responsibility for.

Trawick's work in an LTTE village in eastern Sri Lanka (2007) draws our attention to the ludic aspects that pose challenges to the understanding of violence (with its expected effects of fear and horror, and sorrow and grief). Showing how categories of war and play become interchangeable in the lives of young LTTE cadre, Trawick writes that the LTTE Tigers represented the battles they fought as 'child's play', 'fully intense, concentrated, and serious, but also elevated above the mundane world, and fun' (2007, 13). For the Naxalites, too, and definitely those who joined so young, (the tryst with) violence was perhaps indeed encountered as play; in this adventure, even death may have been seen (and dismissed) as acceptable risk. Throughout my ethnography, there are repetitive records of nonchalance or of pleasure (including in the experience of a new vesting of power); Manishji's elan and bravado and Rinku's flippancy are only some amongst them (see Chitralkha 2010). If it started as play, it does not continue as that, but I have fewer oral records of that shifting experience, of exhaustion, fear, longings for escape or of terror—including of death that is eventually as intimately

faced as dealt out in the past; more frequently evasions and silences speak of what could not be asked, leave aside acknowledged or told (see Das's reflections on the reality of killing and being killed, which is openly spoken about, known and yet never fully comprehended [2008]).

Through the period of my fieldwork in Jharkhand and Bihar, local regional papers would often carry photographs, sometimes on the front page, of the Naxalite 'terrorist' eliminated in encounter in a neighbouring village or an adjoining district. Mostly, I would see these papers at the local chai and samosa shop or sometimes when it was brought into the homes of those I lived with. That imagery and its accompanying text, as in Verdery's reminiscence of Levi-Strauss's words on the properties of corpses that make them 'good to think' as symbols (Verdery 1999), spoke of the finally overpowering might of the state, of Naxalite bodies killed like vermin, of de-infestation (a random perusal of a month's news feed around the keyword 'Naxalite' in Indian nation press would easily throw up the word 'infested' several times); the picture though would be of a young boy, mostly painfully thin, now bloodied and his body splayed out, rarely claimed in death (accepting the body of a 'terrorist' would mean trouble for other members of the family, also often associated with the party in many ways). Brijesh's grandfather believed he joined PW as he enjoyed the power and privileges, but his mother towards the end of my stay in Mahuadanr (and when we were alone) would often say, 'What is he getting for this .... /Because of him his father and brother could open a motorcycle shop/We could get his sister married' or (after cooking a meal of dal-*chawal* [watery lentils and rice]), 'Who is giving these boys good food to eat .... They only get stale leftovers from homes'. Did she worry about the real risk of early death of her teenage son? Had she seen those pictures in newspapers? I could not ask. She did not tell. If grief itself is a product of culture (Scheper-Hughes 1992), there are contexts where its

acknowledgement is not a choice; if for Brijesh's death was once an acceptable risk to take in the future to improve life now, she too had been complicit in that bid.

## The Question of Violence

Azad, the official spokesperson of the CPI (Maoist), wrote eloquently about the need to see Maoist violence within the context of an oppressive system: 'Dalits have to face humiliation and abuse on a daily basis .... One cannot appreciate the need for revolutionary violence unless one understands the fascist nature of the state, the cruelty of the state's forces, tortures and fake encounters' (Azad 2006, 4380–82; Azad was killed in 2010 in an encounter with police forces).

Azad's plea for the need to understand the structural causes of violence resonates in the narratives of many who had joined the movement in the agrarian plains of central Bihar: Anil whose participation in the brutal castration of the zamindar was made possible by collective memory of humiliation and grief, Harihar Paswan who was beaten up by upper castes for wearing new clothes, Vijay who was tossed a piece of bread and so on. In all of these cases, violence was deeply mediated and performed through entrenched—and long suffered—structures of caste inequality, becoming in many ways as Arendt saw it also 'the only way to set the scales of justice right again'; in these conditions, to be cured of rage and violence would mean dehumanisation or emasculation (Arendt 1969, 64). But barring those of few committed cadre, in most narratives, the recalled joy in use of violence is more difficult, not easily contextualised or encompassed by ideas of accumulated rage or defence against long victimisation, less still as ideologically justified means towards fulfilment of a cause. Across social psychological categories of participation in

the movement and time–space coordinates (in the sense of including those who may have joined in the 1980s or early 1990s), there was hardly any recall of anxiety or doubt about the use of violence as legitimate means to realise ideological or other goals; for most, the opportunity to possess and use arms was, in fact, eagerly anticipated. If for committed cadre like Anil or Vidyarthi, knifing the zamindar was not just practice leading to freedom from oppression but also simultaneously a direct and physical symbol of newly won power and strength, even Sadanand Mahato, who had not suffered or experienced zamindari, reminisced that killing (the enemy) was a privilege in the line of duty. He recalled entering the armed cadre 'with gusto'. 'I was so happy the first time I got a gun. I didn't take long to learn. I asked questions .... They said nothing has ever changed without guns. Many people died .... We took it in our stride as part of the struggle'. Jopan Manjhi, much younger than Mahato when first handed a gun, says, 'I have never felt confused about what I am doing, not even the first time I had to kill'. No stranger to violence even as a child, Manjhi joined the party without too many complicated thoughts. Whatever few inhibitions he may have had were dissolved in the long years of training that went into making him a 'hard core', and by the time of my fieldwork, he had killed more times than he could remember: '*Bahuto ko cheh inch chota kiya*' (we beheaded many)'.

Killing for those who joined the party in more contemporary times was bereft of the triumph and vindication that described the practice of cadre who had participated in the violent reprisal against then deeply entrenched zamindari. Also, the modalities of killing itself had changed for the younger generation of cadre who had joined closer to the time of my own fieldwork in Jharkhand and Bihar. From the direct and physically tactile method of the 1980s and 1990s (as when a peasant cadre would slit the throat of a landlord), the usual practice in Jharkhand by the time

of my fieldwork (as now in Chhattisgarh, West Bengal etc.) was 'killing from a distance'—by shooting at the enemy or triggering a bomb, for instance. The post-millennium generation of the Naxalites (Navjyoti, Brijesh, Rinku etc.) had, in fact, seen far greater dependence on methods of attack such as landmines and other explosives, which did not involve direct combat. Yet paradoxically, even for them, remembered over the years, it was the arms and the guns that were recounted as amongst the best perks of a hard life. Killing was either adventure or non-event but mostly unmarked by trauma or regret. Manish, unselfconsciously proud of a gleaming, closely strapped machine gun, admits, for instance, that he 'liked holding a gun at fourteen and even now'. Even Pandey, neither happy with MCC's organisational culture nor the hardship involved in the job, had fond memories of his acquaintance with arms in the party, 'They gave me arms training .... I enjoyed it ... but when you can cut open a man with a knife, why waste a bullet .... It used to cost sixty rupees a piece even in 1995'.

How is Manish's or Pandey's transition from 'ordinary' youth to a nouveau but enthusiastic practitioner of violence to be understood? The (violent) practice of the committed may be seen as located in ideological commitment, and those of the oppressed as pursuit of freedom from subjugation. For mercenaries or opportunists, violence was mostly a non-event, expediently used as part of personal means–ends calculations. But what of young people who 'drift' into the party almost as an occupational choice in a context bereft of real choices? If they take up arms neither for politics nor for material gains (and were not coerced either), where does the readiness, even eagerness to participate in violence derive from? In both Bihar and Jharkhand, I did not encounter discomfort or unease around the use of violence itself; the practice of violence as means to realise ends had mostly already been rendered usual 'prior' to joining Naxalite groups. Narratives of drifters (as most other cadre) pointed towards a high degree of

early acclimatisation to violence, of its routinisation as a way of life for respondents across contexts. Several drifters, most opportunists and even a few of the committed, in fact, had had prior familiarity with use of firearms—often through exposure and training within the family circle—even before joining the party. As Mohan, whom MCC cadre expelled on grounds of corruption, put it, evidently amused when I tried finding out more about aspects of his acclimatisation to arms and violence after joining the armed cadre: 'In *Kalyug* (ongoing and morally most depraved state of civilisation in Hinduism), one already knows how to operate a gun.'

What is of note perhaps is that not only is violence already normal or is not reflected on or evokes few, if any, ethical dilemmas but rather how its practice is now inspired by or associated with independently resonant and culturally valued symbolic attributes. If, as in Roy's account of women activists who joined the Naxalbari movement in Bengal in the late 1960s, the leaving behind of the everyday or the taken for granted was in yearning for a heroic life, where by going 'underground' to lead fugitive lives, women too led exalted lives of courage and adventure (Roy 2007); now close to half a century later, joining the movement for most is still in quest of 'heroism', only somewhat differently envisaged. For most of those I met, often, even before joining the party, possession of the means to violence, ownership of arms or (perceived or manifested) capability to be the actor of violence was desirable as indicative of strength and power, as were values of tolerance or non-violence already indicative of weakness or insufficiency. I find Fromm's conceptualisation of 'social character' useful to locate that prior culture of violence in regions of Maoist influence (and perhaps across more dispersed scapes in India as elsewhere, but it is not the subject of this chapter). Fromm suggests that the process of transforming general psychic energy into specific psycho-social energy is mediated by the

‘social character’ of particular spaces; the means by which social character is formed are essentially cultural (1977, 339). Fromm, of course, wrote in the context of the holocaust, and the idea of social character is certainly easier to relate in a context of ethnic antagonisms (I have argued elsewhere for its importance in understanding the work of mobilisation of the Dalit youth in Ahmedabad or the Bhils in Sabarkantha, or for that matter, the murderous mobs that attacked Muslims in Ahmedabad in 2002; see Chitrlekha 2012). Nevertheless, while there are evident limitations to the lengths to which Fromm’s ideas can be relevant to understanding the historical and contemporary complexities of Maoist practice, it calls attention to the need for richer analysis of the underlying processes of larger political and cultural changes (including erosion of the region’s rich history of Gandhian–socialist movements). These may link to ongoing structures of social–psychological change that assist understanding of not just the prior normalisation of violence in the region today but also the semiotic re-rendering of its meanings altogether, of the encountering of pleasure in being the possessor of means to violence and its associations or linkages with recognition and esteem.

## Conclusion

A significant part of the shared text between histories of cadre such as Rinku or Brijesh or Pandeyji can perhaps even here be traced to the impact of ‘education’ and ‘development’, both of which, no matter how uneven or inadequate, promised livelihoods and futures that were never realised, leaving in their wake restless populations that were easily tapped by rebel movements. Studies in Nepal have documented how the Maoist spread is also an unintended consequence of the state’s neoliberal policies,

wherein membership in a Maoist party can, in a sense, be seen as rejection by rural youth of that which they were excluded from (Shah and Pettigrew 2009, 240). Despite evident differences in their gendered locations, there were also significant resonances between the complex, entangled contexts and hopes that brought unlikely soldiers such as Rinku or Brijesh to kill for Naxal parties, and those of the few women cadre I could meet and spend time with.

I met Navjyoti in Navada, a remote Santhal hamlet in the western Tundi ravines bordering Dhanbad and Giridih districts of Jharkhand, where she had spent her childhood and met with the MCC. Out on bail after the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) intervened against her prolonged third-degree torture in police custody (her condition was acknowledged as serious after maggots appeared in her wounds), she spoke finally, not about the party or about Maoism but about herself and the kind of forces that drew her into the party. The youngest of three sisters, she reminisced she had thought she may become a 'leader'. *'Ham soche achha hai, kuch seekh rahe hai ... leader bhi ban sakte hai'* (I thought it is good, I am learning something ... I may even become a leader). Those who had known her before she left with the MCC, including a school teacher associated with the National Literacy Mission (Sakshartha Vahini), remembered how she became close to the 'partywallahs'. 'She had a good voice and was useful for the Nari Mukti Sangh (front organization). She got a lot of attention from them'. This teacher believed that Navjyoti had a different 'bent of mind' from other girls (including her own sisters), and it was the party's recognition of her sense of self-worth that led her to them. Despite the brutalising experience of incarceration, torture and near-complete closure of options, the stubborn wish to overcome her life conditions had survived. As I was to leave Navada, she said, 'If I have the support of more women like you, I can do a lot even now .... If you have come so far to meet me, I too can come to Delhi with you'.

Nisha, area commander of a couple of villages in Khelari (Ranchi district), had completed high school in Sunduru, Lohardaga, before joining the party. She recalls walking 6 km every day to attend school in an adjoining village, then again attending ‘coaching’ after school—sometimes without lunch. Her family did not have too much land, but there was, as she put it, ‘enough to eat’. Once she joined the armed cadre, she went through a period of intensive training. She said,

I found it hard to learn the firing positions ... sitting, standing positions ... fire straight at the target. At first, I felt uneasy ... how to eat, how to sleep, how to bathe. One day I got *makkai* (corn) fodder to eat. I refused but Kuldeep *bhaiya* (MCC’s sub zonal commander in the region—with whose consent she spoke to me) said, ‘Learn to eat whatever you get’.

When we met on the far outskirts of a village in Khelari, Nisha was a ‘confirmed’—and evidently influential—cadre of the party. ‘Now I have a uniform, a gun .... People have even published about me in the press .... They must have seen me in *jan adalats* (court sessions held by Naxal parties) or other meetings’. Nisha acknowledges linkages between economic and status deprivation and women’s association with Naxalite *dastas*, admitting many women in the party, including in her own *dasta*, joined when all doors closed for them. ‘They are very poor .... Some have no parents. They come because the party is a different society ... brotherhood, equal rights’. She demands that her own position, however, as a respected full-time cadre of the party be recognised as different from that average. ‘The other girls here are very jealous of me. The sub zonal (commander) gives me a lot of importance’. Much like Pandey or Rinku, she recalls with evident pride how (even before she actually joined) she was especially recognised by the commander: ‘I was even asked to give talks in various meetings’. Open to building conjugal ties within the party (‘If seniors [in the party] say marry, I will’), it was

nevertheless not a matter of importance for her, though many women, she points out derisively, did, in fact, join MCCI only to find mates. 'Sometimes soon after they get married, women leave Nari Mukti Sangh. Doesn't it prove they came here only to marry in the first place?'

Nisha's overt pleasure in being photographed by journalists and in seeing her pictures that appeared in newspapers is not dissimilar to the documentation of the insurgency in Nepal in a fast-changing context wherein images of rural youth that were previously either invisible or presented as backward in media terms became front-page material as 'gun-toting young women were as likely to be featured as beauty queens' (Shah and Pettigrew 2009). Her motives and aspirations—much as those of other 'drifters'—have to be acknowledged perhaps as more than 'private issues' on the periphery of a social movement—as urgent indicators, in fact, of a shifting politics of recognition. If the first steps towards equal participation are taken when actors are given resources to interact with others as peers, for those like her, this came in the form of possession of arms. If we are to hear voices such as those of Rinku or Navjyoti or Nisha, we may not be able to assume that young 'Maoists' want different things than our own children do. The youth joining the MCCI in Jharkhand may far too often have been motivated by aspirations not very different from those that get other young people inside an Ivy League University, a coveted law firm or a Fortune 500 company. It is another matter that the scope of choices for them is often restricted to a question of membership of 'which' armed group.

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