The intimacy of insurgency: beyond coercion, greed or grievance in Maoist India

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Published online: 25 Aug 2013.

To cite this article: Alpa Shah (2013) The intimacy of insurgency: beyond coercion, greed or grievance in Maoist India, Economy and Society, 42:3, 480-506, DOI: 10.1080/03085147.2013.783662

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03085147.2013.783662
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Abstract

The Maoist movement has been presented as one of the most powerful forces of resistance against policies of economic liberalization in India. This paper explores how and why the movement has spread in recent years. Analysing beyond theories explaining insurgent action in terms of coercion, greed or grievance, the article draws on long-term ethnographic research in a Maoist guerrilla zone to explore an important aspect of mobilization that has been underplayed to date in the literature: the relations of intimacy which develop between the mobilizing forces and the people in the area of struggle. The paper shows how bonds of family and kinship, exchange and its expectations, caste and its manifestations are crucial for understanding the social dynamics of revolutionary mobilization. Moreover, it suggests that the relationship between ideology and political organization is significant in shaping the kinds of relations of intimacy developed, and that in turn this can explain the reach of the organization. In the Indian case, the paper thus compares the spread of the Maoists with competing political organizations in their guerrilla zones – the Indian State and the Hindu right. Just as relations of intimacy may help explain why people support and join radical movements, the paper suggests that their conflictual relationship with revolutionary subjectivity may also become the Achilles’ heel of such movements, explaining why people distance themselves from, leave and betray them, leading in part to their decline.

Keywords: Communist Party of India (Maoist); Naxalite; revolution; civil war; counter-insurgency; ideology; intimacy; India; tribe; Adivasi.

The setting

It was a balmy summer evening in 2009. Chatting in a clearing in the remote forests of the state of Jharkhand in Eastern India, two kilometres from the...
nearest village, were three young tribal or Adivasi men and two women dressed in olive green uniforms – green trainers, green shirts neatly tucked into green trousers and green ammunition belts strapped across their chests. They were gathered around a table with a wooden frame and glass sheet on top. Paper was strewn everywhere around them: across the patches of grass and by the five rifles resting against the trunk of a tree, butts facing up. The weapons were not sophisticated, mainly the old spoils from raids on the police – one 303, two police rifles and two country-made guns.

There was jovial banter and teasing. ‘Look at you Kishore! You’re too busy flirting with Chanda. Can’t you see you need more ink?’ In progress was screen-printing. Hundreds of copies of the latest letter were already printed. This was an underground guerrilla mobile press of the banned Communist Party of India (Maoist).

Paras, the zonal secretary for the region, walked down the windy rocky path that descended from the main camp towards the press. Everyone became quiet; a sign of respect for Paras’s seniority. Kishore gave Paras a copy of the letter, fresh off the press. Paras checked its quality. ‘People, Rise Against Corruption in NREGA [the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act] and the PDS [Public Distribution System]. Speed up the Struggle Against Liberalisation and Privatisation’. Paras read out the title, paused and sighed. Kishore knew that Paras was thinking of Gyan, one of the recently arrested leaders. The last time they all met, Gyan was composing this letter. Gyan wrote beautifully, whether it was protest pamphlets or poetry. He could recite passages from Robert Frost or Percy Shelley. Paras missed Gyan’s friendship and also knew he had to improve his own writing to take on some of Gyan’s responsibilities.

Paras continued aloud:

Friends,
The central government’s policies of privatisation and liberalisation have caused immense damage. On the one hand there is an increase in starvation, poverty and displacement. On the other hand, millionaires are becoming billionaires overnight.

The situation in the villages is deplorable. In Jharkhand’s rural areas, 85% of people are living below the poverty line. Land is being forcibly taken away from Adivasis in the name of industrialisation. The neglect of development and agriculture has caused a huge exodus from the villages to the towns. But there are no jobs in the towns.

Meanwhile, prices are rocketing sky high. Corruption seeps through the system. If you can’t take all this silently and dare to protest then you will also have to bear the brunt of the government sticks and bullets. Understandably, young men and women of Jharkhand have taken up arms.
Paras skimmed over the long section on corruption in NREGA. He skipped the part on rising prices and on the cuts in PDS rations for poor people, and noted the end.

We appeal to all of you, labourers, farmers, hard working people, junior officials, shopkeepers, merchants, students and youth. We appeal to you to struggle against the corruption and rising prices created by the government policies of privatization and liberalisation. Come and participate in the programmes of our organisation.

Five days later 3,000 villagers gathered to protest in Tetar Tikra, a hamlet named after its tamarind trees. There were Adivasis (India’s indigenous or tribal people) but also some Dalits (the lowest of castes, previously called untouchables), Muslims and higher castes. Most came by foot and a few had bicycles, though tractors and jeeps were arranged for those who travelled the greatest distance of 30 kilometres. Maoist cadres and young men from the villages had invested enormous effort in organizing the rally. They had printed letters in the guerrilla press, travelled from village to village to inform people about the protest, painted Maoist slogans on the mud houses, arranged loudspeakers run off car batteries and made bunting to line the village square. On the day of the protest, two lines of people marched from one village to the next throwing up a haze of dust, shouting slogans against rising prices and corruption in the PDS, while demanding 365 days of employment – not just 100 – to be guaranteed by the NREGA. As dusk settled, the villagers gathered under the cluster of tamarind trees. Various men rose from the crowds and delivered long speeches against privatization and liberalization. Finally, to close off the demonstration three effigies made of hay and dressed in white cloth, were doused in kerosene and set alight. Manmohan Singh (the Indian Prime Minister), P. Chidambaram (the Home Minister) and Montek Singh Ahluwalia (the Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission) went up in flames.¹

Introduction

With a more than 40-year history of armed underground organization to seize power from the Indian state,² India’s Naxalite or Maoist movement (as represented now by the Communist Party of India (Maoist) and its People’s Liberation Guerrilla Army) is back on the agenda of international and national policy-makers, business interests, journalists, human rights activists, film makers, novelists and academics. In the last decade the Maoists have increasingly been presented by these various groups as one of the most formidable organized counter-movements to the Indian state’s policies of economic liberalization, representing the explosion of dissent in the underbelly of the Indian boom.
Alleged by the Indian government to affect about two-thirds of the subcontinent, the Maoists have developed their strongholds in the ideal guerrilla territory of the hills and forests of Central and Eastern India (Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, but also Bihar, West Bengal and northern Andhra Pradesh). They moved into these regions from the 1990s after it became increasingly difficult for the underground forces to survive state repression in the more exposed agricultural plains. These are the remote regions that, on the one hand, house most of India’s mineral wealth (reserves of coal, iron ore and bauxite in particular) and that, since Indian economic liberalization in the 1990s, have become the target of investment by multinational companies and large corporations (Mittal, Vedanta, Essar, Posco, to name a few). On the other hand, these are also the regions that have historically been severely neglected by the developmental functions of the Indian state, making them some of the poorest in the country by even the crudest of poverty measures. They have no electricity, no running water, no sanitation, no pitch roads, negligible health care, very low levels of literacy and almost everyone living in mud houses, relying on forest products, wage labour and a little bit of farming to make ends meet.

In the shadow of India’s economic boom and a historical context of extreme state neglect of these areas, speculation about how and why the Maoists are spreading is rife. Giving insights and explanations which are grounded in field evidence is challenging as counter-insurgency operations have made access to Maoist areas extremely difficult. The relationship between the military interest in the Maoists and clearing people off mineral-rich lands to make way for the mining investment needed for India’s economic growth is not coincidental. In 2006, the Prime Minister described the Maoists as the biggest single internal security threat the country faces. Three years later, he declared in Parliament that, ‘if left-wing extremism continues to flourish in parts which have natural resources of minerals, the climate for investment will certainly be affected’. The Maoists were then banned as ‘terrorist’ under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, and subject to unprecedented counter-insurgency operations, with hundreds of thousands of extra security forces sent to circle their guerrilla zones in Central and Eastern India. In some parts of the country, notably Chhattisgarh, villagers were even armed as Special Police Officers and encouraged to kill their neighbours in a movement known as the ‘Salwa Judum’ (translated in the local language Gondi as a ‘purification hunt’). In this context of counter-insurgency, the Indian government tried to keep a strict control on reporting: journalists were apparently paid by the administration to write from a particular perspective or not to write at all (Choudhary, 2009) and researchers were prevented from easily accessing the areas.

In this absence of adequate reporting and research, as international interest in the insurgents grew, left critiques of the Maoists were initially very quick to propose that ordinary people were trapped between the fire of the Maoists and the state. The situation which was famously referred to in Guatemala as caught ‘between two armies’ after David Stoll’s (1993) controversial analysis became
popularly known in India as the ‘sandwich theory’ – that people were sandwiched between the state and the Maoists (for a critique, cf. D’Souza, 2009). Accusations included the charge that the Maoists controlled areas by terrorizing local populations, revealing their anarchism (Bose, 2010) and extreme vanguardism which made them comparable to fascists (Banaji, 2010, 2011), and the allegation that they co-opted non-violent resistance movements through secret terror operations expressing total indifference to human lives (argued for Lalgarh by Rana, 2009; Sarkar & Sarkar, 2009). Maoist domination, some scholars argued, was maintained through their exploitation of the Adivasi peasantry (Prasad, 2010) and any achievements in living with local people went hand-in-hand with brute force (Balagopal, 2006; Mukherji, 2010; Sundar, 2006). Whereas the Maoists needed the people as fodder for their revolution, for the government the people were a minor expendable detail in the quest to free the mineral resources they lived on top of for the development promoted by liberalization policies (Gupta, 2010). A war of attrition was what India faced, predicted Ramchandra Guha (2007), one which would take the lives of policemen, of Maoists and of unaffiliated civilians. The latter – ordinary citizens, or ‘the people’ – became suspended above the state and the Maoists, though sometimes necessarily pulled into the sway of the latter in particular (Independent Citizens’ Initiative, 2006).

Slowly first-hand accounts of these regions arose above the various versions of the ‘sandwich theory’, making propositions that the people were ‘stuck between two armies’ difficult to sustain. Journalists and activists reported with more detailed insights by waiting months for clandestine support from the Maoists (Myrdal, 2012; Navlakha, 2010, 2012; Pandita, 2011; Roy, 2010) to visit their areas for a few days. A different emphasis increasingly emerged which gave more agency to people’s participation in the Maoist movement. In these accounts peasants were far from the ‘sack of potatoes’ of Marx’s vision, and, as the analysis during and after the Vietnam War so keenly pointed out (Moore, 1966; Paige, 1975; Popkin, 1979; Scott, 1976; Wolf, 1969), they were shown to play a decisive role in such movements.

In fact, speculations about the role of ordinary people in the guerrilla zones of Central and Eastern India reflect many of these older debates on peasant mobilization. Just as Samuel Popkin (1979) drew attention to the rational cost-calculating economic peasant of Vietnam who participated in revolution to improve his future position, and Collier and Hoeffler (2004) have emphasized the role of ‘greed’ in their recent econometric analysis of 79 world-wide civil conflicts, some have stressed the significance of economic and utilitarian benefits in driving the Indian movement. The most extreme versions of the utilitarian arguments in India have mapped Maoist spread onto mining areas to show that the mines served as a cash register for a loose confederation of militias whose local commanders were in it for money alone (Miklian & Carney, 2010).

Rejecting the role of ‘greed’, there were those who stressed the role of ‘grievance’ and the significance of the older debates on ‘moral economy’ (Scott,
1976; Thompson, 1971) in granting people the agency to participate in insurgency. The general message here was that those on the margins of survival joined the Maoists because the guerrillas took up the cause of the poor. Arundhati Roy’s rage (2011, pp. 158–9) represented one extreme of this position, ‘the bottom line is that they are fighting for their dignity, for the right to live and smell like human beings. They’re fighting because, as far as they’re concerned, “the fruits of modern development” stink like dead cattle on the highway’. Others took a more measured approach to make similar arguments. One example is the 2008 Report of an Expert Group to the Planning Commission of the Government of India (Government of India, 2008). Led by intellectuals/human rights activists, Bela Bhatia and the late Shri K. Balagopal who wrote the first draft, the report explored the experience of development from the perspective of Dalits and Adivasis (a quarter of India’s populations), arguing that they were the main Maoist supporters. Most of the report focused on how the Indian state had failed to deliver in ‘extremist affected areas’, the resulting ‘elements of discontent of the people’ (Government of India, 2008, p. vi) and how this ‘failure, inadequacy or injustice of state mechanisms and institutions created space for the Naxalite activities’ (ibid., p. 45). Extensive documentation of poverty-line figures, lack of access to basic resources to sustain livelihoods, low literacy rates and limited employment opportunities was juxtaposed with political marginalization, social discrimination and a list of human rights violations. Landlessness, displacement and forced evictions in the name of development such as mining operations, social oppression and maladministration were among the topics that made it onto the analytical agenda, as did other factors like ‘denial of justice and human dignity’. Together these factors were shown to explain why the Naxalites derived support: how Adivasis and Dalits faced alienation that resulted in their conviction that relief could be had outside the system by breaking the current order (ibid., p. 3).

Increasingly these Indian approaches to understanding Maoist support have taken account of the stress that Elisabeth Wood (2003) has placed on emotional engagement and moral commitments that consolidate rebel action, the pleasure of agency in participating in the movement. They have focused on the Maoist appeal as being underpinned by their efforts to address the historical institutionalized exclusion and suffering of poor people in these remote regions.

Long-term ethnographic field research in conflict situations is extremely challenging and the few scholars and journalists who work in contexts of revolutionary mobilization have had to rely on historical sources and oral histories or on very short visits and interviews. Most detailed field research is done after the conflict, when the guns are silent. These accounts have inevitably elevated events and individuals above the dynamics and dialectics of social relations. There is a shortage of detailed field-level data and analysis of social relations during revolutionary mobilization in any part of the world, but this is especially true of the Maoist movement in India. In this context it would seem reasonable to assume that the sustained neglect of these remote regions
by the Indian government, combined with the threat of their further impoverishment on the underside of rapid and uneven economic growth, ignited the people who lived in the guerrilla zones to support and join those who were addressing the structural inequality pervading the country. However, drawing on ethnographic research conducted over more than a year and a half of living in a Maoist guerrilla zone, this paper reveals that, in a long and protracted struggle such as that of the Maoists, there are other significant processes of organized mobilization that have to date been underplayed in the literature on peasant revolution, insurgency and civil war in India and beyond.9

The ethnographic research on which this paper is based, which entailed not only following demonstration after demonstration but also getting to know the people gathered as brothers, sisters and friends, reveals a more complex picture of revolutionary support than one centred on grievances. Although at one level the greater visibility of the Maoist movement may be presented as a response to forms of economic accumulation under policies of liberalization, in fact much of the explanation for the spread of the Maoists, as we shall see, is dependent on the development of relations of intimacy between the mobilizing forces and the people in its area of expansion. In highlighting the significance of relations of intimacy for revolutionary mobilization, I will suggest that the dialectics between ideology and political organization are crucial in determining the form of these relations. For these are relations of intimacy that the Indian state, concerned with domination and exploitation, has failed to develop in these guerrilla zones. They are also relations of intimacy which are premised on rather different ideological principles from those of competing organizations, such as that of the Hindu right in neighbouring areas. In focusing on the development of relations of intimacy and their ideological tensions, this paper shows the ways in which the contradictions of revolutionary subjectivity formation, with the ties of family and kinship, exchange and its expectations, caste and its manifestations, emerge as crucial tools with which to understand the social dynamics of the revolutionary mobilization. The conflicting tensions between different ideologically influenced forms of intimacy can explain why people support and join, but also why they leave and betray movements of radical mobilization; they help explain what sustains the expansion of radical movements and can also explain their decline.

Addressing grievance and its limits

Before exploring the relations of intimacy between the Maoists and the people, we must return to the Maoist demonstration and what an analysis focused on people’s participation in such protests may reveal but also what it can veil. Focusing on reports of the event alone — a short trip to the guerrilla zone to observe the rally, an interview or two, or perhaps the vernacular Hindi newspaper report which appeared two inches tall and three inches long on page seven the day after the protest — would suggest that this was a ‘farmers’ rally’
supported by the Maoists and that local people were all protesting against their poverty in the shadow of the Indian economic boom. However, as we will see below, living among the people who were demonstrating shows that the internal dynamics of the protest were complex and revealed solidarity but also frustration with the Maoists.

Village youth, close to the Maoist cadres, were standing between the two lines of protestors at an interval of about 20 metres. They were responsible for much of the organizational work of the rally and marched up and down, distributing pamphlets, shouting slogans and ensuring people kept in line. Rahul, a 20-year-old high-caste youth, was stationed where the two lines turned from being men to women. As the people in the lines moved forward, Rahul, raised his voice and, copying the other workers, ordered those around him, ‘Stay in line. Stay in line!’

One of the women burst out in anger. ‘Shut up you young fellow. Who are you to order us when the women from your own houses have not turned up?’

At that point they moved past some mud houses. Standing in the doorways, their heads covered by their saris, were several higher-caste women. The rage of the Adivasi women in the rally turned from Rahul to the women. ‘What are you doing standing in the doorway? Simply staring at us? Get in the rally! How dare you think you can be exempt while we go to every protest’.

Rahul recoiled and was apologetic to the women. He was only just learning the ways of the game and was overcome by the women’s retorts. The women were fuming. Once again the demonstration started late. They had diligently arrived for nine in the morning, leaving all their household and agricultural work. But others only slowly trickled in over the course of the day and nothing really began until 2 pm. As the day progressed their annoyance mounted. They realized that they were expected to march on empty stomachs. The long speeches that followed the rally were a challenge to endure: same old stories, same old drones. This time there was also a rather contradictory situation – the local PDS dealer, widely known to operate a black economy in the rice and oil that came through the state, delivered the speech against corruption. Moreover, this was the fourth rally they were attending within two months.

The first rallies organized by the Maoists, at least five years before, had been exciting. Some had brought the buzz of a festival to the village. Other rallies, to the district and state capital, had brought adventure, as most people had never been to Ranchi, Jharkhand’s capital. For young men like Rahul who were involved in the organization, the rallies persisted in presenting a thrill as the meetings with the Maoist cadres, the hustle and bustle, all added spice to the more mundane everyday village life. However, despite the commitment and energy dispensed by the Maoist cadres and workers – not to mention the expectation of the leaders – over time for many others the rallies began to generate resentment.

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Gradually villagers became sceptical and even bored with the numerous meetings and demonstrations in which they marched. They complained about the bad organization, the endless waiting and the work they had left behind, and said that it was a waste of time to demonstrate. Some were bitter that, while they risked their lives at the hands of the security forces, those who stayed at home were not reprimanded. Whether because of boredom or fear or both, whereas once participation in the rallies was described with a certain enthusiasm, many began to participate simply because they felt they ought to in order to show their support for the Maoists. The demonstrations in which the Maoists invested enormous effort to consolidate rural support had not only come to have little impact but had the potential to undermine people's sympathy for them. It had become boring, and sometimes dangerous, to protest.

Read in the context of participating in organized protests alone, such situations may lead one to argue that these villagers were ‘sandwiched’ in between the forces of the state and the Maoists. Indeed, in the context of the rallies, some people described their predicament in terms of increasingly becoming footballs — kicked on the one side by the state and on the other by the Maoists. Senior Maoist leaders were in fact worried that people were compelled to join the rallies precisely because this implied an element of coercion. They were well aware that Mao Zedong, whose guerrilla tactics they followed with zeal, said: ‘The people must be inspired to cooperate voluntarily. We must not force them, for if we do, it will be ineffectual’ (Mao, 1961, p. 82). However, although it was not Maoist policy, village youth often administered the desires of the local-level cadres that at least one person from each house should join the protest. And moreover, as we see in the rally described above, villagers would pick other villagers up for not attending. Though there is no evidence to suggest that violence was used against those who did not participate, people were afraid that not attending would incite public humiliation. Thus, over time, a situation developed whereby many villagers participated in demonstrations because they felt they had to. In the context of a hierarchical organization, the Maoist case reveals that, despite the leadership’s desires, coercive pressure does not have to operate in a top-down fashion but can, in fact, be produced at the lower level.

Whatever the nature of its production, however, coercive pressure is not necessarily incompatible with more general revolutionary support. When we explore people’s engagement with the Maoists beyond that of particular events, it is clear that compulsion to participate on certain occasions does not undermine a more general solidarity with the Maoists. In fact, other contexts have shown how revolutionary organizations, unlike alien governments, may pressurize civilians to comply with their demands without compromising their legitimacy because of their ability to appeal to moral sentiments to justify their actions. For instance, FLN (Front de Libération Nationale) coercion may actually have contributed to its popularity as Algerians felt that non-compliance might have elicited allegations of being a traitor and brought
with it feelings of shame and dishonour. There, considering the pride and status that could be gained by joining the FLN, many opted for this solution and it is difficult, Martha Crenshaw (1978) says, to separate actions motivated by fear from those of choice. Similarly, John Dunn (1972) argues of Vietnam that coercion applied by the insurgents was effective because it was exercised on intelligible moral solidarities. Indeed, in the guerrilla zones of Jharkhand, despite the villagers’ criticisms of and increasing reluctance to participate in the rallies, there was overwhelming sympathy for the Maoists. So even those who made the particular criticisms of being ‘footballs’ – played by the state and the Maoists – described more general feelings that ‘after all they are fighting for us’.

What I wish to suggest here is that this general moral solidarity with the Maoists emanates to a large extent from the fact that, over the 20-year history of guerrilla involvement in the area, the Maoists have become the legitimate authority there. In my previous writings (Shah, 2006a, 2009) I have shown how the initial Maoist spread was dependent on wresting control of the ‘markets of protection’ from the state in the region. This was protection to both enable access to the informal economy of public resources (seen by the Maoists as ‘levies’ or ‘taxation’) as well as protection from the Maoists’ own propensity for, and control over, violence. Over time, however, while controlling the markets of protection remained significant, the multiple ways in which the guerrillas attempted to make life better in the region were undoubtedly important for their credibility. The Maoists’ local legitimacy as an authority was increasingly gained through a range of actions that were seen as broadly for a morally just cause.

What actions gave the Maoists local legitimacy? Maoist documents – their Strategy and tactics or their Party programme – would suggest that the guerrillas were directed by an analysis of the Indian economy as semi-feudal and semi-colonial and that localized struggles of the movement would prioritize anti-feudal struggles and land redistribution. However, in these guerrilla zones of the forests and the hills, where a history of semi-feudalism has been weak and mobilization for land reform has little local relevance (Shah, 2013b), the Maoists have been more flexible than directed by their Strategy and tactics. Here, Maoist mobilization was focused against the historically exploitative role of the Indian state.

One of the first measures that the Maoists undertook in the region was the bombing of the rest houses of state forest officers and the burning of their jeeps and trucks. This generated the sympathy of most villagers as it evacuated the much-resented foresters, the dominant presence of the Indian state, from the region.10 The forest officers prevented the use of the forests by local populations but at the same time enabled outside contractors to leave with truckloads of illegally felled trees. Other important measures included the redistribution of the land of a large state-owned farm to poor families and the raising of wages for the collection of forest products. The establishment of Maoist mobile health clinics and schools was also seen as an important gesture indicating their concern for local populations.
Similarly, from the point of view of the Maoist leaders, the rallies, which would enlighten the villagers about the fundamental and systemic problems of the Indian state, were part of the tactics of the war. The rallies were to play two simultaneous roles. On the one hand, they were a means to mobilize the villagers to protest about their everyday struggles. On the other hand, they were to raise the awareness and consciousness of the villagers by educating them about the structural mechanisms of power through which their everyday problems were produced. The rallies were then one articulation of the theory of leadership that Mao Zedong contributed to the communist movement, the theory of the mass line, which encouraged cultivation of the closest possible interaction between the masses and the party. This leadership was ‘from the masses, to the masses’ whereby ideas of the people, which were considered by the revolutionaries as scattered, were to be studied and systematically propagated among the people to be embraced as their own and translated into action (Mao, 1943, p. 120). The particular focus of rallies thus began in the Maoist village committee meetings. Here, problems faced by the villagers were collated and then discussed up the hierarchy of leaders. The leaders re-analysed these problems, located and situated them beyond the village confines amid the broader structures of power in which they were enmeshed in order then to re-present them to the villagers to organize against. In the case of the PDS, for example, the villagers’ immediate anger was against the village fair-price shop dealer who sold off their entitlements of rations of grain and kerosene oil on the black market. The Maoist leaders took the villagers’ frustrations against the dealer into account in their rallies but they also located the dealer’s position amid increasing interference by the World Bank in the PDS, the privatization and liberalization leading to declining state subsidies and systematic corruption within the state system. They wanted the villagers to question not just the dealer but also the very character of the Indian state.11

The content of the Maoist rallies emerged from the specific, practical daily difficulties faced by villagers in the area, albeit as understood and re-presented to them by the Maoists. So even those who would rather not be at the rallies shouted the slogans against corruption and rising prices with a commitment and passion to denounce the structural conditions in which they lived. In the context of the rallies, it was not the issues of the protest that upset people, but the shape and form that the rallies took. Although some villagers felt compelled to participate in the rallies, this was not an indication of the inappropriateness of Maoist tactics to mobilize people’s problems. Rather, it was a sign that the Maoists had come to lack the imagination in content, structure and organization that would enthusiastically attract the crowds.

From control over markets of protection, over the years the Maoists had gained increasing legitimacy as a local authority in these regions through their attention to the moral economy that had been undermined by the exploitative Indian state. However, what we cannot understand by focusing on grievances alone as a reason for people’s mobilization in radical movements is the question
of how and why even when people lost their patience with the movement – when the Maoists got it ‘wrong’ and when people got bored or angry with them – they persisted in not only extending their sympathies and support but even joining the underground squads.

**Relations of intimacy and mobilization**

To understand the depth of people’s engagement with the Maoists, which grows deeper and persists beyond the legitimacy they gain from addressing violations of a local moral economy, we must explore the social relations that have developed between the party and the people. So let us turn to Kishore, one of the Adivasi men screen-printing the letters, and imagine him a year earlier, when he was 17 years old:

It was a November afternoon and Kishore had his back bent over a hoe, sweat was pouring down his forehead, and his vest was muddy and wet. He was tilling his family’s small piece of upland by the forest – half a hectare of *tanr*, as it was locally called – preparing it to sow lentils. When Kishore rested, with his bare foot propped against the back of his hoe, lunghi flying in the wind, he took deep breaths. It was not the tilling, but the recurring thoughts of the fights with his wife that made Kishore breathless. When he looked up, Mangtu, a young Adivasi man, dressed in a smart white shirt, black trousers and green trainers, was walking towards him with a tightly clasped fist. As they shook hands, Mangtu slipped into Kishore’s palm a little white note, neatly folded and glued. Kishore smiled because he recognized the writing on the note. It was from Manoj and Kishore had been waiting more than a month in anticipation of his return.

Once he read the note, Kishore acted quickly. There were only three hours left before dusk when the village would become a hive of activity as 32 people would march in. On that occasion there was enough time for the platoon to prepare their own food when they set up camp in the forests so there was no need to ask for a plate of food from each house. Nevertheless, the pots and pans still had to be recovered from where they were kept and rice and dal, onions and garlic, oil and spices needed to be bought. Fortunately there would be no need for a tent as it was still warm enough to sleep under the trees.

As Kishore prepared for the arrival of the platoon, he reflected on Manoj-da. Like many other villagers, Kishore called Manoj ‘da’, elder brother, but in fact saw him more as a father-figure than a brother. When Manoj had arrived the time before in the village, Kishore had slept two nights with the platoon in the forests. Kishore thought fondly of the moment when he arrived at Manoj’s camp in the pitch black of the night, with a sack of steel plates on his shoulder, pissed off because there was a hole at the bottom and he had to keep stopping as some kept falling out. His anger had melted when he saw Manoj.
‘You’ll stay won’t you?’ Manoj had asked and then quickly retracted his question, winked at Kishore while talking aloud to the other leader, ‘But Kishore does whatever he pleases, no matter what I say!’

Manoj often teased Kishore with the love and affection a father shows for a son. Their bond was special. Manoj was clearly not Adivasi, and the villagers were sure that he was higher caste, but caste seemed to pose no barriers in relations with Manoj. Kishore wasn’t quite sure how he had grown so fond of Manoj. Over the years, Kishore had become enchanted by Manoj: aware of the thrill he felt each time at Manoj’s unannounced arrival, the fascination in listening to the passion in Manoj’s speeches in village meetings, the desire to be with him. Kishore started hanging around Manoj, carrying his bags whenever Manoj would let him. Manoj took to the young boy, as he was then, and let him accompany him, at least while he was in the village. They did not speak much but a lot was communicated through small gestures. Gestures such as Manoj offering Kishore a cup of tea; Manoj ensuring that one of the boys in the platoon had space under his blanket for Kishore to curl up if he wanted to stay; Manoj giving Kishore an acacia stick to brush his teeth in the early morning even though Kishore was quite capable of breaking off his own from the trees.

So, when Manoj arrived back in the village that evening, Kishore had made up his mind. This time, he had decided he wasn’t just going to stay with Manoj for two or three days, he was going to go wherever Manoj took him, perform whatever roles Manoj assigned. There would then be no more shouting, no more bending over backwards for her expectations: no more wife. From then on Kishore decided there would only be the dedication and commitment of moving with Manoj and the squads; the simplicity of life on the move to serve a broader cause.

That’s how Kishore became a squad member. At first he moved in and around the 15 surrounding villages as a local guerrilla squad member. There were some hiccups along the way. Pressures from his wife to return which meant he came back after six months. But the same old story at home soon drove him back to the squads. A year and half later Kishore was promoted to leading the squad, in the hope of eventually making it to the platoon.

Kishore’s story reveals the bonds of intimacy which developed over the years between an Adivasi youth and a high caste Maoist leader, how these bonds interplayed with the social relations of his household (between him and his wife) and how they led to him joining the movement. The emotional closeness between Kishore and Manoj is the kind of intimate relation that develops all the time between the party and the people. Over time the development of these relations of intimacy has led to many villagers, such as Kishore, joining the movement. So, after many years of the presence of the Maoists in the region, kinship relations have flowed in and out of the villages and the party and often transcended relations of caste.

Kishore’s story was not exceptional. There was, for instance, Kanta, the 16-year-old Adivasi girl who ran away from an arranged marriage in the village to
live with the squads, enchanted by them because her cousin Chanda had been a platoon member for at least 10 years. There was also Kanta’s brother Pramod who ran from a fight with his father to be with the squads and Kanta’s cousin, Lila, who wanted to follow her elder sister. But there were also other people: Geeta, the Dalit girl who fell in love with a Yadav local area commander; Reena and Rakesh, who were in love with each other but, because one was Oraon and the other was Munda and their inter-tribe union was prohibited in the village, sought refuge with Manoj in the squads. In fact most people from the area who had joined the Maoists had a similar story. Adivasis and Dalits who joined the guerrillas in Jharkhand were thus both running away from one home, the village home, for inter-personal reasons and at the same time being welcomed by what had already locally become another home for whoever sought it: the underground Maoist party.  

In the stress that has been placed in recent years on the Maoist movement being an Adivasi or indigenous people’s movement (Roy, 2011 is exemplary, see Shah, 2012 for a critique), it has been easy to overlook the significance of the development of the social relations between the party and the people, which cut across tribe and caste boundaries. Emphasizing the ethnic or indigenous dimension to the characteristics of recent mobilization reproduces popular stereotypes of tribal communities who do whatever it takes to defend their primordial attachment to their land, hence explaining why Adivasis have taken up arms to protect their lands. These accounts generally overlook the fact that the Maoists were far from an Adivasi movement but consisted of leaders, cadres and sympathizers from a range of different castes and classes brought together in a political organization around class struggle which reflected the transforming history of recruitment.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the Maoists attracted students from the colleges and universities of metropolitan centres – Calcutta, Delhi, Patna, Hyderabad, Warangal in particular. The recruitment of these (generally) middle-class and higher-caste students initially went hand-in-hand with a programme of mobilization of poor peasants from middle- and lower-caste backgrounds (especially Dalits). Many of these students were killed or left after police repression, but some rose up the hierarchy into contemporary leadership positions. Although new student recruitment became negligible, the middle castes persisted and many of them became leaders. Among the Dalits, except for the armed cadres who stayed in the underground forces, the majority who had joined the open-front mass organizations left when the plains that were their homes became increasingly vulnerable to police repression.  

It was only when the party went in search of better terrain for guerrilla warfare, from the 1990s shifting their strongholds into the middle of India, that Adivasi youth began to join the guerrilla forces in greater numbers. Moreover, it is important to note that even in these forests and hills, although Adivasis dominated numerically, other castes also were living – notably Dalits and a scattering of higher castes and Muslims. The Dalits of these regions were as likely to join the Maoist armed cadres as the Adivasis. The Maoist party thus reflected its
long-term social history and consisted of people from diverse caste and class backgrounds.

In the context of movements with such long histories of mobilization, the Maoist case seems to suggest that the political scientists who highlighted the role of political organization in revolution beyond that of coercion, greed or grievance were to some extent correct. This is because they drew attention to the fact that the degree to which peasants participate in revolutions is dependent on the revolutionary leadership and its capacity for absorption (Migdal, 1974), and to the dynamic nature of exchange relations between the new revolutionary authority and the people (Wickham-Crowley, 1987). In a sensitive ethnography of Japanese workers protests, Christina Turner (1999) points out that, although the workers said they initially joined the demonstrations out of anger, the most common reason for staying after two and a half years of the dispute was the ties of closeness to the other workers, the friendship and their history of association with each other. Similarly, in the Maoist case, under the adverse conditions of survival strong bonds of friendship and commitment to one another developed among the Maoists, but also between the party and the villagers, which was one of the most important factors explaining the expansion and sustenance of the movement in the area.

Indeed, in the same vein of anthropological analysis that highlights the porous boundaries between the state and the people (for example, Fuller & Harriss, 2001), the Maoists can be seen as part of an extended family. When one looks at the social histories of every house in the guerrilla zone, it in fact makes little sense to speak of the Maoists as separate from the people. Highlighting the blurred boundaries between the people and the Maoists does not mean that everyone was a Maoist, but that almost every family either had or knew someone who was involved as an armed cadre, worker or sympathizer or who had a dispute addressed in the Maoist courts. Many people had lived with the Maoist underground forces for a few months and then left. And, of course, the greater part of those who left seemed to retain a considerable attachment to the movement.

Particular Maoist leaders, like Manoj, Gyan and Paras, had made lasting impressions and were treated with respect as dadas, mamas or kakas, elder brother, mother’s brother or father’s brother or, in some cases, even as fathers. Moreover, people had over time developed individual social relations with particular Maoist cadres and leaders, the sum of which could not be reduced to a simple love/hate, support/reject attitude towards the movement. Some had literally fallen in and out of love with cadres, many had declared wedding vows in the revolutionary army and still others, such as villagers seeking inter-caste/tribe or inter-religious unions, were married by the revolutionaries in the villages. To draw attention to these social relations between the party and the people is to argue that it is not just the policies but the people who made the party who had gained credibility and who had become a fundamental part of the social structure in the area. So what the Indian Maoist case seems to show
is that the relations of intimacy that are built between the political organization and people in its area of struggle are crucial to understanding the growth, development and especially persistence of revolutionary mobilization.

Ideology and political organization in relations of intimacy

In considering the kinds of social relations that the Maoists have developed with the people, I would like to suggest that the significance of ideology is crucial. The ideological premises of a political organization influence its everyday experiences and shape the development of new subjects and the characteristics of social relations it encourages between them, which in turn can determine its reach. Analysis of ideological considerations in relations of intimacy thus enables a comparative examination of the relative success of the Maoists vis-à-vis other competing political organizations – namely the Indian state and the Hindu right.

In the case of the Maoists, ideology is significant in the everyday life of the movement because communism is not simply a utopian dream of a future society but influences the remaking of subjects and the restructuring of social relations in areas of party presence. The future society, the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’, presents the proletariat as an abstraction to guide the making of new subjects and the shaping of new social relations. In the Indian case, Nicolas Jaoul (2011) is one of the few scholars to have explored the production of class subjectivity at the intimate level, and he does so in the case of the formerly underground faction of the Naxalites, the Communist Party of Indian–Marxist Leninist (Liberation). Here, he points out how divisions among the peasantry (in particular middle and poor peasants) are undermined in the emphasis placed on a single peasant class – a rural proletariat – and he focuses in particular on the memorial of a woman martyr, Manju Devi, to explore how a politically engineered, culturally negotiated and territorially entrenched brand of the rural proletariat is manufactured (Jaoul, 2011, p. 370).

The aesthetic sobriety of Manju Devi’s memorial allows the party to subvert the pomp of state iconography but significantly it also subverts both the classic feminine icon of Indian nationalism (of women as sisters and mothers) with one of popular militancy of a rural proletariat and the rules of endogamy, as Manju Devi transcends caste (and class) barriers in her own inter-caste (and class) love marriage with a party activist. In resurrecting this woman peasant martyr with an inter-caste (and inter-class) marriage, an intimate organic link of mutual commitment between the party and the people is built, hence enabling the party, Jaoul (2011, p. 368) argues, both to transform the poor peasantry so that it assumes its role as the agent of Indian revolution and to produce an image of the struggling poor and their revolutionary commitment. Similarly, in the case of the Maoists, the relations of intimacy nurtured by the revolutionary party are not simply the continuation of village caste and kinship relations but grounded in a particular ideological perspective which fundamentally seeks to rupture pre-existing social relations. Despite a hierarchically
governed organization, an enormous effort was made to supersede and negate the specificities of caste and class divisions among all the people brought into the revolutionary fold. This involved, in particular, paying great attention to treating lower castes and tribes with respect and dignity as equals.

In contrast to the Maoists, the Indian state has historically dominated these regions through economic and extra-economic exploitative extraction and, in this process, treating its populations as subjects (not citizens) who were expendable. The modern state, especially with the arrival of the British East India Company, followed by the government under the British crown and then the independent Indian government, penetrated the area through taxation and through exploitation of the forests for military purposes and railway sleepers (Guha, 1985). In these regions, therefore, the state and its apparatus were experienced through the police and the forest guards — both highly repressive outsiders from whom Adivasis sought to keep away (Shah, 2007, 2010). It was not just the indifference to humanity that Michael Herzfeld (1992) shows becoming entrenched through the bureaucracy that the Indian state suffered from here, but also the ideology of domination through which it ruled. This ideology manifested itself in highly exploitative social relations between the officers of the state and the people of the area. The high-caste northerners (often Biharis) who formed the state were notoriously distanced by the villagers because they both looked down on the people of this area as junglee, that is wild and savage, and treated them as such, as barbaric (Shah, 2010).

In everyday life it was often the small things that mattered in the relative reach of the Maoists in comparison to that of the Indian state: for instance, the tone of voice in which one was spoken to, the way one was greeted, the way one’s house was entered, whether one sat on the floor like everyone else or required a chair to be found. In contrast to the state officials, the Maoists (whose leaders were also outsiders — often high-caste Bihari men) had made it a point to be gentle and kind in everyday interactions. They called the villagers, chachi (father’s brother’s wife) or mama (mother’s brother) or baba (father) or beta (son) or beti (daughter). They did not want special treatment and even insisted on doing things that no villagers would expect of their outside guests — like washing their used plates and cups and helping with household chores. Unlike the personnel of the Indian state, the Maoists had over time become ‘apna’, ‘one of our own’. They had become a part of the area because of their ability to treat the villagers as equals, overriding differences of caste. They had built relations of respect and dignity, but equally important, relations of joking and teasing. The Maoists had become part and parcel of people’s life in these remote regions, in a way in which the Indian state never had. Whereas the Indian state had been experienced as exploitative and discriminatory, the successful appeal of the Maoists was in contrast dependent on their ability to develop intimate social relations of dignity and respect with the people.

If the Indian state treated people in these forests and hills as expendable, in neighbouring areas the organizations of the Hindu right — the neo-
traditionalist Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS) or the more modernist Shiv Sena – have been more successful in developing relations of intimacy. For these organizations of the Hindu right, like the Maoists, relations of fraternity and amity were also crucial in developing a prototype for a caste-less nation. However, once again the ideological premises are significant in analysing the comparative differences in the kinds of social relations which are shaped: on the one hand, the Maoist negation of caste and class distinctions which affected the everyday praxis of their mobilization emanated from an ideological vision of a future egalitarian society in which the abstraction of the proletariat was valorized; on the other hand, the RSS ideological vision of negating caste depended on bringing in a golden age of Ram Rajya which would be a society upholding upper-caste values (and, of course, excluding Muslims) and which contained no significant challenge to class relations.

These ideological differences meant that the processes of negation of caste among the Maoists were not the same as those promoted by the Hindu right in neighbouring areas. Hindu right groups sought to unite people of different castes through a universalization of upper-caste values in processes of Sanskritization. So, although they promoted a casteless society, it was often one in which people would behave like the upper castes (see Basu et al., 1993; Froerer, 2007; Heuze, 1992). In contrast, the Maoists in principle consciously subverted the rules of caste differentiation in the kinds of intimate relations they developed. Rather than encourage the rules of purity and pollution, the subversion (rather than valorization) of upper-caste norms was much more common among the Maoists. For instance, not only was it common practice for high-caste Maoist leaders to eat from the same plate as low castes or for them to make a point of eating beef or rats to undermine quintessential markers of ‘untouchability’, it was also significant that villagers exploring inter-tribe or caste unions (prohibited in the villages) found a space of freedom for their exploration in living with the Maoists.

The significance of ideology is also pertinent when we consider the comparative approach of the Hindu right and the Maoists in relation to class. For the Hindu right, while capitalism’s competition and consumption was rhetorically condemned, the labour relations and social organization generated by that order were accepted. Thus, aside from those who became religious leaders, followers of the Hindu right faced no significant change in their everyday material lives – they could go about their petty trades and work as they did before joining. For the Maoists, in contrast, those who joined were to become new subjects based on the values of the future society in which the proletariat was resurrected as an abstraction to signify the official liquidation of class distinctions within the party. The first requirement for every party member was thus to ‘declass’ himself/herself. Declassification was part of the praxis of the revolution, in which the ideological values of the future society were promoted in the ‘living by doing’. Above all, the proletariat represented a population which did not lay claim to any specific rights and in declassification
members had to divorce themselves from any personal property. It was also expected that members would adopt proletarian values by practising austerity, refraining from ‘worldly’ pleasures and surviving with just basic necessities. Maoists were not paid; there was no salary. (Once a person joined, the party looked after all their needs – food, clothing, books, healthcare, etc.) Any form of economism, that is attention to personal interests of economically driven goals or improving the material standards of living, was to be fought. All relations of intimacy were thus to begin with the premise that guerrillas need to subordinate any form of self-interest to the interests of the party and the people, willing to sacrifice everything for them, so that eventually there would be no cleavage between particular and common interests. And in this process the new relations of intimacy were to supersede the caste and class divisions of village societies and be the basis for further revolutionary mobilization.

Ideology then is crucial in the everyday experiences of political organization, influencing the subject formation and kinds of social relations that are developed in its areas of influence, which in turn can impact on its spread. In comparing the Maoists, the Indian state and the Hindu right, two tentative arguments can be made. First, I would like to suggest that part of the success of the Maoists in having long-term support and solidarity in the hills and forests of Central and Eastern India is dependent on the stark contrast between their ideological premises and that of the Indian state. On the one hand, the domination and exploitation of the Indian state in these areas resulted in the persistent ‘othering’ of and discrimination against local populations, leading to their desire to keep the state away. And, on the other hand, the ideology of communism guided the creation of relations of intimacy which enabled the Maoist guerrillas to be accepted by the local people as one of them. Second, I would like to suggest that, when we highlight the significance of ideology in the everyday experience of political organization, the Maoists perhaps have a more difficult task than that of the Hindu right in the development of relations of intimacy in areas of their spread. Unlike the Maoists, the Hindu right ideological vision does not contain a fundamental challenge to the development of capitalist relations in the region into which everyone living there is drawn. In India the development of class differentiation among the lower castes has generally gone hand-in-hand with Sanskritization processes as lower castes move up the class hierarchy by emulating upper castes. In valorizing a casteless society that promotes upper-caste values, the Hindu right then is working with the material forces of history. In contrast to the Hindu right, the Maoists constantly have the more difficult task of the creation of social relations against the material forces of history – an analysis which may help explain in part any potential comparative success of the Hindu right (vis-a-vis the Maoists) in times to come.
The Achilles’ heel: the conflicting formation of subjects and social relations

In the face of economic liberalization, the Maoist insurgency has been seen as a marker of dissent in the belly of the Indian boom, representing the rise of disenfranchised and impoverished populations left out of the project of India shining. Commentators have depicted it as one of the most powerful mobilizing forces against the Indian state and its ruthless policies of accumulation, dispossession and displacement. What explains its success, its ability to sustain itself in the face of all the adversities of life underground?

Speculation about why people become mobilized in dissent has been rife, whether it be in relation to civil war in Africa or peasant insurgency in Southeast Asia. In general, theories of mobilization have explained insurgent action in terms of coercion (Stoll, 1993), some kind of greed, self-interested or rational motivations (Collier & Höfﬂer, 2004; Popkin, 1979), or in terms of the violations of local moral economies, grievances and the emotional engagement which results (Scott, 1976; Thompson, 1971; Wood, 2003). These various explanations have also been important in reflections on the Indian Maoist movement, though increasingly accounts have represented the Maoists as a kind of primordial uprising of the Adivasis, the indigenous populations of the remote forests and hills, taking to the gun to protect their traditional ways of life and their ancestral attachment to land against the forces of dispossession of economic liberalization.

In this paper, I have shown that accounts of the Indian Maoists which explain the persistence of the movement in terms of greed or grievance – the standard models of rebellion in economics and political science – are grossly deficient. Drawing on long-term ethnographic research in a guerrilla zone, I have instead advanced an argument about relations of intimacy which develop between the mobilizing forces and the people in an area of struggle, an argument which has been underplayed to date in the literature. In the case of the Maoists, these relations of intimacy manifest themselves in the creation of new subjects beyond the caste and class divides of rural India, nurturing spaces of freedom which contest established rules of endogamy, of hierarchy and traditional conventions. These are spaces of freedom which have proved attractive to historically marginalized and discriminated populations.

I have argued that the relationship between ideology and political organization is crucial in the development of new social relations and can determine the movement’s expansion or spread. In the Indian context, I have suggested that part of the success of the Maoists’ ability to develop relations of intimacy with people in their areas of struggle has been a consequence of, on the one hand, the everyday manifestations of the ideology of communism which has encouraged them to treat people as equals. And on the other hand, the Maoist success in developing relations of intimacy is simultaneously dependent on the Indian state’s ideology of domination and exploitation which has persistently resulted in the treatment of the people in the remote hills and
forests as wild and savage and hence ‘other’. I have also suggested that Hindu right-wing political organizations that have developed relations of intimacy with local people in neighbouring areas may, in the long run, be more successful in their expansion than the Maoists because, unlike the guerrillas, they do not fundamentally challenge the configuration of caste and class relations against the grain of the material forces of history.

In conclusion, I wish to suggest then that the conflicting ideological tensions in the development of relations of intimacy help explain not only why people support and join movements such as that of the Maoists, but also why people leave and betray them, leading in part to their decline. An exploration of the dynamics of relations of intimacy can enable an analysis of what connects revolutionaries but also what can divide them. Relations of intimacy are both the strength of revolutionary mobilization and also dangerously its Achilles’ heel.

The development of relations of intimacy in revolutionary mobilization present a particular paradox as their ideological reshaping through leadership and political organization is constantly in danger of being undermined by the more parochial caste and kinship bonds of the villages which are rooted in the development of capitalist relations. The problem is not simply that village kinship obligations are likely to be as divisive as they are uniting (they can result in bitter enmities as much as they can in patient, tolerant and enduring attachment), but that there is always likely to be a tension between loyalties due to one’s kin and the impartiality that is expected of becoming a revolutionary. This is a problem similar to that which Peter Brown (1981) describes as faced by the Catholic Church in the Dark Ages. The Church had to contend with the issue of prescribing a universal message — the gospel is for all regardless — in the face of powerful kinship groups that continually threatened to turn its moral and material assets into a kind of private fiefdom. The danger that it faced, and that it had to resist, is one which constantly confronts the Maoists — a kind of ‘privatization of the commons’.

Indeed the restructuring of social relations to eliminate the caste and class differences of village society involves a long process of reformation, of revolutionary steeling and self-cultivation in which leaders have a responsibility to educate, develop and help the cadres into the values promoted by the movement. Leaders worked on the premise that, as Liu Shao-Chi (1951, p. 63) says, people joined for many different reasons and over time needed to be educated into the principles of the movement. The attractions of kinship may be a significant part of the reasons why people joined the cadres. However, if they persisted in the development of a party member, they ran the risk of undermining the principles of the new society to be created. In the new relations of intimacy, party interests were to usurp the personal ones of village kinship and caste structures.

The resulting tensions were multiple. On the one hand, family and kinship links were important for the struggle because those outside the underground party provided essential support, such as safe houses for recuperation, storage
of essentials, provision of food and sometimes members for the struggle. However, on the other hand, these continued links with families were also dangerous for the establishment of new relations of intimacy because they came with their own demands and expectations which were crucially linked to the development of capitalist relations and related processes of class differentiation, processes that the Maoists were in fact trying to undermine in the creation of new subjects. For instance, party cadres were vulnerable to transferring levies collected for public interest in the interests of personal gain – to extend and beautify the houses in which their wives or children lived, to improve the economic status of their families. Even the strongest and most staunch leaders, those who in all other aspects ‘declassed’ themselves to promote a classless society within the party, could at times find it hard to resist prioritizing the needs of their families above those of the rules of the struggle.

In a classic article comparing Melanesian and Polynesian political organization, Marshall Sahlins (1963) drew attention to the limits of the Melanesian big man who relies on kinship ties. Whereas the Polynesian chief derived his power from his office as chief, the Melanesian big man had to work hard to mobilize the masses through exchange relations with kin. Similarly, kinship relations of village societies in Maoist areas depended on personal loyalties and relations of reciprocity that had to be continually reinforced, whereas in the revolutionary party a strict chain of hierarchical command structures, not economic leverage, determined one’s position. Positions of power in the Maoist party were assigned by the leadership in relation to one’s commitment to the party aims; they were not to be demonstrated through economic exchanges. However, differences of power between kin in the village, to which every Maoist was also intimately connected, were sustained by mobilizing personal loyalties and the related economic obligations which nurtured processes of class differentiation.

Relations of intimacy thus resulted in competing ideological tensions and loyalties which were both the strength and the potential source of weakness in revolutionary mobilization. The continuity with village kin and caste networks which at one level was the strength of such movements, at another level always ran the risk of breaching the new relations of intimacy which were to be underpinned by the ideological subordination of personal interests of family and kin to those of the revolutionary party. The tension between the demands of village obligations and revolutionary participation may lead to accusations of betrayal, treachery and corruption and may ultimately be why people leave such movements, leading to their decline.

To end I wish to suggest then that, despite the tremendous military investment in arming men, training and war machinery by the Indian state against the Maoists, it is not surprising that one rarely hears of Maoists being killed in military battles or in face-to-face encounters. It is, in fact, the interpenetration of conflicting ideological tensions in the development of relations of intimacy which can produce betrayers, coverts, informers and
sometimes local militias (just as it can supporters) that is perhaps proving to be the most effective means of undermining this powerful counter-movement against the Indian state.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful for detailed comments from Jonathan Parry, James Scott, Nicolas Jaoul, Christopher Fuller, Stephan Feuchtwang and Stuart Corbridge on earlier drafts of this paper. I would also like to thank audiences at the Princeton University South Asia Studies Seminar, the UPENN conference on Maoism in India, the British Academy Poverty workshop held at Oxford University, George Washington University Mortara Centre, University of Ghent Political Science and the Yale Agrarian Studies Seminar. Special thanks are due to George Kunnath for accompanying me on the fieldwork drawn on in this paper. The limitations, though, are of course entirely my own.

Notes

1 These narratives, and other indented ones which appear in the text, are direct accounts of events that took place during field research. Ethical considerations, especially those of security, have been paramount in the style of writing adopted here and everywhere respondents and places have been anonymized.
2 The best accounts of the early history of the movement remain those of Banerjee (1980), Mohanty (1977) and Ram (1971).
3 In Jharkhand alone, more than a 100 Memoranda of Understanding were signed in the last decade selling off approximately 200,000 acres of land for mines, steel factories and power plants.
4 The argument that villagers are coerced into the movement in Maoist-controlled areas provides justification for government counter-insurgency operations in the name of ‘rescuing the people’.
5 The critiques from the left are united in separating the people from the Maoists and the state, though their motivations for this argument vary. For instance, for those coming from other left party positions, accusations of left adventurism, anarchism and terror can kill the curiosity of a budding fellow traveller and curtail potential sympathizers from taking the political project of the Maoists seriously. For those on the left who are less staunchly aligned with a party position but involved in civil liberties reporting on developments in the forests of India, suspension of ‘the people’ above the Maoists and the state eases the case for the impartiality of their activism as torchbearers and protectors of Adivasis. In this scenario, they can call the state to account on human rights abuses while avoiding the questions of transformations in political power foregrounded by the Maoists (see Shah, 2013a).
6 I do not deal here with the politics of earlier mobilization of the 1980s in the agricultural plains on which Bhatia (2000), Kunnath (2012) and Louis (2002) are the most insightful.
7 More recently Collier et al. (2009) have argued that feasibility is the most significant factor.
9 The research on which this paper is based has had a long gestation. Several years of preparation after a first stint of long-term field research between 1999 and 2000 in Jharkhand (see Shah, 2010) laid the ground for a second phase of long-term ethnographic field research in a Maoist heartland in India. This was carried out over more than one and a half years, from September 2008, with the anthropologist George Kunnath, who himself had been studying the decline of the Maoist movement in central Bihar (Kunnath, 2012). Classic ethnographic methods were pursued to understand the sociology and history of the wider region.

10 While the defence arms of the state, such as the police and forest officials, were chased out of the area, the Maoists allowed certain ‘developmental’ functions of the Indian government which benefited the people. Teachers and health workers continued to live and work in the guerrilla zones. However, as was the case for the fair-price shop dealers, the Maoists held them to account via their village-level committees. Block development officers rarely entered the region but most developmental schemes, such as the building of wells and hand pumps, were implemented via local contractors. Any measures, which enabled the easy entry of the security force into the guerrilla zones were forbidden, for instance the building of bridges or tarmac roads (the mud roads were easier to lay mines in).

11 Indeed other contexts have shown that movements for the better implementation of state welfare – such as NREGA or the PDS – can be incredibly successful in creating support for radical political organizations. In the plains of Bihar, for instance, Nicolas Jaoul (2011) reports that it is precisely these mobilizations that have led to the mass increase in membership of an organization of the previously underground faction of the Naxalites, the Communist Party of India–Marxist Leninist (Liberation).

12 It is ironic that the Maoists were in some ways providing similar kinds of ‘spaces of freedom’ for Adivasis and other lower castes to those which, I have earlier argued, were provided by seasonal casual labour migration to the brick factories of other states in India (Shah, 2006b).

13 See Kunnath (2012).

14 The higher castes and Muslims tended to be on the periphery of the movement, playing the position of village-level workers, mass organization leaders, couriers and mediators for supplies. The lack of higher-caste and Muslim involvement in the armed squads was less an indication of their intimacy with the Maoists than an indication of their prejudice towards the labour of carrying arms. Although many had less land than the Adivasis and were as impoverished, they generally saw it as beneath themselves to engage in the most risky forms of manual labour, which had the lowest remuneration (such as brick carrying or gravel mining) and were carried out by Adivasis and Dalits.

15 The party investigated such reports and, if found guilty, members had to go through a process of self-criticism in front of other members, face the humiliation of demotion of rank and ultimately expulsion.

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