Class Struggle, the Maoists and the Indigenous Question in Nepal and India

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This article compares the Maoist movements in Nepal and India, with a focus on their respective relationship to indigenous politics. The unprecedented rise of indigeneity and ethnicity in post-war Nepal was, in large part, a consequence of the Maoists’ People’s War, which paid special attention to the case of Nepal’s Janajatis through, what we call here, the “indigenous question.” In comparison, the Indian Maoists have paid less attention to the indigenous question than their Nepali counterparts, though they have created their guerrilla zones in Adivasi-dominated areas. While the Indian Maoists’ relative lack of attention to the indigenous question creates a situation in which class struggle can be presented primarily as an Adivasi movement, the danger in Nepal is that the sole focus on identity has undermined more radical demands for state restructuring. In both cases, a limited politics based on rights for particular groups has had the effect of replacing broader—even international—struggles, which have the potential to address more fundamental socio-economic inequalities by challenging the dominant politics of production, reproduction and redistribution.

In recent years the relationships between Janajatis, Adivasis and the Maoist movements in Nepal and India have attracted international attention. In Nepal, the legacy of the People’s War and two Maoist-led governments had led to the unprecedented rise of marginalised Janajati groups and propelled them onto the Nepali political scene. Following the historic Constituent Assembly (CA) elections in 2008, Janajati groups became more directly involved in demanding their rights in the making of a “new Nepal,” both inside and outside parliament. In India, the Maoist movement, underground for almost half a century, has been increasingly presented in the national and international press as an Adivasi movement, an uprising of disenfranchised tribal peoples. In both cases, through different means, a focus on identity or indigenous politics has been prioritised over class politics. In this commentary, we seek to outline some of the defining features of this shift—from class to identity—in the Maoist movements in Nepal and India, as well as to analyse its contemporary significance. In doing so, we seek to analyse the dialectical relationship between class and indigeneity, and the potential challenges of identity politics.

We do not undertake here a critical analysis of Maoist categories of class or of the Maoists’ characterisation of the national economies as semi-feudal or semi-colonial, though this is a much-needed task (see the recent volume edited by Lerche, Shah and Harriss-White 2013). Rather, we focus on the turn to indigeneity in both the Maoist movements and what this means for an analysis of class struggle. Class analysis for us means understanding class not as a static social category, but in the Marxist sense of understanding the social relations of production, whether people themselves overtly refer to class or not. Class struggle, as E P Thompson (1978) argued, is people’s struggles around antagonistic points of interest when they find themselves in structurally different positions in relation to their experience of exploitation, and may be expressed in a range of different idioms (including indigeneity). For us an analysis of class struggle must also explore whether that struggle is progressive and whether it benefits capital or not. It must consider both people’s subjective conception of the struggle they are involved in and develop an analysis of that struggle that contextualises it within a wider analysis of class relations.

Many commentators have argued that the revolutionary struggle in Nepal was decisively abandoned when the Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) (UCPN (Maoist)) joined mainstream politics, bringing the decade-long People’s War to
an end. It is true that despite being the most popular party coming out of the CA elections of 2008, in government the UCPN (Maoist) confirmed the lines of neo-liberal economic policy embraced in Nepal since the mid-1980s. Domestic and foreign investors were encouraged, concessions were made to the private sector and the nationalisation of industry was rejected. The Maoists also faced internal criticism when they put the People’s Liberation Army in cantons supervised by the United Nations (UN), dismantled their parallel administrations and were developing far too close a link with the Indian government. These criticisms led to a split in the party in June 2012. Disillusionment with the politics of the mainstream, and the Maoists’ participation in it, relegated the UCPN (Maoist) to a distant third in the 2013 CA elections. Yet, it is also the case that the rise of previously marginalised Janajati groups, in what Paff-Czarnecka (1999) has called the “ethnicisation of politics” had seen few parallels in South Asia.

Groups who faced discrimination in Nepal for centuries were making powerful demands on the writing of Nepal’s constitution. The considerable presence of Janajatis on the various constitutional committees contributed to the production of reports that raised objections to the status quo. Meanwhile, under the banner of the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) and the Indigenous Nationalities Joint Struggle Committee, Janajati groups organised major agitations, including a nationwide general strike in May 2012 demanding identity-based socialist model. These parties have also been demanding tribal populations against the terms of development imposed on them by the Indian state.

Later in 2012, a number of Janajati leaders took initiatives to form political parties aimed at uniting indigenous peoples, Dalits, Muslims, Madhesis and other oppressed groups. While these parties did not experience the breakthroughs they envisioned, shifting alliances has meant that they now have a national presence, and an impact that would have been unthinkable in previous years. For example, the Federal Socialist Forum Nepal (FSFN), which now has 15 seats in the CA and has become the fifth largest party, aims to push for the institutionalisation of the gains won for Janajatis and Madhesis under a federal, identity-based socialist model. These parties have also been involved in initiatives such as the Indigenous Nationalities National Movement (INNM), formed in October 2014 and which is working together with NEFIN in opposing the draft constitution. The scale and seriousness of these challenges to the historical dominance of the upper-caste ruling elite, that the constitution-drafting process folded without agreement on these crucial details.

In India, the Maoists have risen to new heights, described as the single largest internal security threat by the Indian Prime Minister in 2006. Indeed, the “Maoist problem” surpassed the attention given even to Kashmir or the North East in national and international media. This increased attention to the Maoist movement is a result of a number of factors. First, the neo-liberal economic policies pursued by the Indian government in recent years, backed up by an extensive counter-insurgency programme to clear out mineral-rich Adivasi-inhabited lands. Second, an increased international concern for the rights of indigenous peoples against their displacement and dispossession, which has been increasingly supported by non-governmental organisations (NGO) and social movements. Third, the coincidence of Maoist guerrilla tactics with their retreat into tribal lands.

In the 1980s, increased state repression in the agricultural plains led the Maoists to the search for territory that was more conducive to guerrilla warfare in the hilly and forested tracts of central and eastern India. The terrain was home to India’s Adivasis—tribal or indigenous populations—and also happened to be the land where the majority of India’s mineral resources are found—coal, bauxite and iron ore, in particular. With the liberalisation policies of the 1990s, the area became the target of extraction by government-supported national and multinational corporations. In this context, attempts to clear the region via an intense programme of securitisation and militarisation in the name of defending the country against the Maoists—now conveniently dubbed “terrorists” by the government—are perhaps not that surprising. The government seems bent on executing its neo-liberal development policies in the region at any cost in order to maintain high economic growth rates. As journalists, novelists and celebrities sympathetic to the revolutionary struggle began to catch the wave of attention being generated by high profile attacks and counter-attacks between the state and the insurgency, and focused their cameras and their pens on the remote forests and hills of central India, the Maoist movement was increasingly referred to as an Adivasi movement. Today, the Maoist movement is most commonly understood as the rise of India’s disenfranchised and dispossessed tribal populations against the terms of development imposed on them by the Indian state.

Whether in seeking actual political power, or in the terms through which the struggle has been represented, Janajatis or Adivasis have played dominant roles in the Maoist struggles in both Nepal and India. Here we map out the different ways in which the indigenous question has unfolded (or not) in both countries, and critically examine their consequences. This undertaking is part of a broader effort to consider the relationship between class, class struggle and identity/indigeneity in South Asia (Steer 2011, 2014; D’Mello and Shah 2013; Shah 2010), as well as to encourage and widen the scope for more general cross-country comparisons in South Asia and beyond (see, for instance, Shneiderman and Tillin 2015; Shah and Shneiderman 2013; Shah and Pettigrew 2009, 2012; Gellner 2009, 2010; Middleton and Shneiderman 2008).

**Janajati Question and Indigenous Politics in Nepal**

Against a backdrop of persistent marginalisation and subordination of ethnic groups, the creation of a “new Nepal” as an avowedly “multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-religious, multicultural” country (as defined in the Interim Constitution...

Dominant Nepali history has focused almost exclusively on the history of the Shah dynasty that ruled Nepal from 1768, when it was unified by the skilful political and military strategist Prithvi Narayan Shah, born in the principality of Gorkha in central Nepal. At this time, the time of the American and French revolutions, Prithvi Narayan Shah sought to establish Nepal as a distinctly Hindu state, and in opposition to Muslim rule in India. His dynasty, through high-caste Bahun and Chhetri influence, conquered the multiple indigenous and ethnic fiefdoms that populated the region. By the time the Ranas seized power from the Shahs in 1846, Bahuns and Chhetris prevailed over Nepal's population as the most dominant groups—landowners, administrators, priests, soldiers and police.

Although Nepal was an official protectorate of British India (Gurkhas were even used by the British to crush the Indian Mutiny in 1857), it did not endure the process of caste classification that was used to divide and rule India. Nevertheless, the unification process of Nepal was accompanied by an attempt to classify social and cultural diversity along lines of caste hierarchy; this was systematised with the promulgation of the Muluki Ain, the legal code of 1854 (Höffer 1979).

The code was informed by two central ideas: the concept of a Hindu order of collective purity protected by law, and the concept of the nation state (Malagodi 2013). Under the Hindu order, the Tagadhari (twice-born castes or weavers of the sacred thread)—the Bahuns and Chhetris—are at the top of the caste system and, today, they make up 31.2% of the population. They dominate over the Matwallis, a derogatory term denoting the so-called alcohol-consuming castes, who are further divided into enslaveable and unenslaveable groups, and of whom 35% are classified today as Janajatis and 8% as Dalits. The Muluki Ain of 1854 was amended several times, and in 1963 was revised entirely. The 1963 amendments banned caste discrimination, reflecting the post-1950 constitutions—1951, 1959 and 1962—that enshrined equality before the law, stating that there would be no discrimination on grounds of religion, sex, race, caste or tribe.

In practice, however, the justice system encouraged cultural homogenisation and accommodation, and caste and ethnic discrimination were perpetuated. Imposing unity on the basis of specific cultural identity-markers only inflamed discontent amongst ethnic minorities. Nationalist provisions were not merely symbolic but had substantive outcomes that negatively affected minorities (Malagodi 2013).

After India gained independence from British rule, Nepalis who had been prisoners in Indian jails and had been involved in the Indian independence movement organised against the Rana regime, and both the Nepali Congress and the Communist Party of Nepal were established. The first elections with universal suffrage were held in 1959. Although the country was officially a democracy, King Mahendra staged a coup in 1960, consolidating the monarchy's grip on power. The 1962 constitution reflected this, promoting the idea of Nepal as a monarchical, Hindu state, against which any ethnic claims were to be repressed as potentially destabilising. Following the overthrow of the panchayat regime, the 1990 constitution acknowledged Nepal's ethnic diversity and the existence of indigenous populations, but it still gave primacy to Hinduism by declaring Nepal a Hindu Kingdom, and to Nepali as the national language, to the exclusion of other religions and languages. The expression of a compromise between the Hindu monarch and the parliamentary parties, the 1990 constitution ultimately helped strengthen Bahun–Chhetri domination. Indeed, De Sales (2015) has astutely commented that the two different (and in many respects opposite) processes of Nepal's legal codification—the Muluki Ain of 1854 and the post-Rana era constitutions—in fact had similar results:

The legal recognition of the cultural differences of the social groups was made possible within the Hindu system of castes, but it put the ethnic groups at the bottom of the hierarchy; however, the opposite principle of the legal equality of the citizens also ended up putting the groups in question in the position of culturally oppressed groups under the cultural hegemony of the high castes. One way or the other, the cultural subordination [of ethnic groups] was accompanied by economic and political subordination.

Thus from the 1990s, when Janajati movements began to organise more concertedly, Nepal began to see a significant shift from a time in which ethnic groups were subordinated at every level. Unquestionably, demands for indigenous rights were influenced by an international focus on indigenous people and the creation of NEFIN in 1991 as a pressure group to unite different Janajati groups. Several Janajati groups have existed since the 1950s, such as those for Tharus, Magars, Gurungs and Tamangs, but were never officially recognised (Lawoti and Hangen 2012; Skar 1995). Since its formation NEFIN has organised rallies and demonstrations, conducted research on the situation of indigenous populations and led delegations to lobby the government and international bodies, all for the cause of strengthening the Janajati movement and developing its member organisations.

The Role of the Maoists

In 2002, NEFIN succeeded in pressuring the government to establish the National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities (NFDIN), formalising the role of NEFIN and officially representing the interests of indigenous nationalities within government. However, the role of the Maoists in effecting these shifts cannot be underestimated (Tamang 2006). Unlike earlier communist parties in Nepal, which considered caste and ethnic-based analysis to be reactionary—a deviation from class analysis—the Nepali Maoists made major advances by incorporating historically oppressed peoples, including indigenous people, Dalits and Madhesis, as collaborators in the revolutionary struggle. They included the perspectives of a range
of indigenous leaders who had been referring to Lenin to argue that Marxist–Leninist praxis must recognise and speak for ethnic and linguistic equality, and struggle against ethnicity/caste-based discrimination and oppression.

Quoting Lenin, Maoist leader Bhattarai (2004) argued that “in the same way as mankind can arrive at the abolition of classes only through a transition period of the dictatorship of the oppressed class, it can arrive at the inevitable integration of nations only through a transition period of the complete emancipation of all oppressed nations, that is, their freedom to secede.” Based on this understanding, he further argued, “we should firmly grasp that the best way to solve the national question is to implement the right to self-determination of oppressed nationalities under the leadership of the proletariat according to the concrete time, place and conditions” (Bhattarai 2004). The point was to recognise the right to self-determination, but precisely in order to defuse the National Question and, as Lenin saw it, pursue the struggle for socialism in unity with workers and the oppressed of all nationalities. That is, a recognition that nationalities must have complete freedom to agitate over particular national concerns, even to the point of secession, which is “merely the logical expression of the struggle against national oppression in every form” (Lenin 1916). Such recognition would in fact weaken secessionist movements in practice, but would also contribute to removing division and inequality between nations and undermine the narrow nationalism of the ruling class by shifting the focus towards building unity amongst the working classes across nations. Lenin (1913) concluded that, “workers who place political unity with ‘their own’ bourgeoisie above complete unity with the proletariat of all nations, are acting against their own interests, against the interests of socialism and against the interests of democracy.” Bhattarai had written about the National Question in the early 1980s (Bhattarai 1990), and ethnic rights were raised even before the launch of the People’s War, through the formation of an ethnic wing, the All Nepal Nationalities Organisation (led by Suresh Ale Magar, who had also been one of the original founders of NEFIN before joining the Maoists). The indigenous or Janajati question, then, was consistently raised by the Maoists in more concrete terms than any other political party in Nepali history (Tamang 2006).

In 1995, at a national conference prior to the war, a policy was adopted on ethnic autonomy and special privileges for Dalits (Lawoti 2003). A firm policy on the Janajati Question was later formulated by the Maoists in a 1996 document entitled “Nationality Question in Nepal” by Hisila Yami and Baburam Bhattarai. They argued that Nepal essentially suffers from two forms of oppression that make class and nationality “inevitable components of the democratic revolution” (Yami and Bhattarai 1996). The first was “external”: the semi-colonial domination of Nepal by India13 and the “neo-colonial” domination over Nepal by other imperialist powers such as Britain (through the recruitment of Gurkhas) and the United States (US) (through its domination of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund). The second form of oppression was “internal,” that is, the domination of weaker nationalities (the Janajatis) by groups of Indo–Aryan descent, whose language, dress and religion have traditionally enjoyed state patronage.

The Maoists rightly denounced the discrimination suffered by indigenous populations at the hands of the state, and pointed out that these oppressed nationalities were organising to fight for equal rights, “which is quite logical and justified” (Yami and Bhattarai 1996). Their struggles were seen as struggles for national liberation within Nepal and as inseparable from class liberation. In 1998, ethnic fronts were established for Magars, Gurungs, Tharus and Tamangs (as well as for Dalits and Madhesis). In 2001, Maoist policy on ethnic and caste issues was made public and, by 2004, nine autonomous regions were created. The Maoists stressed the need for equality and freedom for these groups, their rights to self-determination and the abolition of caste-based untouchability.

Of course the precise relationship between the Maoists and their engagement with ethnic rights activists worked out in different ways in different regions (De Sales 2007; Ogura 2007, 2008; Lecomte-Tilouine 2004; Shneiderman and Turin 2004). For instance, in the “crucible” of the Maoist movement—the Kham Magar country—De Sales (2015) has argued that it was their economic marginalisation and not their ethnic/cultural marginalisation that incited the Kham Magars to join the Maoists. However, De Sales suggests that over time the Maoists’ lack of attention to the cultural nuances of the Kham Magars politicised their ethnic identities. Ogura (2007) also notes the state’s indifference to the socio-economic welfare of the Magars in Rolpa and Rukum. Combined with local forms of domination exerted by Thakuri families, a foundation was laid for the acceptance of communist ideas in the region, years before the start of the People’s War.14 Although there has certainly been a longer history of Janajati mobilisation that predates the Maoists, the Maoists’ attention to ethnic marginalisation, guided by their perspective on the National Question, was a key factor in making demands for ethnic rights, and which ultimately had the potential to threaten the privileges of the established Bahun and Chhetri elites. Thus to point out the attention that the Maoists gave to the indigenous question is not to deny a longer history of the emergence of particular indigenous leaders and the political mobilisation of individual nationalities. Rather, it is to signal the significance of a concerted nationwide effort by a political party that led to the emergence of an ethnic movement as a powerful force on a national scale. Although facilitating the emergence of this movement was a conscious effort by the Nepali Maoists, in the absence of a wider class project around which to forge class demands, the Maoists have been unable to withstand pressures from mainstream and other establishment forces that have an interest in the continued marginalisation of indigenous groups.

The Adivasi Question and Tribes in India

The efforts of the Maoists in Nepal are all the more striking when we compare the attention given to the relationship between class and indigeneity by their counterparts in India. Although they have now held their strongholds in Adivasi-dominated areas for at least the last 20 years (not to mention that when
the movement first began Adivasis were significantly involved), the Indian Maoists have been less clear than the Nepali Maoists about the historical specificity of Adivasis, and in particular in relation to the indigenous or Adivasi question. That is, how to theorise the relationship between class, caste and indigeneity in relation to questions of self-determination, secession and autonomy in class struggle.

The Communist Party of India (Maoist) (cpi (Maoist)) documents, in particular the Party Programme (2004a) and Strategy and Tactics (2004b), do not dwell in depth on the matter. While the Party’s Strategy and Tactics notes that the economy, society and culture of Adivasis differ from those in the rest of India, there is little systematic analysis of this difference. Considered alongside the nationalities of the North East, Adivasis are separated from the North-East groups by a perspective that grants self-determination for the latter but only the possibility of autonomy for the Adivasis. At the same time, Adivasis are depicted as only “in the process of developing as nationalities” and hence treated alongside other marginalised groups, namely women, Dalits and religious minorities (cpi (Maoist) 2004b).66

Adivasi areas are seen as subject to the forces of the “imperialists, comprador bureaucratic bourgeoisie, unscrupulous contractors, moneylenders, traders and government officials [who] have deprived Adivasis of their land and other traditional means of livelihoods” (cpi (Maoist) 2004b: 129). Hence, the Strategy and Tactics document recommends that the Party should organise with the slogans, “Right over the forest belongs to people and Adivasis,” “Political autonomy to Adivasi territories” and “Transform the territory as exploitation-free, that is, red land” (cpi (Maoist) 2004b: 130). Nevertheless, although special attention to Adivasi areas is proposed, it is their strategic military importance that is stressed (due to the utter negligence of these areas by the ruling classes). This is not only due to the guerrilla-tactic-conducive terrain they inhabit (both in terms of physical terrain and relative absence of the state) but also because of the perceived “glorious traditions of the anti-imperialist and anti-feudal struggles,” which ought to make Adivasis good soldiers and leaders of the revolution (cpi (Maoist) 2004a: 22).

Despite the mention of the range of specific conditions of Adivasis, in light of the fact that the Maoists have been active in Adivasi-dominated areas for at least two decades, their policies on the indigenous question seem muted. It is always more difficult to explain an absence than what is a presence. Indian Maoist leaders—who one of us has interviewed—while recognising the need to consider in greater depth the Adivasi issue, themselves unsurprisingly found it difficult to comment on their own relative silence. So the analysis presented here is perhaps more speculative than in the Nepali case. Nevertheless, the hope is that it will provoke discussion on this much-neglected question.

One part of the explanation for the Maoists’ relative lack of clarity on the indigenous question in India is that they ended up in the central and eastern Adivasi-dominated belts because of the coincidence of the territorial demands of their guerrilla tactics, rather than a premeditated strategy to align themselves with the historical struggles of the Adivasis. In the 1980s and 1990s, state repression in the adjacent plains drove the Maoists in search of forested and hilly tracts better suited for guerrilla warfare. These tracts happened to be Adivasi-dominated areas (what is now Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Odisha), with which most of the leaders of the movement (who had emerged from the cities and the plains) had little previous sociological experience.

Indeed, though there was some debate (for example, Communist Party of India (Marxist–Leninist) People’s War, Karnataka 2002) about whether Adivasis had their own mode of production, separate from feudalism or capitalism, in the end the semi-feudal, semi-colonial analysis prevailed even in Adivasi-dominated areas with a small acknowledgement that there were some fragments of a previous mode of production in their social and cultural life. Perhaps, the unfamiliarity of the Maoist leaders with the Adivasis and their areas was compounded by the fact that, in contrast to Nepal where the Janajati constituency is more than four times its proportional size (at 35% of the population), Indian Adivasis make up only 8% of the total population.

Conflation with the Dalit Question

Moreover, unlike Dalits who are found across the country, attention to the Adivasi Question was easily neglected because of their habitation in the peripheral hills and forests. In fact, Adivasis are most often grouped together with Dalits, as the Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, oppressed minorities at the bottom of India’s caste hierarchy. While this amalgamation with Dalits may be warranted in some parts of the country where Adivasis have been pauperised to what Jan Breman (1976) has called “tribal castes,” in the hills and forests of central and eastern India Dalit issues cannot easily be conflated with Adivasi issues. There, Adivasis have had some direct access to control over their means of production (through access to land and forest resources) and this has resulted in a different sociology, history and conflictual relationship with the state than is the case for landless Dalits.

Tactical coincidence, historical unfamiliarity and conflation with the Dalit Question, as reasons for the absence of sufficient attention to the Adivasi Question, were compounded by the historical legacy of the fact that it had taken several years of critique before the Maoist movement paid due attention to the specificities of caste and ethnic discrimination more generally. On the one hand, the sociology of India too readily took caste to be a primordial reality, so that even some Marxists emphasised the role of depth, relegating the material causes of backwardness. On the other hand, there was a more general history of omission of caste in the communist movement in India marked by the theoretical division of base and superstructure in class struggle, through which caste was sidelined. Whereas economic issues were prioritised as elements belonging to the base, caste was relegated to a domain of a less significant superstructure that would in any case change—or even disappear—once the base was transformed. Caste actions by exploited and oppressed people were thus not seriously to be considered as class actions.
Dalit activists, especially in Andhra Pradesh, vehemently criticised the Maoist movement for its treatment of caste as superstructure. Although this Dalit critique eventually led to greater thought being given to caste and more specifically to the role of Dalits in the Maoist movement in India (Ghandy 2011; Gudavarthy 2005), there was no parallel critique of the Maoist movement from Adivasi activists and scholars. Debate around the Adivasi Question was thus relatively muted, as Adivasis were amalgamated into the overall Dalit category. This is not to deny a rich history of scholarship on Adivasis, class stratification and an analysis of whether they were any different to the peasants of the plains (these references are by no means exhaustive but see, in particular, Munshi 2012; Xaxa 2008; Baviskar 2005; Guha 1999; Sundar 1997; Corbridge 1988; Betelie 1974), but to point out a comparative absence of debate on the Adivasi Question on the left in relation to the Dalit Question nationally (Steur 2011, 2014; Mohanty 2011; Nilsen 2010; Prasad 2010 are recent exceptions). Moreover, this paucity of attention to the Adivasi Question is all the more noticeable when compared with other parts of the world—most notably Latin America—where sustained consideration was given from the early 20th century to the indigenous question (see Vanden and Becker 2013; Becker 2006; Vanden 1979, 1985). Role of Colonialism and Missionaries

Colonialism and the Church, and the special measures they introduced, had created a small but influential Adivasi elite that was part and parcel of the project of state rule. India was colonised by the British, whereas Nepal was for the most part a puppet state of the British. Although the distinction between the two countries in relation to the impact of colonialism in India and its absence in Nepal are often overdrawn, one significant difference is the fact that Indian colonial rule also instituted a process of special measures for its tribal populations more than 80 years ahead of its consideration in Nepal.

These began at the turn of the century when the threat of various violent rebellions, particularly in the Chota Nagpur plateau, persuaded colonial officials that they had a serious problem on their hands and that some protectionist measures were necessary as a remedy (Bates and Shah 2014; Shah 2010). Special measures were initially introduced in relation to land rights (for instance, the 1908 Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act that prohibited transfers of certain tribal land to non-tribals). But in the 1930s, with plans to create Indian-run provincial governments elected on a first-past-the-post basis, the Government of India saw the necessity and advantage—in accordance with the strategies of divide-and-rule—in presenting itself as the protector of minority interests. This move both justified the perpetuation of colonial rule, and also guaranteed colonial officials with a continuing voice in the newly created provincial legislatures.

Thus the Government of India Act of 1935 created the concepts of the Scheduled Tribe and the Scheduled Area, where no elections would be held; instead, the best interests of “backward” tribal communities would be upheld through colonial officials acting as their representatives. Official enquiries supported this strategy by pointing to the impoverishment and decay of tribal communities and arguing the case for protecting them from the injurious effects of alcohol and debt (Elwin 1942; Grigon 1944). And so measures for affirmative action for India's Scheduled Tribes were instituted.

The work of Christian missionaries was significant in the process through which these protectionist measures emerged. Missionaries sometimes assisted colonial officials (for instance, the Jesuit Father Hoffman's involvement in the Chota Nagpur Tenancy Acts); but more importantly, they produced a new
generation of educated tribals who eventually—in demanding special treatment—marked themselves out as “Adivasis.” In the late 1930s, Christian-educated tribal youth who had formed the Chota Nagpur Improvement Society (mainly Anglicans and Lutherans) and the Chota Nagpur Catholic Sabha merged to form the Adivasi Mahasabha. This was a significant classificatory moment in the construction of social categories, as they then popularised the term “Adivasi” across the country to describe those who live in India’s forests and hills and transported the term.

Moreover, one of the chairmen of the Adivasi Mahasabha, Jaipal Singh Munda, went on to fight—against those seeking the assimilation of tribals as just “backward Hindus” (Ghurye 1943) and alongside Ambedkar making a case for Scheduled Castes—for the special rights of Scheduled Tribes in the Constituent Assembly Debates. Jaipal Singh Munda, the main bearer of the Adivasi torch in the Constituent Assembly Debates, was a product of mission influence and colonial rule: the Anglican Canon Cosgrove had taken him out of St Paul’s School in Ranchi and provided him with an Oxford education in order that he could return to India and lead his people in taking their position in the national life of India.

The combination of special measures and Christian missionary influence led, on the one hand, to the creation of what became the pan-Indian term “Adivasi,” but on the other, to the stratification of these tribal populations in some areas, and the emergence of an Adivasi elite seeking to influence the shape of the new state. Although there remained a substantive non-Christian Adivasi population who sought to keep the state away (Shah 2010), and who could ironically remain relatively autonomous because of the protective legislation around their land and forest rights which allowed them direct access to their means of production, there were also those who increasingly promoted a politics of making demands within the state rather than one of escaping the influence of the state in a kind of “dominance without hegemony” (Guha 1998). 22

The Maoist strongholds today are in fact not the areas that were affected by missionaries; they are those in which indigenous populations have historically sought to keep away from the state. But the wider region has seen a complex history of colonial and mission-influenced attention to the protection of subordinated Adivasi populations that had created stratification in Adivasi society. This is a history influenced by mission-educated tribals, the new “Adivasis,” whose politics was seen as much more a politics to be engaged by the colonial and national state (rather than a rebellion to be crushed), precisely because in demanding inclusion, it was a politics of conformism, reformism and negotiation.

In the case of Nepal, while Christian missionaries first visited in the 17th century, they were forced to leave when Nepal was unified under Prithvi Narayan Shah, and were not permitted to return until the fall of the Rana regime and King Tribhuvan’s return to Kathmandu in 1951, almost two centuries later. There was no systematic mission-influenced colonial project in Nepal; the aim of the British was not to absorb Nepal but to make it smaller and weaker, allowing it to serve as a reasonable buffer with China (Brown 1996). The legal and cultural subordination of Janajatis by the Bahun–Chhetri elite began during the Rana era, while during the panchayat, cultural homogenisation within the overall framework of national integration perpetuated ethnic discrimination. This history does not imply the absence of Janajati elites, but rather that there was relatively less stratification within individual Janajati groups. 23

To summarise then, the concerted focus that the Nepali Maoists gave to the potential liberation of Nepal’s Janajatis was not paralleled by the Indian Maoists in relation to Adivasis in India. The comparative lack of clarity in relation to the indigenous question by the Indian Maoists emerged from a complex range of interrelated reasons, several of which have been outlined here. First, the Maoists arrived in Adivasi-dominated hills and forests because of the tactical needs of their military struggle and thus had not given sustained strategic thought to the very different social, political and economic history of these areas in contrast to the plains from which they had come. Second, there was a more general historical neglect amongst the left to pay sufficient attention to questions of tribe and class. Third, in comparison to the Dalit Question, the Maoist movement was not challenged in the same way to incorporate a theorisation the Adivasi Question by the Adivasi movements themselves. All of this was compounded by a fourth factor—that special measures protecting Adivasis have a more than 80-year Christian mission-influenced history, which led to a creation of an Adivasi elite in the wider region that promoted a politics of conformism, reformism and negotiation that did not have precise parallels in Nepal.

The Challenge of Identity Politics
This commentary has argued that the rise of indigenous groups onto the national scene in Nepal is in large part a consequence of the Maoists’ People’s War, which, drawing on historic discussions of the National Question within the Leninist tradition, paid special attention to the case of Nepal’s Janajatis. However, the Maoists’ failure to maintain the primacy of a class project, within which ethnic rights could be fought for, has weakened both the project of national liberation and also the Maoists themselves. In comparison, the Indian Maoists have had less clarity on the indigenous question, despite creating their guerrilla zones in tribal-dominated areas in recent years. Apart from the different ways in which the Maoists dealt with indigeneity in Nepal and India historically, paradoxically both projects have faced different but parallel challenges. These are tensions that emerge from the dialectical relationship between class and identity/indigeneity, which movements of social transformation confront in many other parts of the world, and in which class struggle is replaced with a new politics of rights, based on the politics of identity, encouraged by the forces of neo-liberalism (see Comaroff and Comaroff 2009 on Africa and Hale 1997 and Gledhill 1997 on Latin America).

In the Indian case, although the Maoist movement is caste and class diverse, containing important sections of Dalits, middle castes and higher castes, it is increasingly presented
as an Adivasi movement by sympathetic journalists, scholars and activists. In the process, much-needed discussions about the relationship between class and indigeneity in the context of class struggle may be sidelined. The problem is compounded by heavy counter-insurgency measures, which have reduced the space for debate on the Adavasi Question within the Maoist movement, as its leaders are either in jail or focused on how to keep the state out of their guerrilla zones through military tactics. By default, the movement thus incorporates and acts on the representations of itself provided by sympathetic activists who present the Maoists as an Adavasi movement.

In an international context where neo-liberalism is being challenged by indigenous movements, and where indigeneity and indigenous rights have also been valorised by the neoliberal state, the centrality of class within a dialectical relationship of class and identity/indigeneity can easily be eclipsed by a focus on indigenous or ethnic rights alone. Thus to think in a strategic manner about indigeneity means thinking through class-as-it-actually-exists, and ensuring it remains central.

Scholars have rightly tried to point out that the struggles of Adivasis—against land alienation, big dams and mega industrial projects—have a distinct history of their own (Mohanty 2011). At the same time, in a context where there is a proliferation of donor funding for indigenous rights, and a growth of NGOs and social mobilisation around indigenous rights, concerns for indigenous populations have coincidentally coalesced with Maoist concerns. Indigenous rights activists fighting against mining companies in India, for instance, to keep the bauxite in the mountains, which are sacred for various tribal peoples, literally map onto Maoist concerns—to keep the Indian state out of their guerrilla zones.

Thus the struggles of Survival International in taking up the case of the Dongria Kond tribes of Odisha, keeping the British mining company Vedanta out of the area, have gone hand in hand with the political activism of various celebrities, scholars and journalists. The representation of India’s forest-dwelling original inhabitants taking up arms to fight mining companies has the potential to capture the imagination of a vast international audience. In this process, the underground Maoist movement, labelled as “terrorist” by the Indian state, has been made more palatable as a movement protecting India’s indigenous populations (though it is an armed movement that is not actually against mining per se, and thus has very different agendas to the indigenous rights activists who remain generally pacifist and anti-mining). But where the movement itself has not carefully thought through its perspective regarding the Adavasi Question, its subjugation and subversion to identity politics is a potential danger.

Increasing Autonomy of Janajati Movement

In comparison, in addressing head on the Janajati Question, the Nepali Maoists went further in their analysis of the complex relations between class and identity/indigeneity to consider issues of consciousness and subjectivity, which can manifest themselves in cultural terms: traditions, values, ideas and their institutional forms. While there are certainly those who argue that the Maoists’ mobilisation of ethnic groups in Nepal was purely instrumental or tactical, exploiting oppression for totalitarian ends, in recognising the right to self-determination and national liberation, the Maoists were in fact responding to the felt concerns and aspirations of Janajatis.

Although the Maoists did well to raise the indigenous question in order to address ethnic oppression, questions of class were ultimately neglected. Diverting class struggle to focus on identity-based federalism has led to a focus on debates between political parties over names and boundaries which, though important, may not translate into material gains for the poorest. Indeed, the Nepali Maoists have been faced with the problem that Yami and Bhattarai (1996) had in fact themselves warned about, following Lenin: that in addressing the National Question revolutionaries must avoid the extreme position of “assigning absolute primacy to the National Question without a class perspective.” Meanwhile, the Janajati movement itself, increasingly distanced from the Maoists, fragmented and insufficiently consolidated, has acquired a political trajectory that is now largely independent, and perhaps even contrary to, class struggle. It remains to be seen whether efforts to unite Janajati groups are able to resist the reassertion of Bahun–Chhetri dominance, which is taking shape in the proposed constitutional reforms.

Pressures to turn marginalised people’s struggles into mainly ones of identity, in part because of the support of donor agencies and NGOs, are very strong. Significant resources have been available for programmes related to social inclusion and indigenous rights. Organisations like NEFIN, for instance, which have even been briefly sustained by donors such as the Department for International Development (DfID) and the World Bank (Shneiderman 2013), make claims to self-determination on this basis and often pursue international instruments such as ILO Convention 169 and the UN Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as a panacea. But the politicisation of identity encouraged by such agencies is based on the protection of the “rights” of indigenous people and on issues of cultural survival in which a serious critique of the state in class terms is often absent.

The Nepali Maoists have been left open to this subversion because they have put the ethnic struggle on the same level as the class struggle, taking the National Question in Leninist terms to mean the formation of separate organisational forms along ethnic lines, rather than defusing the National Question by ensuring that ethnic demands are articulated through a wider class project. Without the primacy of a class perspective, the struggle for national liberation can be inherently divisive, even leading to competing movements for autonomy or secession, which ultimately loses the focus on class unity across nationalities. As Lenin (1913) argued, the focus on autonomy takes attention away from the task of democratising the state, which is necessary to ensure peace between nationalities. Thus the Maoists, having embraced the neo-liberal line in the hope of strengthening Nepal’s working class, have played into the hands of donors and the ruling elite through their own abandonment, not of the indigenous question, but of class politics. Having facilitated the emergence of a movement that places ethnic...
demands at the same level as class demands, they have also enabled the political landscape to be dominated by divisions over indigeneity, ethnicity and consensus-based politics, instead of deepening the emerging class polarisation as a result of the People's War.

Drawing on Marx and Engels' position towards the nationalist movements during the 1848 revolutions, Gail Omvedt (1987) reminds us that nationalist movements should be seen in strategic terms, and are progressive only insofar as they intensify the general crisis of capitalism and further the process of socialist revolution. In other words, nationalism has a historically contingent value: it has a progressive element in that it can bring together the working classes across nationalities, but is reactionary because it inevitably involves class collaboration. The same logic can be applied to ethnic or indigenous movements within nations: the progressive element is the extent to which these movements, involving genuinely oppressed groups, are emboldened to challenge the status quo, and thereby expose the democratic deficit of the capitalist state; the reactionary element is the extent to which they divide people across nationalities and promote fragmentation along ethnic lines. Not all of these sub-national or indigenous movements have a progressive element, and must be judged in their specificity and role in national contexts.

Identity/indigeneity and class are always intertwined and while there are great virtues to mobilisation around the demands for indigenous rights, in both countries the Maoist struggles have faced being subverted by the politics of identity alone. Guha (1987: 46) notes that the National Question has become a matter of great concern for imperialist powers as part of the process of capitalist expansion: on the one hand, promoting corporate power and, on the other, championing the “umpteen varieties of separatism and ethnic consciousness in order to disrupt people’s unity against the capitalist system.” In addition, it has long been noted that ethnic or indigenous demands are the potential basis of a racism whose eventual consequences can involve ethnic cleansing (Kuper 2003; Béteille 1998). However, even in the absence of the development of communalism, there are other dangers inherent in the turn towards ethnic demands alone. In particular, struggles to protect the rights of minorities, which become limited to struggles of claims-making, may take precedence over class struggle in a number of ways.

Five Points of Tension

First, mobilisation around indigeneity is likely to support agendas around the cultural politics of the protection of rights—for instance, land rights struggles, forest and conservation concerns based on the supposedly inherent cultural preservation of indigenous communities. Fighting for the protection of land rights and forest rights is important for indigenous peoples to maintain their autonomy in accessing their means of production. However, the rights-based movements are most often pitched as cultural struggles which rely on an internationalist language of indigenous rights that values particular notions of property, entitlement, ownership and individualism that in fact does not account for the significance of alternative values amongst indigenous communities from which a different politics of communism could emerge.

In India’s Adivasi areas, for instance, systems of cooperation and mutual labour exchange, and even alternative ideas of democracy, leadership and authority, could form the basis of a communism emerging from the communities themselves (Shah 2010). But these are too readily seen as “backward”, “primitive” or “corruptible” systems that will be superseded when they could in fact be considered as a non-teleological basis for revolutionary struggle building on a politics of “from the masses to the masses.” Thus more limited rights-based struggles can take the place of understanding and working with indigenous values that could be the basis of new and more egalitarian futures.

Second, these rights-based issues of cultural politics are often only one arena of necessary struggle in the daily lives of the concerned ethnic groups. Aside from the fact that many of those classified as Janajati or Adivasi have continued to creatively reject the state, they are also no longer dependent on just their lands and forests, and are actually struggling to reproduce their households through a very precarious range of livelihood strategies which includes working as wage labourers and often migrating to faraway places as manual contract labour. Demands for social inclusion of minorities cannot adequately address these socio-economic concerns, and the fact that the most important struggles are the terms and conditions of labour, often outside the frames of nation states (let alone identity-bound federal states) as people migrate beyond its boundaries to meet their daily needs (Shah 2010).

Third, socio-economic concerns are shared by poor people across the world, not simply by particular ethnic groups. In Nepal, not only are there poor and marginalised Bahuns and Chhetris, but a focus on ethnic demands in the debates over federal restructuring has led to a proliferation of ethnic groups, further dividing them. Where access to resources is concerned, that elite Janajatis will represent the interests of the poorest within a particular Janajati group is far from certain. Many of the smaller ethnic groups do not necessarily see the benefits of identity-based federalism; as far as they can see, it will substitute one set of masters for another. Demands framed in terms of autonomy divide people, pitching them against each other, whereas unity in a broader class struggle has the potential to address both political demands related to the recognition of identity/indigeneity and economic demands related to access to resources and rights to redistribution, including, ultimately, control over production.

Fourth, because ethnic groups themselves are fragmented and differentiated by class, mobilisation around ethnicity can create and reinforce socio-economic differentiation, which enables upward mobility for some but at the same time leads others from the very same groups to become further marginalised. This is the critique that has emerged from Marxist commentators of the Dalit movement in India (see, for instance, Teltumbe 2010). Indeed, in the Adivasi case, it is a small middle class that articulates a “politics of difference” based on identity, while at the same time leading to increasing class
Before the constitution-drafting deadline expired on 28 May 2012, Janajati groups ultimatum united. For them, the Maoists relied too heavily on Stalin’s (1953) “Marxism and the National Question” which laid a series of conditions, common language, common territory, common economic life and common “psyche formation”—for the possibility of a nation and that Adivasis did not qualify as nationalities according to these criteria. We are grateful to Bernard D’Mello for pointing this out.

In comparison, it is interesting to note that by 2000 when NEFIN adopted the term “nationalities,” the debates on Adivasis lay in an evolutionary scale (from bands, tribes, ethnic groups and then to nation) ended in Nepal, and Janajatis were officially translated as nationalities.

The document does recognise that a certain section of Adivasis (mainly chiefs) have been lured by the government under welfare schemes, become rich, and have developed themselves as local oppressors, stressing that the influence of this “intermediary section” needs to be eradicated (CPI Maoist 2004b: 129).

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Indeed, along with Hisila Yami from Nepal, Jose Maria Sison from the Philippines, Kurdish groups, as well as Pagla Yu th from the Philippines, who call for the establishment of a National Decade of World Indigenous Peoples. These were also endorsed by the Nepalese government. The Maoists relied too heavily on Stalin’s (1953) “Marxism and the National Question” which laid a series of conditions—common language, common territory, common economic life and common “psyche formation”—for the possibility of a nation and that Adivasis did not qualify as nationalities according to these criteria. We are grateful to Bernard D’Mello for pointing this out.

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since the Sugauni Treaty, which concluded the Gorkhali war with the East India Company in 1816, also partly helped create this elite, but within a discourse of neo-colonial domination that continued to essentialise particular Jana-
Jati groupings by virtue of ethnic background. This ulti-
24 Framing the Maoists’ support for an ethnic movement as opportunistic (see, for instance, Lawoti 2003) is in danger of implying that indigenous activists joined the Maoists inde-
25 It was precisely this fear that led Rosa Luxem-
26 It is arguable that the poten-
27 DFID, for example, introduced social inclusion
28 Indeed, indigenous leaders have claimed that
29 José Carlos Mariátegui, in the Peruvian con-
30 Programme, Central Committee: Communist
31 Communist Party of India (Marxist–Leninist)
32 Communist Party of India (Marxist–Leninist) People’s War (2002): State Committee: A Report
33 Corbridge, S (1988): “The Ideology of Tribal Econ-
34 D’Mello, B and A Shah (2013): “Preface,” José Carlos
35 Commonwealth in the form by which they faced
37 Caplan, L (1991): “‘Bravest of the Brave’: Represen-
38 D’Mello and Shah 2013). Newari groups were fused with Marxist-Leninist socialist
39 Becker, M (2006): “Maoism, the Comintern, and
40 Bhattarai, B (2004a): "An Anthropology of His Writ-
41 Becker, M (2009): “Gandhian, the Comintern, and
42 Basu, A (2005): “In the Belly of the River: Tribal
45 Becker, M (2006): “Maoism, the Comintern, and
47 Bhattarai, B (2004a): "An Anthropology of His Writ-
49 Bhattarai, B (2004a): "An Anthropology of His Writ-
64 Bhattarai, B (2003): “The Indian Workers’ Movement and Class Struggle.”
100 Bhattarai, B (2003): “The Indian Workers’ Movement and Class Struggle.”


