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# **Response to Nandini Sundar's Response to 'The Tensions Over Citizenship in a Marxist-Leninist Revolutionary Situation: The Maoists in India'**

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I can understand Nandini Sundar's annoyance with my article as she rightly identifies it as a critique of analyses derived from the kind of work that she has been involved in as a civil liberties activist. My intention is not at all to dismiss this activist work for it is extremely important in bringing to check the brutality of the Indian state. Rather, my hope is to understand the limitations of the analyses of the relationship between the indigenous peoples (Adivasis), the State and the Maoist guerrillas arrived at through this kind of civil liberties engagement with the Indian state. These are limitations that I see because of my own ethnographic research. It is clear that there are differences between Sundar's perspective and mine. I think that these differences primarily derive from the fact that we begin from two very different starting positions. While Sundar's perspective as an anthropologist is guided by a commitment to an ideal vision of the Indian state, my perspective is based on the viewpoints, experiences and social relations of the Adivasis I have lived with as an anthropologist in the remote hills and forests of Eastern India. Both perspectives are important and necessary. But they are not the same. They affect the very different ways in which we have conducted our, respective, spells of extended field research at various points, and the ways in which we have combined detailed ethnographic research with the study of historical processes. In contrasting these two positions, I am aware that both Sundar and I are continually thinking about the other position, at times even trying to do both. But ultimately these differences produce different kinds of analyses.

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There are three main issues that Sundar and I appear to disagree on. The first is the question of whether Adivasis in the Maoist guerrilla strongholds of the hills and forests of Central and Eastern India have historically held notions of citizenship that reflect those of civil liberties activists working on their behalf. The second is whether relations of intimacy (for example, kinship, caste and family links) are analytically salient in understanding insurgent mobilization. The third is the relationship between indigeneity and class struggle and, in particular, the place of Adivasi politics within this. I will discuss each one in turn and lay out our differences.

To turn to the first issue, Sundar's perspective is that the villagers of the Maoist strongholds in Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh have a betrayed sense of citizenship and have been making justified and unanswered demands of the state for centuries. My argument, in contrast, is that Adivasi desires are in fact framed quite differently. There are good reasons why, in certain contexts such as the contemporary Maoist strongholds of India, people may seek to keep the state at bay from the intimacies of their everyday lives, which for them, perhaps worryingly, even includes the attempt at reforms by radical NGOs and activists. In the rural areas of Jharkhand where I have lived as an anthropologist and which the Maoists have made their strongholds, Adivasis have creatively rejected the state because for the greater part of Indian history they have only experienced it in its most exploitative form of police brutality, venality of forest guards, or the predation of tax collectors and other state officials. This does not mean that the Adivasis have no understanding or awareness of the Indian state nor does it mean that they were not connected to the broader political economy. On the contrary, they were rather savvy and saw the state as the agent of the acceleration of their subordination and oppression. Indeed, it was because of their deep immersion in the political economy of the area that they responded with a creative rejection of the state. In their own terms they were living *In the Shadows of the State*. This led most of the Adivasis I know to discard most concepts of citizenship and liberal rights – or at least keep these things at arm's length, only selectively engaging with them. The circumstances may be different in different regions (for instance, areas affected by Christian missionaries, or where a combination of positive discrimination policies and state education has had a penetrating reach) and may change over time (indeed I have argued the Maoists themselves are bringing a desire for the state closer into Adivasi lives). These regional variations and transformations are important for us to comparatively analyse.

The second major issue is the analytical significance of relations of intimacy in understanding Maoist spread. Both Sundar and I agree that the grievances that the Adivasis feel are key issues. However, our understandings of these grievances are quite different and they depend again on our different starting points of view. Sundar's notion of grievance is framed by the promise of the Indian state and the actual failures of these promises for people – for instance in granting forest

or land rights or protection. From the point of view of the Adivasis I know, grievances are framed by Adivasi lives. This is what I see as giving meaning to grievances and these are experienced in the most intimate of ways, such as how one is spoken to, the way one's house is entered or whether food is shared or not. The success of the Maoists, by contrast to those that they see as agents of the Indian state, even the agents of an idealised Indian state, is that the Maoists have understood Adivasi grievances in terms of these everyday intimacies. They have had to enter these relations of intimacies on the terms of the Adivasis. This has been the basis of their sustained local support (against the Indian state) and the creation of their revolutionary subjectivity. (As I have mentioned in the article and in other works, these relations of intimacy are also the achilles' heel of the movement because the conflictual relationship between the formation of revolutionary subjectivity and the forces of capitalism in the area enable the Indian state to infiltrate the Maoists through kinship tensions, becoming the very basis of counterinsurgency).

The final issue at stake is the relationship between indigeneity and class struggle in relation to the place of Adivasi polities. I agree with Sundar that the notion of the sacral polity has many problems. Indeed different kinds of political activists (from the Maoists to the Hindu Right) have tried to either co-opt or reject Adivasi polities in rather crude terms, seeing them as political systems akin to the state. However, in evoking the sacral polity I was trying to capture its central values for Adivasis from their point of view. This is not possible by using terms which, although they may well apply to the wider Indian polity, would inevitably lose what I was trying to stress: local understandings of politics which refuse the terms of the Indian state and the frameworks through which it considers Adivasi societies. These are not societies of anarchy or disorder but involved in a kind of polity in which – à la Marcel Mauss – there was no distinct separation of religion-politics and economics. The continued significance of these sacral polities may explain why Adivasi societies are *relatively* more egalitarian than the caste divided hierarchical societies of the plains. Thus although democracy has indeed been extremely important in these regions, the Adivasis have been much more creative than the frames that Sundar limits them to. I agree with Sundar that there is a lot of scholarly work on Adivasis but it needs to be complemented by research which fully takes as its starting point local understandings.

Many of these arguments I have elaborated elsewhere and they will form the subject of the book manuscript on the revolutionary struggle in India that I am currently working on. However, for the purposes of a response to Sundar's response to my article, I conclude by stressing that our disagreements come from the difference of what frames our arguments. Whether we analyse people's experiences in terms of what the state should be or in terms of their understandings of what the state is. These are the insights I gain from my experiences among the people who I have lived with whose social relations and point of view I have tried

to interpret. Both points of view are necessary but they provide rather different analyses of similar situations. Too often though our theoretical models and praxis are framed by external visions imputed to be those of local people.

### **Author Biography**

**Alpa Shah** is a Reader in Anthropology at the LSE. In the last fifteen years she has lived as an anthropologist in remote parts of Jharkhand for four and a half years and has written several articles on different aspects of the Maoist movement in India. She is currently preparing a book on the subject. She is the author of *In the Shadows of the State* and has co-edited several volumes including *Windows into a Revolution: Ethnographies of Maoism in India and Nepal*.