

'Committed, Opportunists and Drifters': Revisiting the Naxalite narrative in Jharkhand and Bihar

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Who are the Naxalites today? What drives them to take on a life that, even given the adversity of their prior life conditions, seems very bleak? What are the real tenets of the ideology that make it possible for them to kill? Why are they prepared to die for it? This article is an attempt to bring out the standpoint of foot soldiers of the Naxalite movement. It categorises a sample of forty Naxalite armed cadre met with across Jharkhand and parts of Bihar in 2003 into three motivational profiles: Committed, Opportunists and Drifters. The Drifters make up most of the Naxalite armed cadre and reflect their changing spirit.

Keywords: Naxalite ideology; armed cadre; women Naxalites; Naxalite life histories; Jharkhand, Bihar

I

Contemporary discourse on Naxalism¹ is more fractured than ever before. The Indian state, after years of abysmal neglect and now with its back against the wall, has said that Naxalites are terrorists and must be dealt with as such. Civil rights activists and concerned academics warn that such posturing would amount to a brutal repression of India's

¹ Naxalites trace their lineage to the Naxalbari uprising of May 1967 in West Bengal, which was a localised struggle against oppressive agrarian relations.

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forgotten subaltern voices. But while there has been much discourse on Naxalism in the public sphere as well as in more rigorous academic work (see Banerjee 1984; Bhatia 1998, 2005; Chakrabarty and Kujur 2010; Das 1992; Pandey 1985), we are scarcely closer to understanding the armed movement.

Bhatia, in a study based on extensive personal fieldwork in central Bihar in the mid-1990s, draws attention to the need to develop an understanding of the movement by incorporating the 'point of view of the participants' (Bhatia 2005: 1536). She argues that both ideological and non-ideological motives lead people to join these parties. Amongst those with ideological motives, the ones who join with full knowledge of the party's ideology and agenda are termed 'informed revolutionaries', while those with an urge to fight against injustice are 'instinctual revolutionaries' (ibid.: 1540). While leaders at the block level and above are generally informed revolutionaries, people also join (generally, the open fronts) to fulfil personal needs, in quest of survival, opportunism, etc. (ibid.: 1540–41). Given that Bhatia posits that 'a large majority of the cadres...who comprise the backbone of the movement' are 'instinctual revolutionaries' (ibid.: 1540), it would seem that the vast majority of participants in the Naxalite movement are 'revolutionaries' of some kind or the other.

However, is that in fact the case? Are those (leaders or otherwise) who join with 'full knowledge' of the Naxalite (formal) ideology (Bhatia 2005: 1540) necessarily *motivated* by that ideology? Can knowledge of, or even belief in, ideology be conflated with *commitment to a cause*? Are the young people who make up the majority in the movement today mostly driven by the urge to fight against injustice? Or, is there something missing in our understanding of the men and women still willing to kill and die in the name of the Naxalite cause?

This article searches for answers from the standpoint of the foot soldiers of the movement.² Over months in 2003, I met with armed cadre

² Apart from academic interest, such inclusion has a bearing on effective intervention in areas affected by Left extremist violence. While Naxalite strongholds continue to be the poorest and least empowered regions of the country (see Report of an Expert Group to the Planning Commission 2008), the findings of my study indicate significant differences in the socio-economic profile of the mass base within which Naxal groups work, and the profile of its hardcore cadre (see Chitralkha 2009).

of the Maoist Communist Centre of India (MCCI) and People's War (PW).³ I lived and travelled with these men and their *dastas* (armed team/unit) across Jharkhand and parts of Bihar, learning to walk miles at a stretch, working with four to six hours of sleep, giving up all inhibitions about using the *khet* (field) as a toilet, having a public bath under a *chappakal* (hand pump), reconciling to the lice in my hair, etc. The hope was to live at least a slice of their life in their shoes.⁴

The Naxalites I found were not quite the selfless heroes willing to lay down their lives for a noble cause. Not very many were mercenaries either.

Based on their own narratives, this article categorises forty armed cadre into three motivational profiles that I term 'Committed', 'Drifters' and 'Opportunists'. These categories are, to begin with, described on the basis of *commitment* to the Naxalite cause—high among the Committed, dipping significantly among the Drifters and absent in the Opportunists. While they are also indicative of the reasons for which they *joined*, motivational factors for some had shifted over time within the party. For clarity, therefore, these profiles are best seen as indicative of the current or ongoing motivational forces driving the movement.⁵

³ The Maoist Communist Centre (MCC) was renamed the MCCI after its merger with the Revolutionary Communist Centre of India (Maoist) in 2003. By 2001, MCC and PW (then the two largest surviving Naxalite groups) were sharing manpower, resources and skills. Some of the areas where I did fieldwork (in 2003) were, in fact, manned by joint *dastas* (armed team/unit) of the two groups. Jharkhand was by then the epicentre of Naxalite strength and activity (as Chhattisgarh is now). But from a movement deriving local allegiance around issues of land redistribution, fair wages and human dignity, Naxal groups in Jharkhand had, by the time of my fieldwork, been forced into a pitched battle for survival with security forces, further marginalising the weakening front activities in the region. The MCCI and PW merged formally in 2004 to form the Communist Party of India (CPI) (Maoist).

⁴ I found significant differences between what the Naxalites said in an organisational setting (within a *dasta*, for instance) and when met individually, outside the organisational context, through kin, family and friends. My research (in Dhanbad, Giridih, Latehar, Palamu, Ranchi, Gaya and Aurangabad districts) also included several trips to the central jails. Particularly in Bihar, where the movement had thinned out by the time of fieldwork, it provided an opportunity to speak with those who had joined and killed for Naxal groups in the 1990s.

⁵ Committed, Drifters and Opportunists describe in an ideal-typical fashion the core, defining trait of the relationship the armed cadre I met had with the Naxal cause, and (Drifters/Opportunists) are not termed as such in any pejorative sense. Alternate categorisation by socio-economic background or role in the organisation was not useful as cadre from similar backgrounds, ranks, etc., were often motivated quite differently.

Those categorised as ‘Drifters’ made up by far the majority of the Naxal armed cadre, and are the primary concern of this article. Very few of these cadre had suffered caste oppression; in fact, many were from the middle or upper castes. Most had enough land for subsistence or more, yet significantly enough, across socio-economic strata, agriculture was not seen as a desirable livelihood. The majority of Drifters had met with the Naxalites in their early teens or even before, a time when association with the ‘party’ was considered macho, prestigious and promised quick rewards. In an arena presenting no roadmaps for ideological or life alternatives, their decision to join (and mostly, stay with) Naxalite groups was in many ways a quasi-occupational choice.

The aim here is to deconstruct what the ‘Drifters’ describe as their ideas and, in the light of their narratives, to revisit the paradigm within which the movement continues to be viewed, especially in sociological discourse. But first, it is necessary to take a quick look at the Committed and Opportunists.

II *Committed*

All forty armed cadre in my sample had killed in the name of the Naxal cause, but only eight (a fifth of the sample) had in fact killed *for* it, or *because* of it. These few men whose practice was driven by the Naxal ideology are categorised as ‘Committed’ (see Table 1).

Mostly late associates

Of the eight ‘Committed’ cadre, only one had joined in childhood. Jopan Manjhi⁶ of village Gangapur in Dhanbad district of Jharkand started working for the Maoist Communist Centre (MCC) when he was ten, initially out of awe for the ‘partywallahs’ who supported his family in a land dispute with relatives and later, because he was drawn to the *samajik* (social) vision of Marx and Lenin. Before he turned fifteen, he had left home for good. At the time of his capture and arrest in 1996 (he was twenty-one then), he was a senior commander in charge of two

⁶ All names are aliases.

Table 1
Naxalites/Committed: Socio-economic Profile

Sr No.	Alias	Organisation	Type of Association	Position	Sex	Caste	Caste Type	Education_Self	Age at F/W	Est HH Income/Standard of Living	Other Occupation	Marital Status	Education_Spouse	Occupation_Spouse	Place of Origin-Village/District
1	Jopun Manjhi	MCCI	Jailed	Sub Zonal Commander	M	Dalit	SC	Matriculate	27	Medium		Married	Illiterate	UA	Gangapur, Dhanbad
2	Anil	MCCI	Ex	Area Commander	M	Dalit	SC	Matriculate	57	Low	Agriculture (self owned+ sharecropping)	Married	Illiterate	Agriculture (self owned+ share cropping)	Bake Bajar, Gaya
3	Pranav Vidyarthi	PW	Jailed	Armed Cadre	M	Dalit	SC	Matriculate	30	Low		Single	NA	NA	Ramnagar, Jehanabad
4	Videsh Pal	PW	Jailed	Area Commander	M	UA	OBC	Middle school	40	Medium		Married	Illiterate	Agriculture (self owned)	Makhra, Aurangabad
5	Ramji	MCCI	Current	Chief Coordinator, Students League	M	Dalit	SC	Graduate	30	Medium		UA	UA	UA	Narkopi, Dhanbad
6	Sadanand Mahato	MCCI	Jailed	Zonal Committee Member	M	Kurmi	OBC	Intermediate	33	Medium		Married	Illiterate	Agriculture (self owned) + rice mill + shop	Peshahar, Manatu, Palamu
7	Kalu Mahato	MCCI	Jailed	Armed Cadre	M	Kurmi	OBC	Middle school	45	Medium		Married	Illiterate	Agriculture (self owned)	Santi, Imanganj, Gaya
8	Shyamji	CPI (ML) Liberation	Ex/Active Supporter	Undisclosed	M	Dalit	SC	Intermediate (failed)	39	Medium	Agriculture (self owned)/ Saksharta Vahini	Married	Illiterate	Agriculture (self owned)	Garde, Palamu

Source: Personal fieldwork in 2003.

districts in Jharkhand. In jail at the time of fieldwork, he was amongst the rare cadre who the party was actively trying to get released and back within its fold.

At one level, Jopan was deeply trusted, a 'hardcore' cadre of the party, an 'insider'. As he saw it, the prolonged dehumanising existence in jail had only made him a stronger cadre of the party. 'I like to endure, I enjoy this struggle...I want to do it the hard way'. Yet, at another level, for early associates of Naxal parties such as Jopan, commitment to the Naxal cause is hardly *chosen*. Almost completely unexposed to the world outside the party, he shied away from facing, or dealing with, contradictions in the worldview or practice of the MCC, partly seeing it as treason, and perhaps, also recognising that such deconstruction could tear away legitimacy from work that he had not just killed—and risked his life—for, *but outside which he knew no other*.⁷

Most Committed cadre, however, entered the party in their late teens to early twenties. Many were students then, and worked initially with front organisations. Sadanand Mahato of Peshahar village in Palamu (Jharkhand), for instance, joined an MCC front with his 'friends' (much the same as many Drifters) after his intermediate exams in 1988. Initially, he did not know he was associating with a banned guerrilla party: 'I wanted to give the competitive exams but didn't have the money. These people said you are educated, yet you are doing nothing for the people... I had already read a lot about *Marxwad* (Marxism) in college...slowly we drifted away from the mainstream'. Once in, however, he became deeply involved, and his later decision to join the armed cadre (in 1995) was thought through, based on his eagerness to contribute further to what he, by then, believed was a meaningful cause. At the time of his arrest in 2001, Mahato was a senior ideologue of the party at the 'All Jharkhand' level.

Late associates had seen the world outside the party, and found it easier to recognise and rationalise the contradictions in their practice. Mahato had had differences with the party even before his capture. 'There were things very wrong...people who have destroyed the party'. Unlike

⁷ Jopan's self-conscious knowledge 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).

Manjhi, he is not threatened by the changing context of his practice and, in fact, eagerly initiates discourse on the subject. When ‘meeting time’ in jail was over, Mahato handed me a slip of paper with a few hastily scribbled words—‘*Marxwad kyon fail hua?* (Why did Marxism fail?)’—and his home address. But as men who join with greater expectations of the party, Committed late associates are also more vulnerable to disillusionment. Mahato said he would return to the party, but Shyamji, a compatriot (from Garde, also in Palamu district) who had joined the erstwhile Indian People’s Front in the early 1990s, had withdrawn from action. ‘I understand the dreams of the poor...I was only the third Harijan boy to get a matric degree in this area. But this is not for me any longer... I have always demanded honesty’.

Memories of zamindari

All of those categorised as ‘Committed’ had joined the party between the mid-1980s and the early 1990s. Mostly belonging to the Dalit or backward castes, their narratives carry overriding, vivid memories of zamindari oppression, a deeply remembered personal experience of social and economic subjugation at the hands of landed, dominant castes in the village.

Anil, for instance, had joined in the first flush of the movement in Gaya in the early 1980s. ‘I was the zamindar’s own man, but he was vicious with others...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, misbehave with my family, with female members...’ He vividly remembers the day he took part in his first ‘action’ against the archetypal, wicked landlord—a thrilling, heady experience fraught with no unease whatsoever. ‘The landlord was overconfident no one will be able to harm him...because he had humiliated our women, we cut off his penis and put it in his own mouth’.

Pranav Vidyarthi of Jehanabad (Bihar) joined Party Unity after his ‘first murder’ of a Bhoomi Sena (upper caste army) man who had killed his relative. Vidyarthi had been intimately associated with the Naxalite struggle in order to acquire and redistribute *gair mazurua* (village commons) and ceiling surplus lands in and around his village. He was in Aurangabad jail at the time of fieldwork; the years of bloodshed still held for him a core and local agenda, 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 dare talk down to another man)'.

Killing without regret, death as martyrdom

For Committed cadre like Anil or Vidyarthi, knifing the zamindar was not just practice that led directly to freedom from oppression, but also a physical symbol of newly won power and strength. For others like Mahato, killing was a privilege in the line of duty. 'I was so happy the first time I got a gun...didn't take long to learn. Many people died... we took it in our stride.' Even Jopan Manjhi, who was much younger than Mahato when he was first handled a gun, reiterated, 'I have never felt confused about what I am doing, not even the first time I had to kill'. No strangers to violence, the few inhibitions they may still have had dissolved in the long years of training that went into making a 'hardcore'. Manjhi recalled quietly, '*Bahuto ko chheh inch chhota kiya* (we beheaded many)...in Hazaribagh we cut off both hands of one man for taking percentage (of development contract money)'.

The Committed cannot be identified by their willingness to die, as the imminence of death is factored into the very nature of Naxalite work. Even the Opportunist grapples with this probability as he negotiates what he wants out of the movement and its affected parties (the state, the poor, etc.). However, it is the Committed who go beyond the pragmatic acceptance of death as a work hazard and willingly embrace it as sacrifice for a larger cause, which leads to martyrdom. Martyrdom here is not an otherworldly reward, but constitutes the elevation of an ordinary cadre into an idealised hero *within the party*. As Manjhi remarked, 'I am a highly respected cadre. If something happens to me, they will make me a martyr'.

III

Opportunists

Nine armed cadre are categorised as 'Opportunists'. Mostly from well-off upper or middle caste households, these men join late (often in mid-life)

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and associate with Naxal parties with clearly formulated personal agendas. They join the party for the short term, and are likely to defect or betray it. Among his colleagues, the Opportunist is the least likely to die for the movement (see Table 2).

Not victims of oppression

Most Opportunists had prior familiarity with the use of arms and with physical violence as a legitimate means to secure personal goals. Often, an immediate reason for joining the party was to seek refuge from the law.

An example is Pappu, a 23 year-old from an influential Rajput family in Lalgadh, Palamu. They owned more than 35 acres of land, tilled by *bandhua* (bonded) labour.⁸ Pappu fled his village in 2000 after attempting to murder his elder brother's killer. After whiling a few months away in a government job secured for him by his father with a bribe of ₹35,000, he joined the MCC the same year. After two years he was made deputy commander, and at the time of my fieldwork, had just been promoted to the rank of area commander, with a transfer to Chhattisgarh. While he had so far not been able to make more than a few hundred rupees every month, he was quite confident of making big money with the party in times to come.

Personal connections

Opportunists often rely on family connections or other 'influence' to exempt them from Naxal rules of justice and fair play. Ex-MCC commander, Baiju, for instance, 'surrendered' to the Jharkhand police under then Chief Minister Babulal Marandi's amnesty programme in 2001, but said cryptically that he continues to be useful to the party. 'If they call me on a date⁹ I have to go...I have just returned after organising the annual wedding ceremony'.¹⁰ Later, he admitted that family connections had kept him alive.

⁸ Ironically, putting an end to *bandhua* or bonded labour has been critical to the Naxalite agenda in Bihar and Jharkhand.

⁹ Naxalite commanders periodically report to an immediate superior at a prearranged time and location. These meetings are referred to in party lingo as 'dates'.

¹⁰ Between April and May, the MCCI hosted an annual group marriage ceremony for armed cadre who wished to wed. Baiju said the affair cost about a million rupees in 2003.

Table 2
Naxalites/Opportunists: Socio-economic Profile

Sr No.	Alias	Organisation	Type of Association	Position	Sex	Caste	Caste Type	Education_Self	Age at FW	Est HH Income/Standard of Living	Other Occupation	Marital Status	Education_Spouse	Occupation_Spouse	Place of Origin/Village/District
1	Vijay Singh	MCCI	Jailed	Zonal Committee Member	M	Dalit	SC	Matriculate	34	Low		Married	Illiterate	Agriculture (self owned + labour)	Navi Nagar, Aurangabad
2	Satendra Ram	MCCI	Ex (expelled)	Armed Cadre	M	Dalit	SC	Matriculate	29	High	Agriculture (self owned)	Married	9th standard	Agriculture (self owned)	Soleh, Dalgungj
3	Bajju	MCCI	Ex (surrendered)	Armed Cadre	M	Kurmi	OBC	Matriculate	31	Medium	Police Informer/Naxal Supporter	Married	Literate	Housewife	24 Parganas
4	Kashwar Singh	MCCI	Supporter Jailed	Associate	M	Yadav	OBC	Matric (fail)	68	High		Married	Illiterate	Agriculture (self owned-supervises)	Baghaura, Aurangabad
5	Mohan	MCCI	Ex (expelled)	Area Commander	M	Kumhar	OBC	Primary school	30	Medium	Police Informer	Married	Illiterate	Housewife	Rakshi, Chandova, Latehar
6	Dileepji	MCCI	Ex/Active Supporter	Platoon Commander	M	Yadav	OBC	Middle school	34	High	RJD leader	Married	Illiterate	Housewife	Shanti, Latehar
7	Nathu Mahato	MCCI	Ex (surrendered)	Armed Cadre	M	Kurmi	OBC	Middle school	27	Medium	Police Informer	Married	Primary school	Agriculture (self owned)	Makan, Giridih
8	Pappu	MCCI	Current	Deputy Area Commander	M	Rajput	UC	Matriculate	23	High		Single	NA	NA	Lalgadh, Palamu
9	Dinesh Yadav	PW	Jailed	Zonal Committee Member	M	Yadav	OBC	Middle school	34	High		Married	Illiterate	Agriculture (self owned)	Panki, Palamu

Source: Personal fieldwork in 2003.

My father-in-law is now a senior man in the special committee...when I have invested so many years, why not a few more...Nageshwarda (senior MCCI cadre) has also offered me ₹10 lakh (one million) from the committee fund...I may start a business with it.

Stepping stone to personal goals

If Pappu or Baiju view the MCCI as a goldmine with access to big money, there are others who see it as a quick route to mainstream politics. Several are Yadavs and make the best of their connections with political parties with a strong Yadav base, like the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD). Some eventually join these parties as office bearers. Dileepji¹¹ (a Yadav), MCC platoon commander in Giridih and Koderma (Jharkhand), made enough money to buy properties in both Khelari and Ranchi. When the going got tough with a heavy police raid on his residence in 2001, he joined the RJD as their *Prakhand Adhyaksh* (local head).¹²

IV *Drifters*

Well over half the total sample (twenty-three out of forty) can be seen as ‘Drifters’, that is, men and women whose narratives described joining the Naxalite party as an occupational choice of sorts, taken in the absence of more attractive work/life options. For most, the process involved little planning, evaluation or conscious decision; in fact, most had ‘drifted’ from attending party meetings ‘along with everyone else’ to ‘supporting’ the party, to eventually enrolling in its armed cadre. A majority had used the party’s clout to resolve land and other petty disputes (with relatives/peers/neighbours), following which they became more involved.

Yet, these foot soldiers must by no means be viewed as transient participants of the movement. Once in, drifters are loyal to the party,

¹¹ The prefix ‘ji’ is attached (to original names/pseudonyms) as a mark of respect, both in the party and in local communities within which Naxal parties operate.

¹² While MCC–RJD connections are infamous, links with political parties were not restricted to them. For instance, Dinesh Yadav of PW, a much-wanted zonal commander captured by the Jharkhand police in 1999, spoke about the PW’s high principles versus the corruption and organisational chaos in the MCC. Over time, he revealed his own plans to enter mainstream politics.

willingly kill for it and may even die on the job. But unlike the Committed, who are there because they believe in what they are doing, Drifters stay because they believe there is nowhere significantly better to go to.

In this section, we also look at the narratives of armed cadre Sailendra Ram, Vijay Singh and Dileep Yadav. While they are termed Opportunists in the current context (see Table 2 for profile), their narratives are included here to aid an understanding of the context that enables the seemingly ‘natural progression’ of some who join as (late associate) Drifters into the ranks of Opportunists, who then exploit without a qualm a cause once close to their own lives (see Table 3).

So who really are ‘Drifters’? If it’s not the ideological cause they are killing for, what is it that drives them to a life of unending violence and uncertainty? What is it in this work that makes it worth their while?

Many early associates, few oppressed

Unlike the Committed or Opportunists, almost half of those categorised as ‘Drifters’ (eleven out of twenty-three) joined as children, between the ages of ten and sixteen. Given that all but one Committed cadre (Jopan Manjhi) were ‘late associates’ and that the Opportunists include no early associates, it would seem that *most* of those who join Naxalite parties *early* in their lives are in fact *Drifters*.

Of these eleven, only two—both from Bihar—had memories of caste oppression. Both joined and killed willingly for the party, but not with the larger cause in mind. Mohan Lohar, for instance, joined the MCC when he was fourteen (in 1992) and studying in the local school in village Dhammi-Simmi (Aurangabad). ‘*Rajput ladke wahan bandook lekar aata tha...ham ka kare? Apna lathi lekar jaye ka?* (The Rajput boys used to bring guns to school. What should I have taken—my grazing stick?).’ In Aurangabad jail at the time of fieldwork, he asked angrily what good all this ‘writing’ would do. ‘People like us are born to suffer and then die...conditions inside my cell are so bad that you would not be able to stand for a minute...and you call us Naxalites?’¹³

Unlike Vidyarthi, who stays loyal to the party believing that he contributed to a worthwhile cause, Lohar’s listless wish to return to ‘the

¹³ Most of the Left extremists I met with preferred the term ‘*krantikari*’ or revolutionary to ‘Naxalite’ (associated with derogatory upper caste and police usage).

Table 3
Navalites /Drifters: Socio-economic Profile

Sr No.	Alias	Organisation	Type of Association	Position	Sex	Caste	Caste Type	Education_Self	Age at F/W	Est HH Income/Standard of Living	Other Occupation	Marital Status	Education_Spouse	Occupation_Spouse	Place of Origin-Village/District
1	Navjyoti	MCCI-Nari Mukti Sangh	On Bail	Armed Cadre	F	Santhali	ST	Literate	21	Low		Single	NA	NA	Navada, Girdih
2	Isha	MCCI-Nari Mukti Sangh	Current	Area Commander	F	Dalit	SC	Intermediate-Ongoing	18	Medium		Single	NA	NA	Sunduru, Lohardagga
3	Suresh	PW	Current	State Youth Committee member	M	Kahar	OBC	Graduate	25	High		Single	NA	NA	Chattarpur, Palamu
4	Vilas Paswan	MCCI	Ex/Active Supporter	Armed Cadre	M	Dalit	SC	Graduate	27	High	Agriculture/Sakshartha	Single	NA	NA	Bhurwa (Patan block), Palamu
5	Suraj Yadav	MCCI	Jailed	Armed Cadre	M	Yadav	OBC	Postgraduate +LLB	36	High	Vahini	Married	Literate	Housewife	Baghaura, Aurangabad
6	Chandra	MCCI	Jailed	Undisclosed	M	Ghatwar	OBC	Matriculate	28	Medium		Married	Illiterate	Agriculture (self owned)	Mamadi, Dhanbad
7	Romeshji	MCCI	Current	Sub Zonal Commander	M	Oron	ST	Intermediate	47	Medium		Married	Matric (fail)	Agriculture (self owned +labour)	Lohardagga
8	Siyaram Manjhi	MCCI	Ex/Active Supporter	Undisclosed	M	Dalit	SC	Graduate	36	Medium	Agriculture (self owned)	Married	Matriculate	Agriculture (self owned)	Naro, Dhanbad
9	Mamlal Mahato	MCCI	Ex-Expelled	Armed Cadre	M	Kurmi	OBC	Illiterate	33	Low		Married	Illiterate	Agriculture (self owned)	Naro, Dhanbad
10	Kumar Singh	MCCI	Current	Sub Zonal Commander	M	Rajput	UC	Matriculate	43	High		Married	Middle school	Housewife	Fursuni, Lohardagga
11	Sunilji	MCCI	Current	Undisclosed	M	Rajput	UC	Graduate	25	High		Single	NA	NA	Madanpur block, Aurangabad

(Table 3 continued)

(Table 3 continued)

Sr No. Alias	Organisation	Type of Association	Position	Sex	Caste	Caste Type	Education_Self	Age at FW of Living	Est HH Income/Standard of Living	Other Occupation	Marital Status	Education_Spouse	Occupation_Spouse	Place of Origin-Village/District
12	Raghunandan Yadav	PW	Jailed	M	Yadav	OBC	Matriculate	35	Medium		Married	Illiterate	Agriculture (self owned)	Sahabigha, Jehanabad
13	Rinku	MCCI	Current	M	Rajput	UC	Middle school	16	Medium		Single	NA	NA	Mahuaadabr, Latehar
14	Brijesh	PW	Current	M	Rajput	UC	Middle school	17	Medium		Single	NA	NA	Mahuaadabr, Latehar
15	Nitesh	MCCI	Ex-Active Supporter	M	Rajput	UC	Intermediate	21	High	Agriculture (self owned)	Single	NA	NA	Ranka, Palamu
16	Piyush Nath	MCCI	On Bail	M	UA	OBC	9th pass	35	Medium	BDO contracts	Married	Illiterate	Housewife	Sheetapur, Dhanbad
17	Manishji	MCCI	Current	M	UA	UA	UA	22	Medium	Agriculture (self owned)	UA	UA	UA	Hazaribagh
18	Mohan Lohar	MCCI	Jailed	M	Dalit	SC	Middle school	25	Low		Single	NA	NA	Dhamni Simmi,
19	Harihar Paswan	MCCI	Jailed	M	Dalit	SC	Illiterate	45	Medium		Married	Illiterate	Agriculture (self owned +share cropping)	Navl Nagar Rafiganj, Aurangabad
20	Turi	MCCI	Ex-Expelled	M	UA	ST	UA	27	Medium		Married	UA	UA	Pirtand, Giridih
21	Chander Rana	MCCI	On Bail	M	UA	ST	Matric (fail)	35	Medium		Married	Illiterate	Agriculture (self owned)	Chumukdia, Tundi,
22	Nagarjun	MCCI	Jailed	M	Dalit	SC	Middle school	35	Medium		Married	Illiterate	Agriculture (self owned)	Dhanbad
23	Pandeyji	MCCI	Ex	M	Bhumihar	UC	Post graduate + PGD	28	Medium	Police Informer	Married	Middle school	Housewife	Lesliganj, Palamu
														Ara, Panki, Palamu

Source: Personal fieldwork in 2003.

same Naxalbari, what else' is driven as much by early association and training as a closure of options. While Drifters from disadvantaged backgrounds share Vidyarthi's anger against an unfair system, they do not share his drive and commitment to the larger Naxalite agenda of change. Their narratives are often deeply riddled by despair.

Most early Drifters from 'prosperous households'

The remaining nine early Drifters in my sample joined between the mid-1990s to just after the turn of the century. Seven are, by their own account, from 'prosperous households'. Four are upper caste (Rajputs). So, who are these 'prosperous' Drifters? Why are children from erstwhile 'enemy' families joining Naxalite parties?

Manishji, deputy commander of an MCCI dasta, whom I met in Kotila (Hariharganj, Palamu),¹⁴ had had 'no problems of his own'. Having left home (Hazaribagh, Jharkhand) at the age of fourteen, he said the party's enemies were zamindars, but could not explain the work they did in Kotila, a village that had none.¹⁵

Sixteen year old area commander, Rinkuji, joined the MCC from a zamindar family. Of Mahuadabr village in Latehar (once part of Palamu), they had a large *pucca* house, 30 acres of land and rare amenities like a self-owned well. They were Rajputs, the dominant caste in the village. I was told that Rinku had taken the MCC's help to get someone beaten up before he joined the party. His younger brother, by default now the jaunty local *dada* of the village, said Rinku joined *shaukiya* (of his own wish) because he enjoyed being with them. Although his immediate family did not live in Mahuadabr anymore, Rinku came in to the village to meet me late one night. His version of events was as follows.

I was twelve...they used to come to the village to hold meetings...talk about Chandrashekhar Azad, Khudiram Bose, Marx, Lenin...say let's

¹⁴ A bus from Daltongunj left my escort and I 13 kilometres away from this remote village, and it took hours of trekking on a dirt track into the night before we arrived. The dasta came in at 3 a.m., but it was not before another round of hard questioning, search of person and belongings, examination of identity proof, etc., that we talked.

¹⁵ Palamu, the site of bloody wars between Naxalites and landed classes well into the 1990s, did not have many zamindars by the time of fieldwork.

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?¹⁶

Mahuadabr is in many ways prototypical of the life conditions within which young people, from even ostensibly 'prosperous' families, join Naxal parties today. A remote village of barely thirty-five households, set in the midst of mountainous, heavily forested terrain, it is an easy stopover for the ultra Left. The majority here are Dalits—about twenty-five households. The rest are Rajputs and tribal households (mainly Oraons and Kharwars). Given that life for the inhabitants is hard—no electricity, limited water resources, no public healthcare and no high school—it is predictably fertile recruitment ground for dastas.

An extended stay here provided me with an inside view of the pauperisation of even landed families in Jharkhand, changes that may account for the rising number of so-called 'forwards' amongst the Naxal cadre. The family I lived with was of the Rajput caste, descendents of Narhar Singh, who had ruled a large province in Palamu. Post-Independence, they were left with about 150 acres of land, of which fifty was lost to erstwhile *raiya*s or tenant farmers. Chandrahar Singh (name changed), one of four grandsons of the former king and grandfather of PW area commander Brijesh (whom I met later), had 25 acres at the time of fieldwork.

The Singh household was, however, none the better off for that historical lineage, nor even for being in possession of 25 acres of land, no small ownership in a region where many survive on a fraction of that amount. After an unfriendly house call from partywallahs in the mid-1990s, they increased the rate for *majdoo*ri (labour) on their fields. From a daily wage of two kilos of *dhan* (paddy) plus two meals, the rate was increased to three kilos of rice plus two meals. Singh admitted that the *sarkari* (official) rate was ₹64 a day, but said he did not have the

¹⁶ I was intrigued to find that this slip of a boy, whom I was having a hard time recognising as an MCCI area commander, slept lightly and was up and ready to leave before the first light of day. Rinku was not chivalrous. He was brusque and used fairly crude language in his interactions with peers and local people. When he stopped at a local tea shop, he did not offer to pay; neither did the storeowner ask for money.

resources to pay more. As I could see in the course of my stay with them, the family was finding it difficult to make ends meet. Low rainfall, poor alternate irrigation facilities, an inability to pay for labour—and their children's disinterest in agriculture—had reduced their fields to wastelands. The rice they procured from rain-fed fields—even in a good season—barely lasted a few months, and dwindling income had taken its toll on basic nutrition and healthcare, among other things.

Given these circumstances, Brijesh's family was in many ways better off after he joined PW. His elder brother set up a motorbike repair shop in a neighbouring town. Their sister was married off with an adequate dowry. His mother said that they had been facing penury and humiliation on every front, and it was Brijesh's decision that changed everyone's stance towards them.

Rinku or Brijesh's involvement with the MCCI is an indicator of the rapidly changing profile of 'Naxalites', of the influx of young people from landed, relatively well-to-do and even upper caste families into these parties—families that not so long ago were at the receiving end of their wrath. In the late 1980s, two of Brijesh's uncles were tortured and hacked to death by the CPI (ML) Party Unity (colloquially called PU) in full sight of their family members. Yet, under current circumstances, Brijesh's grandfather does not think it strange that his grandson should join those who were once his bitter opponents. He says that in the final take, his grandson joined PW because it gave him a stature he found exciting at his age: 'The school here is only till the eighth...the boys have nothing else to do...they get excited by the *aavo-bhaav* (demeanour) of the Naxalites'.

If early Drifters like Lohar joined Naxal parties to escape deprivation and indignity, Manish, Rinku or Brijesh joined almost unthinkingly, eager to escape the rut and excited at the prospect of the unknown. Even though they were from landed, relatively better-off families, they did not see a future in their current circumstances. Joining the MCCI or PW, on the other hand, brought instant rewards—economic and social—including intervention sought in petty family/peer disputes. Those who joined from families with a higher socio-economic status also seemed to have a quicker career trajectory within the party. Rinku said new recruits with his background could typically get to be deputy area commander after as little as two years of training.

For those like Manish, Rinku or Brijesh, life as a Naxalite also seems to live up to the promise of immediate power and adventure, even if it is harder to adjust to. Rinku admitted, 'I wasn't very happy the first few months...it was hard and no party gives you arms training initially'. Nevertheless, he doesn't think he had got a raw deal. 'Anyway, it's not as if all of us will get jobs now if we leave the party'. Although the agenda of a larger good or change is couched in rhetorical terms (if at all) for them, 'early Drifters', too, stay on with the party long after the first flush of life change has faded and lost its charm. Often, even the not-so-distant possibility of death is discounted, or romanticised. As Manish left Kotila to continue his trek through kilometres of rough terrain—to ensure the *dasta* was out of the village before daybreak—his parting words were an upbeat, '*jindagi rahi to fir milange* (see you again, if I am alive)!' Rinku, too, is dismissive of the possibility that he may be killed. He says breezily, '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]'.

Women Drifters

Contrary to my assumption (based on initial interviews with the regional police force and news reports) that women who joined Naxalite *dastas* were victims of social oppression, exploitation, desertion, etc., the narratives of MCCI cadre, Navjyoti and Isha, defied simplistic interpretation. Neither Navjyoti nor Isha were victims of zamindari (or other upper caste) oppression, and they had not suffered atrocities at home either. Though far from well off, it was not poverty that had led them to the MCCI. In fact, there seemed to be more commonalities than differences in the contexts that drove these girls and Rinku or Brijesh to join the Naxalites.

One of the two, Navjyoti, had been 'captured' by the Jharkhand police on charges of being a key MCCI operative in the 2001 attack on the Topchachi police picket in Giridih (thirteen policemen were killed here in one of the most audacious attacks on the Jharkhand police force). I met her a year later in Navada, a Santhali hamlet in the western Tundi ravines bordering Dhanbad and Giridih districts of Jharkhand, where she had spent her childhood and where she met with the MCC. Out on bail only after the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC)

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intervened against the inhuman torture she underwent in police custody, Navjyoti was hostile and denied any knowledge of the MCCI. By the time I reached her home, she had been informed of my 'movements'. Tensely poised, surrounded by those she trusted, she shot a volley of questions at me with an authority that belied her age, relaxing only when she was certain that I had arrived alone and carried no arms, cameras or recorders.

Over a length of time, she did speak—not about the MCCI but about herself, her life experiences and aspirations—providing glimpses into the forces that had drawn her to the party. The youngest of three sisters (the other two were married), she recalled thinking that she might become a 'leader'. '*Ham soche achha hai, kuch seekh rahe hai...leader bhi ban sakte hai* (I thought it's good that I am learning something...I may even become a leader)'. Those who had known her before she left home—including a teacher associated with the national literacy mission—remembered how she became close to the 'partywallahs': 'She had a good voice and was useful to the Nari Mukti Sangh (MCC women's front)...she got a lot of attention from them...sense of importance.' This teacher believes she had a different 'bent of mind' from other girls (including her sisters), and that it was the MCC's recognition of her self-worth and promise of empowerment that led her to them. Not all that different from her male compatriots, Navjyoti, too, saw the party as an avenue leading towards opportunity and recognition.

Trapped by the police under the Prevention of Terrorism Act and deserted by the MCCI (barring rare exceptions, Naxal parties are known to swiftly withdraw association with captured cadre), Navjyoti was cornered on all fronts when we met. Despite the brutalising experiences of capture, torture and subsequent near total closure of options, the spark to overcome her life conditions had survived. As I was to leave, she said, 'I will never forget what these people (police) did to me. But now I have to think about what I should do next. If I have the support of more women like you, I can do a lot even now'. She added, 'If you have come so far to meet me, I too can come to Delhi with you'.

Unlike Navjyoti, who did not have much formal education, MCCI commander Isha was a high school student when her parents filed a 'case' against her with the party. She recalled walking six kilometres to school, then again to a 'coaching'—sometimes without lunch. Her father, a 'farmer' in Sunduru (Lohardagga), did not have much land, but there

was, as she put it, 'enough to eat'. When I met her with her dasta in Khelari (Ranchi), she said her parents had objected to her 'affair' with a boy of another caste. 'I used to say I would marry only him, even if I die'. When the 'party' summoned her for an 'enquiry', the commander 'Shyamji' asked her to get involved in Nari Mukti Sangh activities. 'I told him now I won't live at home any more. Either you take me with you, or I will run away.' While Isha says that she left home because she did not want to compromise on her love, she also recalls with pride how she was appreciated by the MCC commander: 'I was even asked to give talks at various meetings'.

Once she joined the dasta, she went through a period of intensive training.

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 corn fodder to eat. I refused, but Kumar *bhaiya* (MCCI sub-zonal commander in the region, with whose consent she spoke to me) said learn to eat whatever you get.

When I met with her, Isha was an evidently influential commander in the party. 'Now I have a uniform, my gun...things have been published about me in the press...I have never given any interviews, but they must have seen me in *jan adalats*'.¹⁷

Isha is open to building conjugal ties within the party: 'If seniors (in the party) say marry, I will'. It is not a matter of importance, though, unlike for other women colleagues, many of whom, she adds derisively, join 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?' Isha admits that many women—even in her own dasta—joined only when all other 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 herself, however, has an edge over them. 'The girls here are very jealous of me. The sub-zonal gives me a lot of importance. He makes me conduct most meetings'.

¹⁷ Jan adalats or people's courts set up by Naxalite groups to deliver a rough and ready justice gained momentum across 'liberated areas' in the 1990s. After the formation of Jharkhand state and the penetration of police forces into erstwhile Naxalite strongholds, these courts have become rarer.

Late associate Drifters

As many as ten ‘late associate’ Drifters had also joined from economically comfortable households, eight from upper and middle castes. All but two are from Jharkhand. For these men—including the few from poorer households—joining the MCCI or PW was often an outcome of the failure of other avenues of ‘achievement’ or ‘profitable enterprise’. Most had cleared at least the matriculate examination. Several were students or unemployed when they joined front organisations, but went on to become hardcore members.

Suresh, a twenty-five year old science graduate, for instance, was at the time of fieldwork, one of five members of the Bihar Jharkhand State Youth Committee of PW. His family (of the Kahar caste) lived in the busy interiors of Daltongunj city (Palamu), but owned about an acre of land in nearby Chattarpur. Suresh joined the Communist Party of India (Marxist–Leninist) (CPI [ML]) Liberation youth front—Inquilabi Naujavan Sabha—while pursuing his intermediate studies, but quit after three years.

I wanted to become a *crorepati* (multimillionaire)...After college, I took the help of the MLA (Member of Legislative Assembly) and started a loan banking company...the Bihar government banned it in 1994...In the same period I was seeing a girl...they forced her to marry another man. I wanted to kill the man she married, even got the arms...but she said what has happened has happened...I joined PWG on the rebound...

While hard luck at work and in love may have precipitated the move, Suresh had been considering shifting to a hard-line party for some time: ‘People were not so scared of *Ma-le* (Liberation)...but PW or MCC...people are terrified...whoever joins them gets a place in society’.

Pandeyji, a Bhumihar youth from Panki (Palamu) and a postgraduate in History, had also been looking, much like Suresh, to ‘make something’ of his life when he met the party.

I was drifting around after matric, doing nothing for a while. Big (MCC) names like Vinod Yadav Vidrohi, Jugal Pal, Gopalda, Gautam Paswan used to come to our area...At one meeting, they asked me to speak...then asked me to stay back and we talked...I later attended a

Central Committee-level meeting in Balunath (Latehar)...I had doubts as I am a Bhumihar, but they said we are not *forward virodhis* (enemies of upper castes), we are against oppressors...said they would help me study further...it works for them.

After several unsuccessful attempts to find employment with the Bihar police, Romesh, an intermediate degree holder from a landed Scheduled Tribe family in Lohardagga (Jharkhand), got a 'prestigious job' as 'machine operator' in the Wazirpur industrial area in Delhi.¹⁸ When the factory closed down, Romesh—by now 'permanent' and a trade union leader—returned to Lohardagga and became involved with an adivasi revival organisation, the Oraon Sarna Samiti and, eventually, because of his growing support base, with the Congress. 'By 1995 MCC started getting interested in me, would call me to jan adalats...I didn't think so much, felt if I help them, they will help me.' In time, mounting police surveillance left him with no choice but to become a 'whole-timer': 'I had brought VRS (Voluntary Retirement Scheme) of ₹45,000, but that was almost over. The police would anyway have killed me. I thought I might as well join'. Despite teething troubles, his education and diverse experience were valued in the party, and he made it through the ranks relatively quickly.

When we met (near the Barasan forest area in Mayapur, Latehar) in 2003, Romeshji, now a commander of sub-zonal rank, was unsure what the 'international struggle' aimed to change, but took pride in his own role in the party. 'I have struggled very hard to reach this level...can lose it all with one mistake.' Although he joined to avoid arrest, once in—much like other Drifters and in a manner quite different from the Opportunists—he sought achievement and fulfilment within the 'workplace' of the Naxal organisation.

Late associate Drifters are more likely to drop out

Pandey recalls that once he was in the party, his views about it changed:

Just like Islam says there is no other God, MCC insists we say nothing but their point of view...they talked of *Lal Salaam* ('red salute',

¹⁸ Like most cadre—including those from landed families—Romesh had never seen agriculture as preferred 'employment'.

signifying Communist brotherhood) but lower-level workers are treated differently...*dalals* (brokers) in the villages entertain and feed the MCC and then get the party to kill their enemies, who they call informers.

Besides his stated 'disillusionment', Pandey, like most of those who joined from relatively comfortable backgrounds, found the going simply too hard: 'Food and water is erratic, you never know when and where you will sleep. MCC rules say you have to do your own work, cook, wash utensils...though often the cooking would be done by women in the Nari Mukti Sangathan.' In 1996, he returned home to recover from jaundice, and was arrested: 'I had heard about TADA [Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act], where people are detained for ten to fifteen years. I thought my life would be destroyed...I became a police informer'.

Suresh, too, admits to using his position as a senior front organisation leader to return home every four or five days: 'PW has been telling me, go underground now or you will get caught by the police...but I find it very difficult after a few days...walking long distances, carrying heavy loads, no food, no bath'.

Killing not problematised

As discussed earlier, for most Drifters, killing was devoid of the triumph and vindication that described the practice followed by the Committed against the zamindari. The modalities of killing had also changed for the Naxalites by the time of my fieldwork. From the direct and tactile methods of the 1980s and the 1990s (as when a peasant cadre would slit the throat of a landlord), the usual practice in Jharkhand (as in Chhattisgarh, West Bengal, etc.) now was 'killing from a distance', by shooting at the enemy or triggering a bomb, for instance. The post-millennium generation of Naxalites (mostly Drifters—Brijesh, Rinku, Nilesh, Isha, etc.) had, in fact, seen a far greater dependence on methods of attack such as landmines and other explosives, which did not involve direct combat.

Yet, paradoxically, guns remained the best perks of the 'job'. Killing was either an adventure or a non-event, but was 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, happy with neither the MCC's

organisational culture nor with the hardship involved in the job, had fond memories of his acquaintance with arms in the party. 'I enjoyed it...but when you can cut open a man with a knife, why waste a bullet...it used to cost ₹60 a piece even in 1995'.

Quite evidently, the Drifters are not driven by compulsion or coercion. Nor is their evident willingness to kill programmed by conformity to authority alone.¹⁹ It is just as difficult to see these young boys and girls—even if they did kill without much ado or regret—as extraordinary (destructive) psychological types.²⁰ As Brijesh's grandfather put it, 'there are differences in all my children...he (Brijesh) was always a rebellious child...in a hurry to get everything, for himself, and for us.'

Although they killed neither in anger nor out of hatred for the Other, the Drifters' narratives, in fact, indicate a significant acclimatisation to and legitimisation of violence as a means to an end even *before* joining Naxalite groups. Within a larger ethical framework, the capacity to use violence was already desirable as an indicator of strength and power, while values of tolerance and non-violence were seen as weaknesses. Suresh had been in awe of 'partywallahs with guns' since he was a boy. 'When I was eight or nine years old, PU (Party Unity) dastas used to cross my village. I was afraid, but thought I would like to be like them one day.' Many, in fact, had a prior familiarity with the use of firearms in interactions within their family circles. To cite just one example, Nilesh, who joined at thirteen from a Rajput family (in Ranka, Palamu), 'had full arms training at home', even before he started 'going with MCC'.

¹⁹ Milgram's path-breaking and controversial experiments (see Milgram 1974) established a decisive correlation between obedience to (perceived) authority and the capability to inflict violence. Holocaust theorist Browning's influential book, *Ordinary Men* (1992), dealt in a similar vein with the question of how 'ordinary Germans overcame reluctance and inhibition to become professional killers' (Browning 1996: 15). Tracing the path of the Reserve Police Battalion 101 from their first orders at Jozefow, Poland, to the *Erntefest* massacres, Browning reveals the transformation of ordinary Germans into cold-blooded killers. My findings with regard to the Naxalites are quite different from Browning's. The battalion's first mass execution duty at Jozefow left the men 'depressed, angered, embittered and shaken' (Browning 1992: 69), but very few Naxalites had misgivings about violence.

²⁰ In *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, Fromm relates the 'obsession with violence and destruction' among some 'revolutionaries' to a (destructive) 'necrophilous passion' (Fromm 1977: 33).

Some late Drifters turn Opportunists

Most late Drifters, unlike Opportunists, join with some empathy for the Naxalite cause. However, with neither the ideological conviction of the Committed nor the impressionability and (depth of) training of early Drifters, quite a few lose sight of the original cause, give in to ‘corruption’ and move into the ranks of Opportunists.²¹ It is the poor who are the most vulnerable to this slide.

Sailendra Ram, MCCI sub-zonal commander forced to resign on charges of corruption, belonged to a Dalit family in village Soleh in Palamu. With about seven *bighas* of land, there was never enough to feed everyone, and he recalls doing *mazdoori* (labour) as a child. Already involved with activities of the MCC front, Mazdoor Sangathan Samiti, he joined the MCC dasta at eighteen ‘to prove a point’ after a fight at home. In Daltongunj, where he now lived with his wife and children, Sailendra insisted that he quit the party as he did not agree with their style of working; however, his friends said he was expelled. ‘Though he was himself a victim of oppression, he started enjoying his power too much’.

An Opportunist in the present classification, Ram, like many other late Drifters, joined to seek escape from immediate circumstances without really evaluating what he was getting into. Somewhere along the way, he shifted categories. Unlike the Drifters who still measured success and growth primarily in relation to the power and prestige acquired *within* the party, Ram turned into the Opportunist who exploits the party for quick gains.

Vijay Singh, ex-zonal committee member of the MCCI—and a high security prisoner in Latehar jail at the time of fieldwork—again amassed considerable personal wealth in his tenure with the party. Originally from a Dalit family in Navi Nagar, Aurangabad (once the epicentre of the zamindar–Naxal conflict), Singh became too powerful to evict, and betrayal by peers in the party facilitated his capture in 2001. He broke down under severe torture and, thanks to his confession, the Jharkhand police recovered over ₹2 million from an underground bunker. The

²¹ While all the ‘motivational profiles’ discussed (premised on the cadre’s *ongoing* relationship with an ideological cause) are theoretically porous, potentially allowing for movement of cadre from one category to another in different time–space coordinates, the shift into Opportunism seems most likely to occur from late associate Drifters.

Latehar jail superintendent recalled that when he was first brought in, both his legs were broken, and that it took months of treatment before he could walk again.

Due to his 'high security' status, I could meet with Vijay only in the presence of the jailor. Initially hostile, he narrated his story over time:

We had four to five *kattas* of land...no dignity, nothing at all...When I was small, the zamindar's men would give me *roti* (bread) and salt and say this is it—now eat it up fast...by the time I was in the ninth class I had realised 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...in 1988 I met the party...

For the ambitious and frustrated Vijay, MCC was—as for most Drifters—in effect, the first available forum for personal achievement. His experience of hardship gave him an edge over many others—including late Drifters from better-off families who, despite their initial promise, could not cope with the physical and emotional stresses of guerrilla existence: 'I have moved around in these jungles since I was born, lived in these conditions for as long as I can remember...for people like us, this hardship is no big deal'. In time, with quick progression in the party, it also became a tempting stepping stone to long desired power and wealth. While his experience of oppression initially lent him an empathy with the Naxalite cause, he had never seen himself as personally committed to the 'larger good' of his people, and did not relate his own accumulation of wealth to the continuing deprivation of the poor. As he saw it, he had only taken a slice out of the money belonging to the rich. The transition from late Drifter to Opportunist was, therefore, not riddled with any troubling ethical barriers, only the (initial) fear of retribution if caught swindling party funds.

Even ex-MCCI cadre Dileep Yadav, who used his position to make a small fortune—and later joined mainstream politics to dodge the law—had at one time seen the worst of poverty. Yadav remembers losing his elder sister to illness when he was twelve: 'We managed to get a doctor to write a prescription, but couldn't buy the medicines. She died in front of my eyes'. At fifteen he was sent to Bombay with a dalal (tout), where he worked for ₹6.40 a day. After he returned in 1989 to attend to his

ailing father, Yadav joined the MCC front Jan Pratirodh Sangharsh Manch. After four years, he was asked to take charge of an MCC armed unit in Barwadih in Palamu: 'After only a year and a half I was transferred to Giridih as platoon commander...I was very happy to be promoted to this big post...only the best men make it to the platoons'. Yadav, who 'joined work' with a Naxal group almost experimentally and was not particularly committed to the Naxal ideology, nevertheless enjoyed the job and moved quickly up the organisational ladder: 'Initially I had a zest for it. They used to say we will liberate Hindustan...The party also helped me...got my younger sister married, helped my family monetarily.'

Sometime thereafter, dissatisfaction set in—although Yadav is not clear about the chronology of events. He says he was already 'disillusioned' by the kind of people being taken in by the party—'Bhumihar, chor, daku (upper castes, thieves, dacoits)'—but the turning point came in 1997 (three years after he joined the armed cadre, and less than a year after he was promoted to the rank of platoon commander). 'There was a huge *baithak* (meeting) in Parasnath Pahadi in Pirtand (mountain ranges in Giridih district of Jharkhand)...many foreigners...*boras* and *boras* (sacks) of marked notes were being sent with them...lot of money was being sent to Nepal'. Yadav says he questioned people in the party about where the money was going. 'They didn't like it...said these are the people who have developed this *sangathan* (organisation) in India'.²²

Yadav left the platoon soon after, based himself in Khelari and continued to, as he puts it, 'support the party from the side'. Although Yadav (now an RJD office bearer) insists he makes his living from '*thekas*' (government contract work) organised by friends, his 'friends' say he makes big money siphoning off 'levies' collected in the coal-rich Khelari in the name of the party.²³

²² Yadav, a Drifter turned Opportunist, quite likely uses this as a retrospective justification to posit (perhaps as much to himself as to others) an ethical reason for leaving the party.

²³ Khelari's rich coalfields and richer coal mafia provided for a happy nexus between the illicit coal industry, political parties and the MCCI (PW did not have a presence here). Several senior cadre made their fortunes here through side businesses, eventually going on to buy huge properties in Khelari, even in Ranchi. Most of those who managed to pull it off did so with the blessings of political bigwigs (mainly RJD), and paradoxically, the MCCI as well. I was, in fact, able to meet other cadre, and later also the MCCI dasta in the region, only with Yadav's help.

Glaring inequities between the ‘literate ideology’²⁴ and the practice of the MCCI (and other Naxalite groups) seemed to be something almost every cadre I spoke with had confronted in his or her tenure with the party. But while late associates amongst the Committed chose to stubbornly stick it out (like Sadanand Mahato) or quit (like Anil), Yadav, who joined as a late Drifter, simply moved into the ranks of the Opportunists. ‘I began to feel that there was too much exploitation within the party...*koi khat raha hai, koi parde ke aad me kama raha hai* (someone slogs, someone else makes all the money secretly)’. He adds scornfully, ‘You know who gets *izzat* (respect) in the party...the absolute fool’.

V

Conclusion

As opposed to the dominant conception of Naxalites in both lay and academic discourse as landless agricultural labourers or poor peasants, the majority of the MCCI and PW armed cadre I met were, in fact, from landed families. While some were Dalits and adivasis, the majority were middle and upper caste (see Tables 1, 2 and 3 for details).

Their stories warn against any easy essentialisation of Naxalites into categories carried over from past discourse on the subject: rich–poor, landed–landless, Dalits–upper castes and so on. Area commander Brijesh was a Rajput and had 25 acres of land. Yet, his family was finding it difficult to make ends meet. Oraon sub-zonal commander Romesh had about the same, but preferred to work in a factory in Delhi. For him, agriculture was never an option. Isha, an MCC commander, whose father was a Dalit ‘farmer’, had ‘enough to eat’. Yet, she doggedly walked six kilometres to school each way every day in pursuit of ‘other dreams’. Navjyoti, alleged MCC hardcore from an impoverished Santhali tribal family, had wanted to be a ‘leader’.

Land or no land, rich or poor, it was really aspirations as ordinary and universal as recognition, achievement, status, power play (with peers and community, not class enemies) and *izzat* (respect) that finalised choices for most. In a changed socio-political context, however, *izzat*

²⁴ Ray (1998: 43–48) uses this term to differentiate between the documented, codified ideology of a movement and the meaning it holds at an existential level for its participants.

was not so much about honour or dignity demanded from the hated Other as much as the respect sought amongst one's own peers, or one's own community, in locations that haven't provided ambitious young people with other avenues of self-fulfilment and peer approval. It doesn't help that—as my findings show—these political 'choices' are often made at the average age of twelve to sixteen, when young people themselves recollected finding guns and the power that came from holding them undeniably attractive.²⁵

Do these findings amount to saying that *any* armed movement is likely to have more Drifters than Committed or Opportunists? Or, for that matter, would my own findings in the region have been different ten years earlier?

To answer the second question first: it was perhaps easier to conjure up sentiment ten years ago, given that the movement was running on a powerful local cause. The proportion of those ideologically committed may well have been higher in the heyday of the movement. Yet, it is just as clear that *commitment to a larger cause* (as different from mere belief in that cause) is not really determined by caste, class, life experience or even the (early) age of joining. While most 'Committed' had indeed experienced class oppression, so had many 'Drifters'. If most Committed joined the party relatively late, so did *all* Opportunists. A determination of what *makes* one cadre Committed and another a Drifter cannot be located entirely in the social context: it would need to factor in an element of individual psychological predisposition which was outside the capacity of this study. It seemed to me that Naxalite groups (as possibly others that may have widely disparate ideologies) gather a great many young

²⁵ None of my respondents were 'children'—although many were under eighteen. But as was evident, most had met and often joined Naxal parties when they were young. Eighteen out of my sample of forty armed cadre had been associating with Naxal parties by the age of sixteen, and another ten by eighteen. To put the figures in context, as much as 70 per cent of the sample had been consistently exposed in organised forums to the idea of a cause/enemy worth killing for as teenagers, and even earlier. At least half the sample had also *decided* to join before they turned eighteen. If we remember that this sample does not include members of the *bal* (child) *dastas* of both parties, the youthful age at which these 'choices' are made is only too evident. See Rosen (2005) for an unsettling view of child soldiers across Sierra Leone, Palestine and Eastern Europe during the Holocaust—not just as passive victims, but as actors with rational choices. Also, see Trawick (2007) for a compelling account of the lives and agency of children in a Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) stronghold in war-torn Sri Lanka.

people in their net, *and when they find it*, effectively tap and channelise innate potential//bent of mind/sincerity towards their cause. As is evident from their narratives, both Jopani and Sadanand initially joined for reasons that were not very different from those that drew the Drifters in. What distinguishes the Committed Naxalites, then, is a quality as distant from Hoffer's fanatical true believer (Hoffer 1951: 82–86) as it is from Fromm's sado-masochistic authoritarian leader (Fromm 1941: 221): their subsequent sincerity to the cause espoused.

In the end, what is of significance is that although those who kill *for* the larger cause are few and far between, many more join and work as 'Drifters'. These findings are also perhaps reason enough to ask if there is indeed any armed movement, be it the Zapatistas in Mexico, Hamas in Palestine, left-wing rebels in Peru or, for that matter, the LTTE, which could have found its numbers or become a 'movement' without successfully tapping its 'Drifters'. Kalyvas makes an interesting case for the interaction between political and private identities in civil wars, pointing out that 'political violence' is not always political, and 'identities and actions cannot be reduced to decisions taken by the belligerent organizations...ideologies derived from the war's master cleavage' (Kalyvas 2003: 487). In the context of the Naxalites, I would only add that the motives of the Drifters must not be read as 'private issues' on the periphery, but as a real and deeply poignant politics of recognition that, in fact, drives the movement today.

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