

# INDIA'S PANDA

THE RISE AND FALL OF SABYASACHI PANDA IN INDIA'S MAOIST MOVEMENT

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**IPCS**

INSTITUTE OF PEACE AND CONFLICT STUDIES

**IPCS RESEARCH PAPER #29**

**AUGUST 2016**

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*“A 40 year long civil war has been raging in the jungles of central and eastern India. It is one of the world's largest armed conflicts but it remains largely ignored outside of India”*

*- Al Jazeera News.*

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Sabyasachi Panda is an ordinary man with a curious claim to fame. A mathematics graduate from a middling college in rural India, Panda, with his custom short haircut (combed to the side), generic reading glasses, and stock-standard moustache (almost universal amongst Indian men), speaks softly and almost entirely in well-worn clichés. Unimposing (both in personality and physicality), neither impressive nor unimpressive, intellectually unremarkable and entirely non-descript in appearance, by all logic, Panda really ought to have lived out his days quietly and unnoticed in the shadows – just another face in India.

The fact that he has not stands as an affront to any ideal of a merit based society. Panda's prominence, it seems, is an accident of history; something that should ordinarily provoke protests – he just does not seem like someone who deserves media attention. Yet it is safe to say that no one in India today envies Panda as he sits in solitary confinement facing an almost certain life sentence. His mug-shot remains the last and only indication that there might be something more to his character: the man now considered a martyr for his cause – ‘India's Che Guevara’ (Pandita 2012) – is spitefully pouting as he stares down the camera in a final act of defiance.

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Badabazaar does not appear on most maps. Tucked into the coastline of southern Odisha, surrounded by thick jungle, it is a sleepy Indian village without any significant industry. So in July 2014, as news channels began to tentatively report on the capture of Sabyasachi Panda in Badabazaar, there was an intolerable absence of information. Journalists simply could not locate the town, let alone find their way there for first-hand interviews.

They need not have worried; there was not much to miss. Panda's end was nothing like his life. Abandoned, sick and exhausted, the poster-child for the revolution was captured by the Indian security forces whilst trying to shelter from the seasonal monsoon. The arrest was fairly inevitable. Panda's support base had been melting-away for years – he was especially isolated after the police killed his deputy, Govinda Majhi, during a shoot-out in March 2013 (The Times of India 2014) – and he was being gradually suffocated as police methodically combed their way through the Ganjam and Kandhamal forests.

The arresting officers were quick to acknowledge: “this being the monsoon season it is difficult to hide inside the forests” (The Times of India 2014) and Panda's last days of freedom must have soaked him with a tremendously unpleasant realisation – whether on the run, or in custody, he was now irrelevant. As police intelligence was becoming impossibly accurate – “we were closely tracking his movements” (The Times of India 2014) – he would have been aware that his former friends were actively informing on him. Analysts were quick to point out that Panda had become so isolated that his arrest would likely have little impact on the movement he once headed. The only surprise it seemed was that at the time of his arrest he had managed to find someone – anyone – still willing to call themselves a friend, and importantly, still willing to provide him shelter.

The police force was positively giddy as they informed the media (strangely feeling the need to convince the public that their captive was unreformed) that among Panda's meagre possessions at the time of his arrest, were ‘Maoist documents’.

This was not necessary. Whereas international audiences would likely – upon hearing the statement ‘India arrests its most wanted terrorist’ – turn their minds instinctively to jihadist groups or Pakistani militants, for Indians, there would be no such confusion. Panda lived the quintessential lifestyle of any self-respecting outlaw: launching brazen and deliberately public attacks whilst constructing a cult of personality around his leadership (not an easy thing to do considering how little there was to work with).

As the media began to preface any mention of his title as ‘Maoist leader’ with the qualifying phrases ‘so-called’, ‘self-styled’ or ‘self-described’, Panda must have been aware that he had well and truly crossed the celebrity threshold. It is only after an individual or movement achieves real power or

notoriety that people begin to parse their language, suddenly tip-toeing over their words as a last-ditch attempt to undermine an already secured status and strength.

So by definition, at this stage the horse had already bolted, and Panda was being offered negotiated peace-deals that included amnesty and was being approached by political parties with the promise of safe-seats in parliament – Odisha’s then-deputy opposition leader acknowledged that Panda was the “voice of 57 percent in Odisha, who have only 12 rupees to spend per day” (Pandita 2012). He had become an Indian Paulo Escobar – a criminal too popular to arrest.

Yet, just like Escobar, brutality pushed Panda beyond the reach of public sympathy. As the face of his movement, he presided over a notoriously bloody wave of attacks on police stations, the seizure of military grade armaments and a series of vengeful attacks on anti-Maoist groups.

Through the carnage, a 2008 attack in Nayagarh stands out (India Today 2008). Arriving in convoys of buses just before midnight, hundreds of Maoists strategically converged on the small coastal town. The target was the armoury. However, after disabling the power supply and communication lines, the entire town was laid siege to, with residents indiscriminately terrorised until daybreak. The cache of arms was successfully stolen, yet left behind was a very personal and gruesome massacre. Fourteen police officers were executed and the cadet training school, burnt to the ground. A 700 strong police counteroffensive failed to produce a single arrest.

Needless to say that despite Panda’s diminished status at the time of his arrest, the Odisha police force were under no illusions as to why he was being targeted. Personally implicated in the deaths of 25 security personnel and 34 civilians (Mishra 2014), facing 100-odd charges (Mohanty 2014), wanted by police agencies across various different states and with a 5 Lakh Rupees (approximately USD 7,500 – a huge amount by Indian standards) reward for his capture (media embellishment often quoted this figure closer to 20 Lakhs), Panda had well and truly earned his place at the top of India’s ‘most wanted list’ (DNA India 2014).

His arrest was announced by Odisha’s Chief Minister, Naveen Patnaik, on the floor of the state’s Legislative Assembly, and despite agreeing to be “cooperative with the police” and “to answer the questions put to him” (Zee News 2014) he was still held on remand for ten days following his capture for intensive interrogation by the Special Intelligence Wing (SIW). Despite reaching the end

of his usefulness, Panda had achieved something remarkable – not since Mao Zedong himself had his namesake movement received such notoriety and fear.

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At the first glance, Maoism seems like an oddly jingoistic type of communism to pursue. Yet this is all in the name. There is nothing specifically Chinese about Maoism today. In fact, of the almost 100 separate contemporary Maoist movements in the world (Mukherji 2012: 3), none are present in mainland China (to be expected, considering the current nature of the Chinese regime and its intolerance toward ideological difference).

And of these various manifestations, nothing comes close to the size and the reach of India's Maoist insurgency. However, and perhaps predictably, it is a movement most commonly reported on in terms of violence, yet rarely in terms of ideology.

At the first glance, all the right gestures and language are there: India's Maoists greet each other (at least on camera) with Red Salutes (a single fist raised with the palm facing forward) and speak in correct communist clichés of 'class enemies', 'peasant uprisings' and, interestingly, in Mao Zedong's unique propaganda label as the 'red sun in our hearts'. When the Maoists target Christian missionaries (an easy, and subsequently consistent, focus for their violence) in the Indian countryside, they can always be relied upon to regurgitate Karl Marx's much abused quotation from his 'Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right': religion is "the opium of the people" (Blunden & Carmody 2009).

However, Indians are nothing if not improvisational: a local favourite, and wonderfully evocative piece of adlibbing is the declaration that the Indian nation can only "rise like a tornado" (Mukherji 2012: 31) under an appropriately Maoist government. Not to be outdone, the Indian state has always been a willing participant in this rhetoric and all too eager to play their expected role. Sympathetic journalists, civil liberties assemblies, union organisations, and even Gandhian groups, have all been labelled 'mainstream Maoists' or 'above ground Maoists'. Highlighting the depth of this fear, the former Prime Minister of India VP Singh once lamented publicly, "What is stopping the youth of our country from becoming Maoists" (Chakravarti 2009).

Perhaps expectedly, and in true communist spirit, the Maoist response neatly rounds-out this circular fear by accusing the Indian government of using them to unreasonably scare the population into passivity – that Maoism is a useful enemy for an insecure state.

And the deeper you dig, the stronger this plagiarised flavour appears. 40 years after his death, Indian Maoism remains unchanged and indistinguishable from Mao Zedong’s original ideology. The movement still aligns itself with Stalinist doctrine because Mao famously felt the need to do so whilst alive (Mukherji 2012: 232) (though be it for historical, rather than ideological reasons). It entirely dismisses the communism of post-Mao China as ‘revisionist’ and it seeks to impose, in the words of Mao himself, a “new democratic” (Mukherji 2012: 2) structure. It could only be outside China, at a safe distance from any memory of the Cultural Revolution or the Great Leap Forward, that Maoism could still exist so unchanged.

In a nutshell: the reigns of democracy must be seized, likely through protracted armed struggle; if elections are contested then they must be used only as a temporary measure (a necessary evil), and they should ideally be boycotted entirely; after this intermediary democratic step a purely communistic society should be implemented, and in true internationalist fashion it will spread throughout the world by virtue of this hypothetical successful example. (Despite vast contemporaneous differences, Maoism post-Mao is almost identical to Leninism post-Lenin).

However, there can often be a tendency to get too hung up on names. Be it Mao, Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin or Engels, ideas tend to rise and fall less on the truth of their underlying precepts and more on the hope that they provide. An emancipative theory such as Maoism will only gain traction if it can be easily contextualised into the experience of everyday Indians.

Regardless of the circumstance, it always takes a lot to convince people that armed struggle is the solution to their problems. It is asking them to accept a situation where they patently have a lot to lose. So it came fortuitously for Maoism as a movement that it found its spiritual home in the hearts and minds of India’s Adivasi population.

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In August 2012, Sabyasachi Panda wrote two rambling and openly desperate letters to his Maoist comrades. By this stage, Panda was in the death throes of his leadership and like a wounded animal he was lashing out with all that he had left – ideological purity.

After a considerable throat clearing and a tedious detailing of all the various plots and conspiracies against him, Panda eventually found his way back to the thrust of his argument: he accused the Maoist Party of both abandoning the Adivasis (India's tribal groups) and of actively turning against them with an "exploiter ideology" and by committing "unnecessary class annihilations" (Pandita 2012).

The term 'Adivasis' directly translates to 'ancient inhabitants'. Yet, it comes with none of the racial overtones that such a label would attract if it were used to describe the indigenous populations of Australia, New Zealand, Canada or the US. However, the same cannot be said for the term famously and repeatedly used by Mahatma Gandhi, *Girijans* (Mukherji 2012: 1), meaning 'Hill People' – Gandhi had form in this regard, choosing to refer to India's Dalit, or 'untouchable' caste with the much derided and heavily patronising word *Harijans* (Toler 2014) or 'Children of God'.

From independence in 1947, the newly forming Indian state made special mention of its 'scheduled tribes' both in the words of the country's founding fathers and within the constitution itself. Whilst the issue of caste tends to dominate the political discussion – both domestically and internationally – the plight of India's tribal populations is rarely ever divorced – legally speaking – from its cousin category. And whilst it would be unfair to accuse Maoism of ignoring the needs of India's lower castes, the country's various Adivasi populations are simply a more convenient target.

Between 1950 and 1980 the newly autonomous Indian economy grew at a staggeringly low (considering its starting-point and resource wealth) 3.2 per cent. This was only fractionally higher than the rate of population growth, making the adjusted or 'real' growth figure a meagre 1 per cent. This came to be known as the 'Hindu rate of growth' (Siva 2013). India's first Prime Minister and patriarch of the still influential Nehru-Gandhi dynasty, Jawaharlal Nehru, had seen his dream of a socialist, protectionist and closed economy fail all sections of Indian society.

Sweeping changes often require a crisis; and a foreign exchange emergency that put India on the brink of bankruptcy proved to be the necessary catalyst. In 1991, the then Finance Minister – later to become Prime Minister – Manmohan Singh pushed through a series of liberalising reforms (Anand 2014) at the behest of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Hindu rate of growth became nothing more than a cautionary tale. India's economic growth immediately lurched toward 7 per

cent and it is now the world's fastest growing major economy (predicted to remain in this position throughout 2016 by the World Bank) (Chen 2016). From an oppressed colony to an economic basket case, India is now in a very unfamiliar position as an emerging super-power.

Yet despite this neo-liberal transformation, India remains the same country that economist Utsa Patnaik described as a "republic of hunger" (Patnaik 2004) – and Maoism feeds on deprivation. First ignored by Nehru's new India – despite the constitutional guarantees of 'equality', 'socialism' and 'welfare' – and then later disenfranchised (often forcibly removed from their ancestral land) by a country trying to play economic-catch-up, the Adivasis sit on the margins of Indian society.

As farmer's committed suicide after the sudden loss of subsidies, as employment growth steadily fell despite the dramatic rise in economic growth, as half of all Indian children remained undernourished or malnourished, as  $\frac{3}{4}$  of all Indians still lacked access to clean drinking water or basic sanitation, as official corruption remained largely acceptable (former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi famously dismissed calls to address the problem by saying "What can you do about it? It is a global phenomenon") and as schools and hospitals continued to be under-resourced, it should have come as no surprise that Maoism had progressively established a significant presence in 18 of India's 29 states.

And of this presence, the vast majority are Adivasis. So much so that the word 'Maoist' is often misunderstood to be a generic term for any criticism of Adivasi oppression, rather than as a standalone theory that just happens to apply to the Adivasi situation. Indeed, many commentators – government ministers included – have made the claim that the Adivasis and the Maoists are so intricately connected that it is impossible to make any reasonable distinction between them, especially when it comes to public policy.

The sad truth is that the development challenges of the Adivasis were, for the most part, overlooked – and happily so – until the violence of the Maoists forced their concerns into the public light. Indeed, while their association gives the Maoist cause a certain necessary legitimacy, for the Adivasis it is nothing more than a marriage of convenience. Often standing as the only real available alternative, Maoism has become the default setting for the disillusioned, the oppressed and even the gullible.



To prove this theory through its exception, in 2002 the Adivasis in Gujarat amassed in support of the nationalist and border-line fascist groups Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). Rather than class warfare, their suffering was suddenly being explained away in the form of religious oppression and their emancipation through an assault on the states Muslim population (Mukherji 2012: 32-33). The ensuing communal riots resulted in the deaths of over a thousand people, and have since gained a certain international notoriety due to the role played by the state's then Chief Minister, and now Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi (the US placed a visa ban on Modi for what they saw as his tacit support for the violence).

Such alliances are almost always temporary and in the real course of events the Maoists tend to be all that the Adivasis have fighting in their corner. So despite his many qualifying statements – “it is with much sorrow I am writing this letter to you” – Panda's claim that his Party were abandoning its only real supporter base struck a very sensitive cord. The response was in the form of a Central Committee Press Release bluntly rejecting the “vicious, baseless and sham allegations made by Sabyasachi Panda.” It went on to accuse Panda of being “in cahoots with the ruling classes” and of acting with “evil intention” (CPI Press Release 2012).

It must have been an excruciating read for Panda, as much of the ‘press release’ took the form of a very long-winded character assassination. However, the gist was simple: in light of his “betrayal” (CPI Press Release 2012) and in true communist tradition, Panda was expelled from his own Party. A senior police officer would soon front the media expressing his concern for the fugitive: “We must get him before the Maoists do” (Dixit 2012). And after his arrest became public, his old comrades could not resist hammering in some extra nails by labelling Panda a government agent and his arrest as “a state-sponsored drama” – a fraud undertaken “in the name of encounter” (First Post 2014).

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The Party in question, the Party from which Panda was exiled, and then hunted, is the Communist Party of India (Maoist) or CPI (Maoist) – the footnote ‘Maoist’ is very important. The various iterations of CPI parties include, but are not limited to: ‘M’=Marxist, L=Leninist, ML=Marxist and Leninist, MLM= Marxist, Leninist and Maoist, and of course Panda’s own *alma mater* – incidentally the dominant power centre of Maoist India – CPI (Maoist) where he held the title of Secretary of the Odisha State Organising Committee (OSOC).

After his expulsion – and after quite surreally being publically asked to return borrowed weapons (Nayak 2013) – Panda flirted with the CPI (MLM), the Maoists Communist Centre India (MCCI), Odisha Maobadi Party (OMP), and was ostensibly an active member of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) at the time of his arrest. Yet all of this can be a bit of a distraction. Maoism today is effectively a loose conglomerate of political Parties of which the CPI (Maoist) are the primary drivers.

Functionally, the movement closely resembles its international cousins. Often and derogatorily compared to the predatory Lord’s Resistance Army in Uganda, Indian Maoism has much closer ideological links with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Communist Party of Nepal who managed to bring about the collapse of their country’s long-standing monarchy. However, their closest manifestations are the little known Senderistas in Peru, who both in philosophy and practice eerily mirror India’s Maoists – particularly so in the policy: ‘hammer the countryside’ (Mukherji 2012: 233); an individualistically focussed military strategy.

The son of a freedom fighter and three-term state Parliamentarian for Ranpur, Sabyasachi Panda, was nursed into political life from a young age. Despite Panda’s elder brother, Siddharth, becoming a member of the socialist Biju Janata Dal Party, the younger Panda decided to join the more radical Maoist movement in 1991. Initially piggy-backing on the credibility of his father, Panda made his first decisive move in 1996 when he formed the Kui Labanga Sangha Maoist branch with the express purpose of recruiting and indoctrinating the Kui Adivasis. The success of the movement began to shift the entire political debate in the region, and the Kui Labanga Sangha eventually morphed into the People’s War Group in Andhra Pradesh – an explicitly more violent, and hence attention grabbing organisation. Panda was suddenly on everyone’s political radar.

By 2008 he had become an irrepressible force. And despite still being a long way from the Party's official leadership, Panda was unmistakably the public face of the movement. The creation of a highly visible campaigning presence (an aspect of the Party that has continued to thrive despite his absence) and a willingness to engage in vote banking (a commonly used tactic across the political spectrum in India where the voter registrations of small communities are taken by force and then votes are cast on mass for a single party without the consent of the voters themselves) dramatically increased the Party's electoral success and with it the god-like aura surrounding Panda. And perhaps it all went to his head, because in two bold yet inconceivably foolish moments, it all came crashing down.

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In 2008, at the height of his popularity, Panda decided to focus his attention upon a strange target – an 84-year-old monk known as Swami Lakshmanananda Saraswati. Saraswati, though heavily revered by his followers, lived a fairly innocuous life largely devoted to the restoration of the ancient religious and cultural traditions of the Khond varavasis. So when 30 armed Maoists ambushed him in his Jalespata ashram in the Kandhamal district of Odisha, the original consensus amongst analysts was a simple case of mistaken identity. Yet as the dust settled, the strange purpose of the attack – killing Saraswati along with three of his followers and a young boy (Two Circles 2008) – became apparent.

Panda had hoped that Saraswati's death would precipitate a wave of communal violence against the local Christian population (World Watch Monitor 2008), and that in-turn this would help to swell the Maoist ranks. He was right on the first count. There had been a long history of animosity between Saraswati's Hindu followers and the local Panna Christians, and as expected, the murder of Saraswati quickly exploded into a month long spiral of vicious communal conflict. The subsequent mass recruitment into the Maoist ranks did not materialise.

As 45 people were killed, 80 religious sites destroyed, 1400 homes burnt, and as 18,500 villagers were force to flee into refugee camps (Kumar & Timmons 2008), Panda and the Maoists had some explaining to do. What followed was a public relations nightmare: an official denial of responsibility was mailed to the media immediately following the attack, placing the blame rather, on non-descript "nefarious elements" (Niz Goenkar 2013) of the broader society. Not long after this, another letter from a Maoist affiliate group, the People's Liberation Guerrilla Army, claimed responsibility (Mishra 2008) and added the generic charge of 'anti-Maoist hate speech' against the octogenarian.

The Machiavellian-like purpose of the killing, along with the tremendously disproportionate level of suffering that the group now seemed willing to accept for its cause, produced substantive cracks in the relationship between Panda and the Party's Central Committee. And in time, and as information began to leak out, it became apparent that Panda had failed to seek Party approval before giving the green light for the attack.

Yet nothing captures media attention quite like a foreign victim. In March 2012, Panda was desperate. His wife, Subhashree – better known as 'Mili' – Panda, was being held in state custody on charges relating to the organising of Maoist training camps and a 2003 attack on a police station in the Kutinguda jungle. Mili, a stout, strongly framed woman with an impossibly thick neck, broad rounded shoulders and a habit of wearing dark sunglasses during studio interviews, undermines her imposing aura the moment she opens her mouth. Fumbling over her words, fidgeting in her seat, offering short and hesitant answers, talking almost entirely in conspiracy theories, and allowing herself to be bullied by her interviewers, it becomes hard not to feel a slight sympathy for her. It appears, at least from the outside that she is in the middle of a fight that she does not want – she seems to argue only for her husband, not for Maoism.

And perhaps this fragility was heavy on the mind of Sabyasachi Panda as he kidnapped two Italian nationals near the Kandhamal forests with the expressed purpose of ransoming them for Mili's release (Mohanty 2014). Indian Maoism had never before received such notoriety; suddenly TV crews were clambering over themselves in order to trek into Maoist strongholds with the hope of being granted interviews with Panda. Claudio Colangelo was set free within days as a goodwill gesture. However, Paolo Bosusco – who incidentally had been living illegally in Odisha for 19 years – it was explained, would remain a Maoist prisoner until all charges were dropped against Mili.

The strategy worked, Panda had found a pressure-point, and the Indian government came to the party in a panic. Mili's case was heard by a specially orchestrated 'fast-track court' and she was promptly acquitted of all charges (Satapathy 2012). Bosusco was immediately freed after spending a relatively short 29 days in captivity. However, Sabyasachi Panda would never recover. Aware of the hole that he had just dug for himself, Panda tried to immediately save some face by declaring that as a part of the deal involving Mili's release, he had also secured a government ceasefire (Biswal 2012).

The Maoist's Andhra-Orissa Border Special Zone Committee (AOBSZC) sent him an instantaneous message – abducting a state parliamentarian for no other purpose than to destroy the ceasefire (Nayak 2013). They needn't have worried, it likely never existed. And even if it did, it would not have saved Panda. There was no escaping what he had done: he had co-opted the movement, and risked the lives of his fellow comrades, in order to fix a problem in his personal life. And as if this weren't enough, he had once again failed to seek Party approval before initiating a military operation. It would soon be open season on India's Panda.

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India is a society of ghosts – a necrocracy. The words and thoughts of its long-deceased statesmen – Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar – still echo through the policies of the modern nation. An odd feeling of debt and comparative inadequacy keeps these cadavers warm, as if their doctors could never quite bring themselves to call an end to the CPR.

However, no such over-the-top reverence is reserved for the man who sparked the beginning-of-the-end for the British in India. In 1934, Manabendra Nath Roy – risking his freedom – found just the right moment, and just the right audience, as he publically demanded the immediate rise of 'radical democracy' (Nath: Acc 2016) in India. From this moment, India was on an immovable path toward independence, yet Roy is the kind of person who is now happily forgotten. He was, after all, also the pioneer of the communist movement in India.

So as he slunk away into the shadows, hunted by both the government and his own Party, Sabyasachi Panda's mind must have shifted towards his place in history. Roy – as his intellectual grandfather – would have stolen some of his attention, as would the 1940 Telangana movement in Andhra Pradesh. But also – and no doubt more viscerally – Panda must have thought back to Naxalbari.

India after independence was far from an ideal society – which just happened to be the ideal conditions for the growth of Maoism. In many parts of India, serfdom still flourished. Peasants would toil the fields of wealthy landlords, who would in-turn take upwards of 95 per cent of all the profits. An absence of regional infrastructure and basic development meant that these workers were left with little other option than to accept this extreme exploitation for both themselves and their children. Slow, yet steady, resentment had been building in the Indian countryside with isolated

peasant revolts sporadically being reported in various parts of the country. And in 1967, in a small generic region of West Bengal, the movement abruptly exploded into life.

It was quite the launching party, with the largest gifts supplied by a government overreaction. The peasants of the Naxalbari villages had for some time been provoking the landlords and the local authorities by demarcating areas of 'communist land' and refusing to harvest already seeded crops. A few minor clashes, confiscations and forcible removals came and passed without much excitement; and then Bigul Kisan, a local peasant, put a human face on the conflict. Kisan – for no other reason than simple bad luck – was viciously beaten by a group of security personnel at the behest of a local landowner (Revolutionary Publications: Acc 2016). As if waiting for just such a catalyst, the residents of Naxalbari – armed with bows, arrows, spears, farm tools and the odd rifle – were immediately on the streets trying to do by force what simple disobedience had failed to achieve. Naxalbari was engulfed by a region-wide peasant uprising – however, it did not last long.

The police – without any experience in such matters – predictably overreacted. In what could be best described as a massacre, the local officers – rapidly developing a blood-lust – brutally murdered nine women and children. Special courts were then set up, not to prosecute the police, but to convict and silence the villagers. The original backlash and the kangaroo courts failed to have the desired impact, so a large squadron of paramilitary forces were sent into Naxalbari in a coordinated assault on the peasants. The area was sealed, thousands arrested, and countless others beaten into submission (Revolutionary Publications: Acc 2016).

Revolutionaries in Calcutta (now Kolkata) quickly realised that in Naxalbari they were witnessing the vanguard of their movement and began plastering the city with banners saying “Murderer Ajoy Mukherjee must resign” (Revolutionary Publications: Acc 2016) in reference to the state’s chief minister, and later launched the Naxalbari Peasants Struggle Aid Committee. Then China, unable to ignore a Maoist uprising on their southern border, embraced the Naxalites through a radio broadcast from Peking “A phase of peasants’ armed struggle led by the revolutionaries of the Indian Communist Party has been set up in the countryside in Darjeeling district of West Bengal state of India. This is the front paw of the revolutionary armed struggle launched by the Indian people” (Revolutionary Publications: Acc 2016).

The key author of the Naxalbari uprisings, Charu Majumdar, whose writings today have become immortalised as a series of Maoist hand-guides known as the “History Eight Documents,” spoke forcefully in the weeks following the suppression: “Hundreds of Naxalbaris are smouldering in India... Naxalbari has not died and will never die.” He was right. The dams had broken and a flood of red flags began to inundate India emblazoned with the revolutionary mantra “March forward along the path of armed peasant revolution” (Revolutionary Publications: Acc 2016) (Chakravarti 2009).

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This began the first of four distinct stages in India’s Maoist movement (Chakravarti 2009). The first, in the 1960s and 1970s, was a collection of largely isolated, sporadic local uprisings. The second, in the 1980s, involved an entrenchment of the ideology within India along with a splintering of allegiances between Maoist factions. The third stage, in the 1990s, saw the movement grow rapidly and mutate distinctively into a broad-scale armed conflict, creating strongholds in Central and Southern India. While the fourth, and current, stage has involved the growing power and dominance of CPI (Maoist) over the other Maoist factions.

As the movement grew, so did the violence. The ‘Red Corridor’ is now a large strip of land – comprising a third of India’s territory – that runs from China in the north, down the eastern coastline of India and across to the western tip of Kerala. Responsible for several thousand deaths in the last decade alone, the Maoists are the largest terrorist group operating in India today (far from being just a lazy colloquial descriptor, that overused label ‘terrorist’ is now the legal definition for the movement). The Ministry of Home Affairs, trying to estimate the size and scope of Indian Maoism pronounced the presence of 10,000 “hard-core underground cadre” (Chakravarti 2009) in the forests of Central India (supported by many others) armed with 7000 guns and an assortment of primitive and modified weapons. What he failed to mention (perhaps deliberately so) was the presence of home-made, yet highly functional, rocket launchers and – in a lesson in military strategy from their cousins in the Tamil Tigers – a large arsenal of landmines (Chakravarti 2009). There is a famous case of an attempted land survey of the vast forests in the Narayanpur District in Chhattisgarh. The Governor at the time lamented: “the surveyors could not move even 2-3 kms inside the region because it was mined extensively in concentric circles and remains to be that way even today” (Mukherji 2012: 234).

Occasionally it has seemed politically useful to downplay the threat posed by the Maoists. In India's newest state, Telangana, the home minister made the confident, yet strange, assertion that there were no Maoists in the state. Soon after, and almost certainly as a public statement of defiance, six leaders from the Telangana Rashtra Samithi Party (TRS) were kidnapped by the local Maoist branch. This response was not necessary. The home minister's statement was at the time already self-refuted by the condition of the chief minister's personal convoy which included 'military grade' Kevlar armour, armed personnel carriers and personal vehicles adjusted with 'tank' modifications (Chakravarti 2009).

Rather than an overreaction, this was prudence. In 2003, the then Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh (the state previously encompassing Telangana) N. Chandrababu Naidu's convoy was attacked by Maoists as he travelled to Tirupati in the south of the state. Nine claymore mines were used in the assault and Naidu was literally blown clear of his vehicle – he amazingly escaped with only superficial cuts and a broken collar bone (Chakravarti 2009). It was therefore unsurprising that Naidu's successor, Y.S.R. Reddy, instigated peace talks with the Maoists immediately after his election (these collapsed in 2005).

One of the stranger episodes in this conflict occurred with the Purulia arms drop. In 1995, in the Purulia district of West Bengal, a cache of arms – primarily consisting of automatic rifles and several million rounds of ammunition – landed in a field in the middle of the night. Confusion reigned. The unauthorised Latvian aircraft strangely returned a few days later and was intercepted by the Indian Air Force. The crew refused to cooperate with the prosecution during the court case. However, the judge decided that it was within his purview to fashion a guess – the arms were destined for the Ananda Marga, a right-wing, fascist organisation, and sworn enemies of the state's Maoists (Singh 2011). However, just who organised and financed the drop remains a mystery, though countless international conspiracy theories have filled the information gap.

Faced with an increasing level of violence and support for the Maoist cause, India has drawn deep into its counter-terrorism bag. In Tamil Nadu, the colonial throwback and wonderfully named 'Q-Branch' has been growing in size and resources like a gluttonous child; Andhra Pradesh has implemented the evocatively named OCTOPUS (Organisation for Counter Terror Operations); Chhattisgarh went a step further with the Special Public Securities Act which targets Maoist



supporters by designating even anti-government thoughts to be illegal (Chhattisgarh Legislature 2005); and countrywide, any provocatively deemed literature or media has been regularly banned.

None of it has worked, and there now exists the very strange phenomenon of police officers choosing to resign on mass rather than accept postings to India's Maoist controlled regions, knowing that kidnapping, torture and murder are the only job perks in such tribal areas. The only successful note of government push back has come in the form of Operation Green Hunt. Described by the government of India as an "all-out offensive" (Insights on India 2015) on the Maoist movement, it seems that the only inaccuracy in that statement is the absence of the word 'indiscriminate'. Green Hunt has taken the form of 70,000 paramilitary troops – often with minimal training, and occasionally with none whatsoever (the Indian government has taken the extraordinary step of simply arming local populations in the hope that they will do the fighting for them) – forcing their way through the jungle toward Maoist strongholds. The result has been one of pure tragedy and pure irony.

As Green Hunt began proving to be successful – at least on the margins – the hard-core Maoist cadres did the prudent thing and abandoned their jungle camps in favour of an even more nomadic lifestyle. This was a luxury the Adivasis did not have. Emotionally and culturally attached to their land, the Adivasis have invariably chosen to remain in their ancestral homes despite the presence of an approaching army. The result has been fairly predictable; an all-out offensive on Maoism has become an all-out offensive on Adivasis.

The new recruits to Operation Green Hunt – burdened by the need to achieve certain tangible results in order to justify future salaries – have often resorted to indiscriminately massacring and imprisoning the local Adivasi populations (Mukherji 2012: 22-23). So as you might expect, the inception of Green Hunt impeccably correlates with a sharp rise in the annual death toll of the long-running conflict (SATP 1999-2015) (Maoist Insurgency 'Update' 2009) (SATP 2005-2016). This is the tragic side; the ironic side of Green Hunt – and seemingly unnoticed – is the image of young men stalking the countryside, abusing undeserved positions of power, terrorising local populations, and whose mere suspicions or accusations are enough to justify imprisonment or murder – this is Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution played out with an Indian cast.

However, it should not be missed that underlying all this mayhem and loose application is a very real commitment by the Indian government to belatedly eradicate Maoism from its territory. Jungle warfare is being taught with a renewed vigour in the Indian army, drones are being deployed to scout jungle hideouts and the Maoists are starting to feel the pinch. In 2010, in the Dantewada district of Chhattisgarh, the local Maoist faction launched their deadliest ever (and strikingly desperate) attack on the Indian security forces – a cold-blooded massacre of 75 police officers – announcing that it was a “direct consequence” (Centre for Conflict Resolution & Human Security 2010) of Operation Green Hunt.

In the aftermath of the Dantewada massacre, the Indian government, riding a wave of public support and refusing to be intimidated, seriously discussed the possibility of deploying the Air Force to conduct a broad bombing campaign in Maoist controlled areas (India Today 2010). Operation Green Hunt represents the most significant development, and the greatest threat to Maoism, since Naxalbari. Yet it has all largely passed Sabyasachi Panda by as he sits alone in an Odisha prison cell.

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Cutting an increasingly desperate figure, Panda has resorted to all that he has left available to him – the time honoured tradition of the prison hunger strike. Protesting against delays in his trial and his solitary confinement, Panda has undertaken four separate hunger strikes (three in a single month) all of which have ended in ignominious fashion after only a matter of days and slight drops in blood pressure. Clearly believing that they were in the presence of someone with a little more inner fortitude, police and prison authorities have treated his hunger-related trips to the hospital with suspicion and have sent unfathomably large entourages to accompany him.

The reality is likely different. Panda, in his own words, is an “old dog” (Pandita 2012) and it is likely that he just does not have any fight left. Despite being so far acquitted in an Odisha court on two cases relating to the Arms Act and the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, Panda will almost certainly be convicted on the bulk of the charges against him, and for this he is unlikely to ever be a free man again. Not that you would get any inclination of this from his wife. Mili, upon hearing of her husband’s capture, re-enrolled herself at the Law School of Berhampur University, graduated from a fast-track degree program in 2015, passed the relevant bar exam and has since been accepted by the Odisha court system as an official council in Sabyasachi Panda’s defence team (consisting of only one other person). Mili, trying to fill-out her new position, was quick to boldly pronounce “I

am confident of getting him released from jail. I have full faith in the judiciary,” (Times of India 2015) “the government has registered a false case against him” (Deccan Herald 2015).

Far from seeming self-assured, Mili, just as with her husband, appears as an increasingly broken human being – and the Maoist ideology has not fared any better. Despite still outwardly seeking the ‘perfect society’, the Indian Maoists – according to Human Rights Watch – have an insidious history of recruiting children (often between the ages of 6 and 12) in order to swell their ranks and carry out the more dangerous jobs such as setting landmines (Mukherji 2012: 139).

The treatment of women – traditionally a high-water mark for most communist organisations around the world – has become a real problem for India’s Maoists. Reports of abuse, rape and sexual torture from jungle camps have been swamping the movement for decades, and for which the Party leadership have remained largely silent (incidentally this was one of the key grievances that Panda voiced in his now infamous open letter). A female former member of the organisation recently described her life in the camps as “tough and disgusting” (Mishra 2010).

And the picture only gets bleaker: the Maoists have developed a counterproductive habit of turning their guns on other left-wing, and ideologically similar, organisations; on the Adivasis who they claim to be fighting for; and, such as with the case of Sabyasachi Panda, on themselves. Having so thoroughly cannibalised itself, the Party has had to go looking for friends, and in places such as West Bengal it has formed unnatural alliances with the state’s fascist and theocratic Islamists. In a 2009 interview, the General Secretary of the CPI (Maoist), a man known only as Ganapathy, publicly justified Islamic terrorism by saying, “jihadist movements of today are a product of imperialist – particularly U.S. imperialist – aggression, intervention, bullying, exploitation and suppression... as part of their designs for global hegemony” (Mukherji 2012: 233-234). It is hard to imagine a more effective way to lose any remaining supporters still sympathetic to the Maoist cause.

As the casualties continue to rise year-on-year, as development continues to bypass Maoist controlled areas, as the Adivasis are still being torn from their ancestral homes and/or are stuck in no-man’s-land between the government’s and the Maoist’s frontlines, an alternative development model still has not been presented by the Maoist movement – all the while the democratic Indian state has consistently shown itself to be free, fair, successful and, above all else, resilient.

Panda was all too aware that his Party was suffering from a terminal illness, and was working desperately – even after his expulsion – to stem the tide of disillusioned members who were openly choosing surrender and a future behind bars over the alternative of remaining in the Party. It was a near impossible task, and Panda must have realised the futility when his close friend, and high-ranking Maoist, Suresh Sundhi, joined the long list of deserters whilst complaining of “mindless violence” (Mishra 2010).

In an eerily familiar precursor to Panda’s downfall, Charu Majumdar, the author of the Naxalbari uprising was himself abruptly expelled from the movement and labelled “Trotskyite” (Mukherji 2012: 101) not long after the 1967 watershed. Within a matter of months, he was arrested, and died in his cell two weeks later (the body was ominously not returned to his family for autopsy). Panda is unlikely to die such an eye-catching death; the authorities are just not that interested in him anymore. Motivated in a way that they have never been before, and with a perfect sense for the moment, the Indian government is currently committing everything that it has; lunging forward, grasping hungrily for Maoism’s jugular. So there has been no time to reminisce. Immediately following Panda’s arrest, security forces shifted their attention to the President of the Chasi Muliya Adivasi Sangh (CMAS) in Koraput, Nachika Linga. Within a matter of months, Linga was also in custody (Indian Express 2014) and everyone was scanning the horizon for the next comrade still brave enough to hold his head above the crowd and publically call himself a ‘Maoist leader’.

But the writing had been on the wall for quite a while, and Sabyasachi Panda should have recognised it. In 2009, a reporter from the *Indian Express* newspaper travelled to Naxalbari to see if Charu Majumdar’s grand statement, “Naxalbari has not died and it will never die” had stood the test of time. An elderly resident, Abhijit Mazumdar, explained: “You won’t find any traces, no matter where you go in Naxalbari. Memories have been systematically obliterated. People are too afraid to speak even now.” A young child in the same village was asked if he was scared to enter the nearby Tukuriya forest, where the Maoists once operated from. The boy innocently replied “We go to the forest regularly. There are no Naxals [Maoists] but there are snakes” (Indian Express 2009).

It is easy to imagine Panda pacing around his prison cell, refusing to accept the boy’s anecdote; dismissing the child as a government agent; believing; hoping that the Naxals are still there, growing in strength, biding their time; poised to once again relaunch the revolution.

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