Margins of Revolution: A Sociological Inquiry into an Under-Trial Naxalite Leader in the Andhra-Odisha Borderlands

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Abstract- This paper analyzes the life and political change of Khasi, a previous CPI (Maoist) commander, to shed light on the reasons and material circumstances behind the Naxalite movement in the Andhra-Odisha Border (AOB) area. Based on lengthy interviews with Khasi in Koraput prison, using a qualitative sociological method, the research looks into how the oppression of caste, exploitation by class, and the neglect of the state come together to fashion insurgent identities. It explores the development of revolutionary identity in terms of armed struggle, organizational discipline, and local legitimacy. Embedding individual stories within larger socio-political frames, the article provides a rich and sensitive analysis of insurgency as resistance and rupture.

Keywords: Naxalite, CPI(Maoist), insurgency, caste, tribal politics, guerrilla warfare, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, political violence, structural inequality.

INTRODUCTION

The Naxalite insurgency in India, the country's longest-running, is based on structural inequality, socio-political marginalization, and continued economic neglect. This essay is a sociological case study of Khasi, a Scheduled Caste Maoist commander from Andhra Pradesh and a key character in Maoist activity along the Andhra-Odisha border. Through an analysis of Khasi's individual and political trajectory, this research looks at the interplay between individual experiences and collective resistance. Placing Khasi's life in the larger context of insurgency politics in Eastern India, the analysis shifts attention to the social forces leading marginalized groups into armed rebellion and ideological extremism.

Historian Banerjee (1980) calls the 1967 Naxalbari uprising a "watershed" in Indian history, highlighting its emphasis on land reform and social justice for downtrodden groups. According to him, it laid bare the post-independence India's inability to tackle rural poverty and inequality. Louis (2002), in People Power: The Naxalite Movement in Central Bihar, points out how the movement rallied Bihar's rural poor, fueled by demonstrations against landlessness and caste oppression, giving voice to the excluded from development. Verma (2020) argues that socio-economic interventions like fair distribution of resources, education, health, and job opportunities are necessary to redress Naxalite grievances because the movement takes advantage of the state's inability to provide social basic services to marginalized groups.

This article carries important academic significance in providing a multidimensional qualitative sociological understanding of the Naxalite movement through the testimony of Khasi, a retired CPI (Maoist) commander. By placing personal narratives within larger socio-political contexts, it captures the dynamics of caste oppression, class exploitation, and state abandonment that play into shaping insurgent identities. Its emphasis on revolutionary identity formation, organizational discipline, and local legitimacy offers new perspectives on the dynamics of armed resistance. Conducted with extensive interviews of Maoist inmates in Koraput prison, it contributes to research in insurgency, social movement, and resistance, enriching inter-disciplinary domains of sociology, political science, and anthropology.

METHODOLOGY

The research uses qualitative and interpretive methodological approaches, with a focus on a detailed analysis of case studies. Primary data were collected through interviews with surrendered and arrested

former insurgents, supported by reports from the government and NGOs. Secondary sources consist of media reports, human rights documentation, and academic research on the Naxalite movement. Triangulation of data was used to validate information by cross-referring oral and written narratives from different sources. Ethical clearance was secured, and pseudonyms were used where necessary to protect anonymity. Thematic analysis was applied to identify recurring themes related to ideology, violence, organization, and surrender.

Entry into the Naxalite Movement

Khasi's trajectory into insurgent politics is deeply rooted in the structural constraints of caste, class, and the agrarian political economy of Andhra Pradesh. Being a member of a Scheduled Caste (SC) family, Khasi was in a marginalized position at the bottom of the rigid caste hierarchy. Though his family owned ten acres of land—a valuable asset for a rural SC family—exploitative landlordism and oppressive agrarian relations and restricted institutional access meaningfully reduced the economic and social worth of this holding. Land ownership also did not lead to social mobility but rather concealed underlying facts of exclusion and deprivation. Khasi's tiled house and limited education (up to class nine) reflect both economic constraints and systemic barriers, particularly the lack of access to quality education and state resources for rural Dalit communities.

Khasi's initial engagement with political activism began in 1989 through the Radical Students Organization (RSO), a key platform for left-wing activism in Andhra Pradesh. The RSO was also an ideological center, exposing him to Marxist-Leninist-Maoist ideology and revolutionary methods. His political and intellectual introduction occurred at a time of mass rural discontent in Andhra Pradesh, as land reforms, caste domination, and state repression were inextricably linked. Encounters with key cadres, like Sahagaru in Adilabad, were instrumental in shaping the political consciousness of Khasi. These engagements were both ideological and practical, particularly during grassroots land struggles that challenged the legitimacy of landholdings sustained through feudal and state collusion. These experiences reinforced Khasi's awareness of historical injustices

and radicalized his outlook, steering him from student activism toward armed insurgency driven by a commitment to structural transformation through revolutionary means.

Khasi became a member of the Naxalite movement in 1990 during rising land conflicts in Nalgonda, Andhra Pradesh, driven by continuing agrarian problems, especially landlessness among Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribals. He took part in grassroots work such as recording land holdings, making tribal sub-plan rights awareness, and conducting mass gatherings to campaign for fair land distribution. His politicization was, on the one hand, determined by individual experiences of exclusion, but on the other hand, equally by a shared collective disenchantment with state institutions that systematically failed to remedy structural injustices.

There was a decisive moment in amplified state repression, with police clashes in 1992 and the detentions of top Naxalite leaders in 1993, which left behind a leadership vacuum among local cadres. Khasi filled this vacuum, taking on the position of a local commander. His duties now encompassed conducting village-level surveys for political intelligence, training new cadres in guerrilla war and ideological education, and overseeing local tactical operations. This realignment represents the theory of political opportunity structures: when traditional democratic channels seem out of reach or unavailable, excluded groups seek insurgent paradigms that offer agency, identity, and leadership in alternative political institutions..

ORGANIZING LABOUR AND GRASSROOTS MOBILIZATION

From 1996-2001, Khasi mobilized all his efforts towards organizing farm labor and rural field workers in Tandbai with a particular emphasis on plantation workers working on coffee and rajma crops.The years witnessed a shift in his political activism from militant propaganda to organized socio-economic formation. He spearheaded grassroots unionization, took charge of negotiating wages, and agitated for the redistribution of land, thus going against feudal landlords and state indifference. In addition to tackling economic repression, these campaigns also generated class awareness among the laborers. At the same time,

Khasi received comprehensive guerrilla training, combining organizational leadership with tactical militarization—a two-pronged activity which would prove pivotal in the activities of the Andhra-Odisha Border (AOB) Special Zonal Committee. Khasi activism also focused on state-displaced populace from development schemes such as NALCO and the Deomali mining project.

His mobilization strategy involved the creation of mass organizations like the Deomali Suraksha Abhijan Samiti and Koraput Janajati Mahasangha. These organizations channeled localized agitation through a broader ideological articulation combining cultural nationalism and anti-capitalism. Khasi used the stereotypical tribal iconography and oral culture to politicize displacement and identity, creating a model of popular self-government radically incompatible with the developmental state paradigm. His activities over these years represented the strength of the Naxalite movement to convert socio-economic causes into insurgent political capital. He also acknowledged that the movement gradually is losing its base due to lack of man power and lack in support from man power. Hirschman(1970) explains that from the perspective of Resource Mobilization Theory, the movement's decline via surrender and disillusionment is a representation of the exhaustion of critical resources: manpower, legitimacy, and networks of local support. The internal dynamics also expose the constraints of radical egalitarianism when organizational arrangements reproduce the very inequalities that are intended to be overcome.

MILITANT-ORGANIZATIONAL DUAL ROLE

Simultaneously, Khasi received intensive guerrilla training, which encompassed the acquisition of military skills in ambush, scouting, and survival—as being constantly engaged in performing an invaluable role in mobilizing rural mass organisations. This double role—a socio-political mobiliser as well as being a militarised cadre—allowed him to correlate ideological work with insurgent capacity development. This strategic alignment assisted in increasing the Andhra-Odisha Border (AOB) Special Zonal Committee's social and operational intervention, paving the way for subsequent insurgent attacks supported by popular legitimation.

Organizing Displaced Populations and Creating Counter-Hegemonic Spaces

Khasi activism also addressed systemic displacement as a result of state-led industrial and mining activities, with a focus on those of NALCO and the Deomali mine project. He spearheaded the formation of mass organizations such as the Deomali Suraksha Abhijan Samiti and Koraput Janajati Mahasangha, which formed organizational spaces for displaced Adivasi individuals to ventilate their grievances. These platforms challenged the prevailing development discourse by fusing anti-capitalist resistance with cultural nationalism. Khasi utilized indigenous oral history, tribal symbolism, and traditional land claims as instruments of political mobilization. In doing so, he fashioned a counter-narrative one which placed tribal self-governance and identity within the framework of universal human rights, rather than cultural tokens. His vision of grassroots sovereignty was accordingly one that rejected directly the state's top-down developmentalism.

Overall, Khasi's activities during this formative period illustrate how the Naxalite movement transformed socio-economic discontent into durable political capital. His work highlights the insurgency's capacity to localize class struggle while also integrating it into a national ideological campaign. Through organizing labor and politicizing displacement, Khasi exemplified the insurgent's role as both a community leader and a revolutionary tactician—blurring the line between social reform and armed rebellion.

Khasi described Jan Adalats as participatory judicial arenas that tried to guarantee revolutionary principles and correct local issues. The courts were utilized as participatory justice tools, promoting societal accountability. While there were verdicts with harsh punishments—public humiliation or bodily punishment—others focused more on political education and moral transformation. Surveillance activities accompanied these courts, with the children under Bal Sangathan being assigned to monitor the state activity, dissidents, and intruders. This de-centered surveillance framework positioned ideological commitment early at a deep point and provided endless observation under zones of influence movement, solidifying twin governance paradigms.

Numerous scholars such as Fernandes, Walter & Bharali, Gita (2011 contend that the state's development interventions in Odisha have been extractive, top-down, and frequently enabled displacement through mining, dams, and industrial ventures—breeding resentment and uprising.

ORGANIZATIONAL AND MILITARY STRUCTURE

Khasi's ascent within the CPI(Maoist) hierarchy demonstrates the movement's reliance on a merit-based system of internal promotions, heavily shaped by ideological commitment and demonstrated operational efficiency. His path—from being a local dalam (armed squad) commander to membership on the State Military Commission—indicates both individual talent and organizational openness to advance competent individuals, particularly those with extensive grassroots experience. The internal organization of the CPI(Maoist) is hierarchically and functionally differentiated into a series of interdependent levels: higher military and political orders are directed by the Central Committee, the State and Regional Committees organize zonal operations and the dalams conduct tactical battles. Grassroots village militias in the grassroots level are decentralized defense firms, armed and trained for supporting ambushes and for providing logistic services.

Militarily, Khasi launched a varied series of operations which included arms procurement on a variety of channels. These involved raids on state security units, break-ins from private contractors, clandestine purchases from black markets, and, according to certain intelligence reports, possible availability of arms through international contacts—although nothing has been conclusively proved. The response tactics provided were highly flexible, considering that jungle terrain was employed for weapon stockpiling, mobile training camps, and dispersed communications networks. All these traits demonstrate the CPI(Maoist)'s hybrid insurgent warfare structure, which brings together guerrilla operations together with institutional discipline. Das (2014) recognize that the majority of Naxalite foot soldiers in Odisha are Koya, Gond, and Kondh tribals, who join up due to poverty, revenge, or ideology.

Tactical Warfare: Hit and Run Strategy

Khasi brought into focus the strategic foundation of guerrilla warfare, i.e., the "hit and run" strategy, as at the heart of Maoist military thought. These shock attacks were planned to cause psychological and logistical losses on state forces and to eschew direct, protracted combat. Operations were usually focused in turn-over geographical areas, where insurgents could cause confusion and extend state resources beyond their limits. Pre-surveyed routes of withdrawal and safe hideaways in forested or hilly terrain guaranteed minimal cadre loss. This mobility-based strategy enabled the movement to endure against heavier enemy fire and monitoring.

Funding Mechanisms and Economic Strategies

Support financing for the rebellion came in the form of a mix of voluntary donations and coercive extortions, placed within local economic arrangements. Grain levies—about 1 kg per quintal—were contributed by the farmers as a revolutionary tax. Likewise, sympathetic workers forfeited a day's wages on recurring cycles, and local entrepreneurs donated, most often in the form of funds in favor of the cause. Rebel-held area contractors charged 2–5% commissions, or a de facto shadow taxation system. Moreover, although not directly involved, the rebellion indirectly enabled ganja cultivation as a source of livelihood. Khasi justified such actions as retaliatory redistributive justice against state and corporate exploitation. Padhi, RanjanK. (2008) outlines how expansion of mining operations in tribal belts, especially in Niyamgiri and Kalinganagar, has displaced communities and destroyed traditional livelihoods, making the zones conflict zones for Maoists, corporations, and the state.

Bal Sangathan and Youth Propaganda

Khasi responded that the Bal Sangathan, which consisted largely of children, had an ideological role to play in the Naxalite movement by doing low-risk but high-impact tasks like surveillance, cultural propaganda, and couriering. Their familiarity with local geography and social contacts made them effective informants and mobilizers. By acting out ideological skits, singing revolution songs, and carrying revolutionary messages, they spread the revolutionary values among the tribes. Their deployment in operations blurred the status of civilian

and combatant, leaving states ill-equipped to respond tactically and morally. State deployment of children exposed the state to international human rights scrutiny and trampled on established paradigms of counter-insurgency grounded in adult warrior norms.

Surrender, Disillusionment, and Internal Dynamics

Surrender policy, more so from the 2000s, is now at the heart of the Indian state's counter-insurgency policy. The policies have rewards such as economic compensation, employment, refuge, and protection in exchange for laying down armed struggle. They aim to demoralize the movement by bleeding it from the inside and establish a discourse of state benevolence (Shah, 2013; Das, 2012). Khasi's surrender in 2011 was the result of cumulative disillusionment, shaped by intersecting personal and political factors. Increased exposure to violence caused emotional burnout, combined with romantic relations and unsettled familial responsibilities. Alienation on ideological grounds intensified as he became increasingly critical of intra-party contradictions in the CPI(Maoist), such as the summary killing of suspected informants and the absence of institutional measures to assist the families of killed comrades. These setbacks undermined his faith in the revolution's cause. Leaving was not merely a defction, but a thoughtful removal based on Ideological Legacy and Critique of State Policies.

Khasi averred that the presence of the Naxalite movement acted as a catalyst for state-led development, especially after 2004 when the Indian government escalated its action against Left-Wing Extremism (LWE)-affected areas. He considered this delayed developmental intervention to be a response and not proactive and contended that the state had traditionally excluded these regions. For him, schemes such as road development, school building, and health camps were tended to be employed more as welfare schemes demonstrations and not welfare schemes in themselves and designed to restore lost legitimacy and quell opposition. Though the movement did force the state to "appear" more responsive, Khasi asserted that such attempts remained extremely superficial.

He was particularly patronizing of Gram Sabhas (village councils), terming them "stage-managed spectacles" convened by political and bureaucratic elites to construct illusory participatory governance. Such gatherings, according to him, hardly represented genuine tribal consensus or democratic deliberation. To this, Khasi added that development plans were usually arrived at top-down with little consultation with affected communities and thus perpetuating the same paternalism that they aimed to remove. In his view, the emergence of Naxalism should not be explained as a failure of law and order but as a socio-political response against long-term structural violence — alienation of land, stripping of forest rights, and displacement due to mining activities. He regarded the insurgency as a political declaration of agency by previously silenced communities and not as a rebellion of criminality as such. His critique insisted that Naxalism was an ideologically rooted movement as a reaction to democratic shortcomings in the Indian state within Adivasi areas. Khasi was arrested on April 4, 2011, in Semiliguda. He was accused of carrying out significant attacks, such as Alampaka ambush and Kalimela landmine explosion. His criminal history includes serious offenses under various sections of the IPC, quoting the state's view of his activities as terror activities. Shah (2010) reveals that in Maoist-affected regions, rebels typically have parallel institutions, including people's courts and redistributive systems, which are sometimes more accessible and equitable to residents than state institutions.

An Overview

This sociological case study of Khasi, a former CPI(Maoist) commander, offers a nuanced exploration of insurgency as both a political and social phenomenon. Khasi's journey—from grassroots mobilization in tribal villages to a leadership role within the Maoist military wing—reflects the interplay of systemic neglect, state violence, and cultural marginalization that fuels revolutionary politics. His story transcends mere biography, serving as a lens into the broader insurgent subjectivity shaping India's left-wing extremism. Khasi's engagement with the Naxalite movement reveals its multifaceted nature: an ideological project, a form of alternative governance, and a survival strategy in regions excluded from mainstream development. His reflections on guerrilla warfare, organizational discipline, ideological education, and community support challenge the dominant narrative that stereotypes insurgency as

anarchic or criminal. Yet, his ultimate disillusionment and capitulation in 2011 underscore the human and ethical cost of extended armed conflict, especially where ideological ambitions go off track from realities on the ground.

This case study invites us to revisit counter-insurgency strategies beyond reductionist law-and-order tactics. It emphasizes that a movement like Naxalism is born out of structural violence—alienation of land, economic exploitation, and political marginalization of tribal people. Sustained peace is in turn dependent on integrative approaches prioritizing tribal autonomy, social justice, and authentic participatory democracy. Militarization or shallow development plans without local ownership will not work. Through locating an insider voice, this analysis promotes a caring, historically sensitive, and sociologically attuned comprehension of insurgency in India's troubled interiors.

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