Communist Insurgencies and the 'Cult of the Leader'

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In the pages of history, the city of Melbourne could hardly be associated with any major revolution. Not, at least, till the first week of January 2023. Nevertheless, when I discovered that our cab driver Allen (name changed for privacy) was from Vietnam, I could not help myself asking him his views about Communism and the 'revolution' that shook his country for almost two decades. Allen was not at all coy about discussing the issues. His family had left Vietnam just after the 'Fall of Saigon' in April 1975, when the Communist troops of then North Vietnam overran the capital of then South Vietnam. Thereafter, his family settled in Australia and Allen was brought up in a land separated from his roots. He was non-committal on Communism as an ideology, but was very vocal

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about the intent of the Communist leaders who ruled Vietnam after the 'revolution'.

'After all, human nature prevails', sighed Allen, 'It is perhaps normal for human beings to exert, dominate, and of course go corrupt with the assumption of power' With a lot of enthusiasm, I referred to Ho Chi Minh and General Vo Nguyen Giap and the historic battle of Dien Bien Phu in which the Vietnamese had defeated the French in 1954, but Allen seemed to be less interested. His basic complaint was against the ways and means adopted by the Communist leadership after the merger of North and South Vietnam. The conversation had to end rather abruptly, as we reached our destination. Nonetheless, my initial surprise over this interaction with a Vietnamese ended on a rather contemplative note.

From a Communist Pentagon: Vietnam-Cambodia-Peru-Nepal-Philippines

It was 1924. Ho Chi Minh, after graduating from Moscow, moved to Canton (Guangzhou) in south China – the place being a major centre of Chinese Communist revolution, writes Julia Lovell.[1] China later pumped in about USD 20 billion in aid to North Vietnam and, among other things, provided training to the Vietnamese communist cadres.[2] In fact, whenever Ho visited China after 1949, he regularly received red-carpet treatment, while Zhu De of the Chinese People's Liberation Army [PLA] even accompanied Ho to watch films together.[3]

Vo Nguyen Giap, the master craftsman of military strategy for the Vietnamese Communist insurgency, perused the

1 Julia Lovell, *Maoism : A Global History*, Bodley Head, London, 2019, p. 228.
2 Ibid, p. 227.
3 Ibid, p. 229.

writings and speeches of Mao Zedong in the late 1930s.[4] It is quite logical to infer that Giap's command over the ground military tactics was influenced by his studies of the Chinese protracted war commanded by Mao Zedong, Zhu De, Chou En Lai and others. As Lovell puts it, further, "most of the leadership of the Vietnamese Communist insurgency, were plagiaristic disciples of Mao."[5] Interestingly, Giap asserted, to the contrary: "We fought our wars in a Vietnamese way. My only influences were the great strategists of Vietnamese history."[6]

As if to bolster what Allen told me in Melbourne, Bui Tin – a Vietnamese Army veteran, defected to France in 1990, being disillusioned by the corruption and authoritarianism of the Vietnamese Communist government.[7] Tin later wrote: "Maoism after 1951 began to stultify our consciences and has caused lasting harm right up till now… Repression was mistaken for enlightenment and progress."[8] He even took a dig at Giap: "...the reputations of generals are built on the bodies of 10,000 men."[9]

This was quite interesting indeed. A pantheon of leaders supremely attracted to Mao Zedong, emulating him in every possible way, finally giving rise to a government that underscored corruption. A people's war culminating in an anti-people's government. Was this outcome desired even in the wildest possible dreams of the 'revolutionaries'?

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4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
6 Robert Templer, "General Vo Nguyen Giap obituary", *The Guardian*, October 4, 2013, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/oct/04/general-vo-nguyen-giap.
7 Julia Lovell, op. cit., p. 230.
8 Ibid.
9 Robert Templer, op. cit.

Nonetheless, as the so-called Vietnamese 'revolution' saw light of the day with the Fall of Saigon, the 'Father' of the 'revolution', Mao Zedong gradually fell into the abyss of ill health. By April 1976, notes Lovell, "Mao was little more than a vegetable"[10] during his meeting with then Prime Minister of New Zealand, Robert Muldoon. Mao was lifted from his armchair to shake hands with him, but he 'slumped back in' the chair in a state of apparent collapse, Muldoon recalled.[11]

This was perhaps a full circle – a revolution – for Mao Zedong. Though revolution per se implies a full circle, from the perspective of social sciences, it has a different connotation. It simply cannot be a term used in natural sciences, indicating a complete 360-degree movement, coming back to the point of origin. Enzo Traverso, Professor at Cornell University, writes that "revolution is a rush towards progress."[12] He further affirms that, since the French Revolution, the term 'revolution' had become "a projection of society into the future, an extraordinary acceleration of history."[13] However, a former Nazi, Reinhart Koselleck defines revolution as a socialist utopia, which was temporalised and projected into the future, and hence asserts that revolution is an "unconscious secularization of eschatological expectations."[14]

All said, before Mao Zedong was overpowered by the vagaries of health, his last-ditch effort bore some venomous fruits, and this was in Cambodia, spearheaded by two despots: Pol Pot and Ieng Sary – the latter being the chief of foreign affairs whereas the former was the secretary-general of the

10 Julia Lovell, op. cit., p. 239.
11 Ibid.
12 Enzo Traverso, *Revolution: An Intellectual History*, Verso, London, 2021, p. 46.
13 Ibid, p 47.
14 Ibid.

Communist Party of Kampuchea [CPK] or, more infamously, the Khmer Rouge. The one-hour rendezvous of these two individuals with Mao Zedong on June 21, 1975, provided them with the required fillip to launch the gory plunge into a 'dark Communism' – thoughtless and grotesquely interpreted – a Communist end game in which people were shifted *en masse* from cities and urban areas to farmlands or, more aptly, concentration camps. Doctors, engineers, professors – all were forced to till the land, the much sought-after 'practice' of Communism in the template of Marxian praxis. An estimated 20,000 people died of snap executions, hunger and disease in the evacuation of Phnom Penh alone.[15]

One photograph shows Mao, Pol Pot and Ieng Sary dressed in Mao-esque suits. Sary is seen holding Mao's right wrist with both hands, while Pol Pot appears out of focus, standing a few steps back. An extract of the conversation runs thus:[16]

> Pol Pot: "We are extremely happy to be able to meet the great leader Chairman Mao today!"
>
> Mao Zedong: "We approve of you! Many of your experiences are better than ours. China does not have the right to criticize you…You are fundamentally correct..."

As if to vehemently negate this specific conversation between Mao and Pol Pot, another communist 'revolutionary' who radiated his own cult, however spatially positioned about 13,000 km away from Beijing, Fidel Castro (duly imagined with his trademark cigar) declares:[17]

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15 Julia Lovell, op. cit., p. 240.

16 Ibid, pp. 240-241.

17 Fidel Castro, *On Imperialist Globalization: Two Speeches*, Left Word Books, New Delhi, 1999, p. 5.

> 'So, then I asked him (a common citizen of Cuba): Would you agree with socialism?'
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> Answer: 'Socialism? No, no, no, not with socialism.' Let alone communism….

Castro however presents his case:[18] "There was so much prejudice that this (communism) was an even more scaring word." Then he goes on to say that revolutionary legislation was what contributed the most to making a socialist consciousness in our people. Notwithstanding his staunch belief in communism and his unabashed reveling in the cult of the leader, Castro at least agrees that a revolution can only be born from culture and ideas. No people become revolutionary by force. And, as if to explicitly counter the popular communist notion of relegating human beings to the backburner in the motion of history, Castro asserts: "we, the revolutionaries, have discovered an even more powerful weapon: man thinks and feels."[19]

Manoj Thapa opines[20] that Sendero Luminoso (SL) or the Shining Path in 1980s' Peru and the Maoist insurgency in Nepal launched by the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) [CPN(M)] from 1996 to 2006, did impact their respective states and societies. Nonetheless, Thapa continues to assert that "despite similarities in the social, economic, and political grievances, the two insurgencies had dramatically different trajectories and outcomes."[21] One reason, according to Thapa, was that, perhaps, the SL leadership could not exploit the political opportunities in Peru. As a natural fallout, the moment

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid, p. 9.

20 Manoj Thapa, "A rationale for the outcomes of insurgencies: A comparison case study between insurgencies in Peru and Nepal", *Naval Postgraduate School*, California, December, 2014, https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA620771.pdf.

21 Ibid.

when SL's charismatic professorial leader Dr. Abimael Guzman was incarcerated by the security forces, the insurgency disintegrated.

However, in Nepal, the CPN(M) leadership under Pushpa Kamal Dahal aka *Prachanda* (the fierce), adopted pragmatic approaches and exploited political opportunities.[22] However, Thapa incorrectly discounts the fact that in Nepal, Prachanda *et al* by eventually treading the path of electoral politics, shelled out an open compromise *vis-à-vis* armed insurgency. Thapa's thesis argues that the Peruvian insurgency developed around a cult of personality, and was dogmatic, whereas the Nepalese communists were far more pragmatic than their Peruvian counterparts, though the former were, at one point of time, inspired by the latter, to take up arms.

This is, of course, one way of looking at things. However, Ina Zharkevich, with her fieldwork in Nepal, presents an ethnographic description of the 'revolution'. She mentions[23] that several whole-timers of the Nepalese communist party later regretted joining the insurgency. They were much aggrieved by the treatment meted out to them by the party leadership. They openly held Prachanda culpable for their non-inclusion in the Nepalese Army after they had laid down their arms.[24] Besides, they complained about the lack of financial support, which was, on the contrary, being granted to the Maoist fighters stationed in the cantonments. It was Prachanda, according to them, who had asked them not to join the cantonments and be in the 'open'. During the 'revolution', Prachanda proposed a tactical approach – a fusion of Mao's rural insurrection and a simultaneous urban insurgency – a course popularised as

22 Ibid.

23 Ina Zharkevich, *Maoist People's War and the Revolution of Everyday Life in Nepal*, Cambridge University Press, New Delhi, 2019, p. 2.

24 Ibid, pp. 2-5.

the 'Prachanda Path'.[25] The 'path' included joining electoral politics or compromise as one of the options. Baburam Bhattarai correctly described the 'Prachanda Path' as a school of thought that was more than a set of tactics, but less than an ideology,[26] with the 'cult of the leader' being evident in the programmes, tactics and policies that the Nepalese insurgents followed!

There is always a high likelihood of people getting attracted, or more correctly accreted, towards an imagined character and movement. However, Joel S. Migdal[27] has pointed out that communists gained followers among peasantries not because of the inherent attractiveness of communist thought, but because communist parties were the most effective groups in undertaking the task of organising peasants for land reforms and protecting traditional village communities from depredations of the state or landlords. Susan Eckstein,[28] on the other hand, has argued that in Latin America, when states with similar levels of economic development and forms of economic organization are compared, states that experienced revolutions have generally given rise to a more equitable allocation of land. Cuba in particular has made greater strides in health care and education, than the states that did not undergo communist revolutions. At least insofar as health care is concerned, Fidel Castro endorses[29] Eckstein's argument,

25 K. Hachhethu, "The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist): Transformation from an Insurgency Group to a Competitive Political Party", *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research* , 2008-2009, 33-34, pp. 39-71.

26 International Crisis Group, "Nepal's Maoists: their Aims, Structure and Strategy", 2005, https://icg-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/104-nepal-s-maoists-their-aims-structure-and-strategy.pdf.

27 Cited in Jack A. Goldstone, "The Comparative and Historical Study of Revolutions", *Annual Review of Sociology,* Volume 8, 1982, pp. 187-207.

28 Ibid.

29 Fidel Castro, op. cit., p. 11.

declaring: "26,000 Cuban doctors have taken part in them (international missions)." However, Lewis Beck[30] blunts the hunky-dory Cuban post-revolution growth story, arguing that the Cuban Revolution of 1959 gave rise to slower long-term economic growth than was evident under the previous regime.

In several Latin American countries such as Peru, Brazil, Colombia, Bolivia and Paraguay, there was a strong attraction to the Chinese Revolution of 1949.[31] One Mexican labour activist, Julia Lovell asserts, was swept away by Chinese hospitality, when hundreds of Chinese (including schoolchildren), "greeted him at a railway station in a snowstorm."[32] On the other hand, some Latin American visitors fell for Mao himself, writes Lovell. They were enthralled by his high and shining forehead, by a man so great and at the same time so modest, so sure of the victory of the people over their oppressors.[33] Himself hypnotized by Mao and his thoughts and actions, Dr. Abimael Guzman of the Shining Path would justify his personality cult by likening himself to the bass solo in the final movement of Beethoven's choral symphony.[34] And if this was not enough, then the following piece of information surely validates the cult of the leader thesis: "Intolerant of dissent, Guzman was a fanatic, who had the power to fanaticize others".[35] It is quite interesting to note that though Marxism (Communism) focuses, in theory, far less on leadership, in practice however, insurgencies based on Marxist thought have relied much more on the leader.

The Nepalese Maoist insurgency is to date the best example of the transformation reflected in two of Mao's statements,

30 Cited in Jack A. Goldstone, op. cit.
31 Julia Lovell, op. cit., p. 309.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid, p. 314.
35 Ibid, p. 317.

separated by a decade. In his 1927 world famous slogan, Mao proclaimed "political power comes out of the barrel of a gun". In 1938, however, he declared: "The party commands the gun, and the gun must never be allowed to command the party." Similarly, the Nepali Maoists began with a bang of the gun and transformed into a democratic political party at the end of the ten-year long insurgency – jumping into electoral politics – a complete full circle, a 'revolution' indeed. Here too, the imagined attraction towards the leader is evident in what Khagendra Sangroula (who never met Mao nor visited China) pronounces[36]: "I had a hundred Red Books in my bag… I like Mao, China and the Chinese revolution…"

On the eve of China's Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution [GPCR], alongside China's foreign aid, Chinese films promoting socialism influenced the future Nepali Maoists.[37] Interestingly, the first documented armed communist rebellion in Nepal (influenced, aided and abetted by India's 'Naxalites' or Maoists) took place in May 1971 at Jhapa, a place located in Nepal just across Naxalbari on the Indian side (where India's armed rebellion on Maoist lines originated).[38] The radical communists of Nepal were inspired by the Naxalite movement in India and further influenced by the Chinese GPCR. It is needless to drive home the point that the Indian Naxalites, too, had accepted 'Mao as their chairman'. However, gradually, the Nepalese Maoists were greatly energized by Guzman's Shining Path.[39] By October, 1989, Prachanda was at the forefront of

36 Julia Lovell, op. cit., pp 390-392.

37 Aditya Adhikari, *The Bullet and the Ballot Box: The Story of Nepal's Maoist Revolution*, New Delhi, Aleph Book Company, 2014, p. 1.

38 Lawoti, Mahendra, "Evolution and growth of the Maoist insurgency in Nepal", in Mahendra Lawoti and Anup K. Pahari, ed., *The Maoist Insurgency in Nepal*, Routledge, Special Indian Edition, 2015, pp. 5-7.

39 Aditya Adhikari, op. cit., p. 7.

leadership.[40] Finally in 1995, Prachanda came up with the CPN(M) and decided to begin an armed insurgency.[41]

A revolutionary is not a terrorist[42] is what Ninotchka Rosca asserts in connection with the octogenarian Jose Maria Sison, who continued to hold the mantle of leadership of the Filipino communist insurgency[43] till his death in December 2022. Rosca believes that Sison "taught his people to ask questions and gave them explanations as to why we are the way we are, who's responsible for our state of affairs."[44] Born on February 8, 1939, ironically in a clan of landlords, Sison believed in the praxis:[45] "as you say life should be lived, so should your own life be lived." Sison lived in exile in the Netherlands, where he applied for political asylum in 1988, and till his death. Like other cult leaders of contemporary Communist insurgencies across the globe, Sison was glad to meet "Comrade Mao and have a photograph taken with him."[46] Sison admitted[47] that he and his followers were "inspired by the revolutionary teachings of Mao Zedong… From among the teachings of Mao, we have learned the principle of self-reliance in carrying the Philippine revolution forward." However, even Sison's cult was challenged from within the party and its military wing, which culminated in plans to assassinate him.[48]

40 Ibid, pp. 7-8.
41 Lawoti, op. cit., p. 7.
42 Ninotchka Rosca, *Jose Maria Sison: At Home in the World - Portrait of a Revolutionary*, Open Hand Publishing, North Carolina, 2004, p. 1.
43 International Crisis Group, "The Communist Insurgency in the Philippines: Tactics and Talks", February 14, 2011, https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/4d5a310e2.pdf.
44 Ninotchka Rosca, op. cit., p. 4.
45 Ibid, p. 19.
46 Ninotchka Rosca, op. cit., p. 45.
47 Ibid, p. 46.
48 Ibid, p. 57.

Before delving into further intricacies of the subject, it is certainly pertinent to point out the questions that emerge. How could leaders of Maoist/Communist insurgencies establish a cult? To what extent did the leadership cult influence the insurgency? Why could the critique from within the organization not dismantle the cult?

The Mao-Mazumdar-Sanyal Trichotomy

Purshottam (name changed), a young civil services aspirant, was sweating it out in Delhi, India's capital city. Hopping from one coaching institute to another, searching for answers to his probing questions. On one such day in February 2008, just after a session on current events, he bumped into me at the exit gate of a reputed civil services training centre in Delhi's Rajinder Nagar.

"Sir, I think there is a huge difference between the Naxalites and the Maoists. But I guess most do not know that," Purshottam asserted.

I understood he was not to be assuaged so easily because he was carrying pre-conceived notions, which were tough to disentangle. Therefore, I asked him to meet me at leisure so that we could discuss the subject at length.

Way later, in June 2021, barely a month after the demise of my mother due to the Covid pandemic, I was having a chat with a senior activist of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation [CPI(M-L)] in Kolkata. While reminiscing the events of the 1980s and 90s, he rebuffed me for raising the topic of India's Maoists post-2004.

"They are wholly unconnected with the Naxalites of 1970s – as led by *Charubabu* (Charu Mazumdar)".

Interestingly, every year Indian Maoists observe July 28 to August 3 as Martyrs' week, to commemorate the demise

of Charu Mazumdar on the July 28, 1972. And to what extent was Mazumdar responsible for the Naxalite uprising of the late 1960s in India or whether he was indeed the focal point of the movement has been debated and discussed at length, in various fora, by various intellectuals, as well as plebeians in tea-stalls so carelessly yet craftily set up on pavements all across Kolkata. Just after being initiated into academic research in my early twenties, I still remember the man (probably in his mid-fifties) with rugged looks, shouting "Tro-tosky, Tro-tosky", while we both were travelling in a dilapidated bus on one fine afternoon in Kolkata. He evidently meant the enigmatic Leon Trotsky of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. I was rather amazed at the depth of his knowledge on Marxism and 'revolutions'. I was not sure why he was craving for Trotsky, whether it was his crude form of eulogy towards Trotsky for espousal of internationalism by the Russian revolutionaries, or to denounce Joseph Stalin's culpability in eliminating Trotsky in a hotel room in Mexico.

Monalisa Basu however, has cogently summed up the set of debates on Mazumdar. In the third chapter of her thesis:[49]

> The movement was the brainchild of Charu Majumdar, once a member of the CPI [Communist Party of India, which was founded by M.N. Roy at Tashkent in 1920] and thereafter of the C.P.I. (M) [Communist Party of India (Marxist) – formed in 1964], who had remained a strong critic of all kinds of revisionism and had been nurturing a dream of revolution.

Basu writes, further:[50]

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49 Monalisa Basu, *The Role of Individual in the History, Charu Majumdar in the Naxal Movement: A Case Study*, PhD Dissertation, University of Calcutta, 2017, p. 67.

50 Ibid.

> He (read Majumdar) was highly influenced by Mao's thought and the success of the New Democratic Revolution (NDR) in China.

Charu Mazumdar, was born in Varanasi, sometime during May-June 1919.[51] In 1937, he joined Edward College at Pabna (in today's Bangladesh). He dropped out of college and the very next year joined the Congress Socialist Party (CSP), which was founded by a group of Socialist-minded individuals within the perimeters of the working of the Indian National Congress (INC), spearheaded by Jaiprakash Narayan, Minoo Masani, Ram Manohar Lohia, et al. Nevertheless, a radical from within, Mazumdar switched over to the CPI in 1939. in the Jalpaiguri district in today's West Bengal. During the severe Bengal famine of 1943, amidst the Second World War, Mazumdar encouraged the rural folk to seize paddy from the granaries of the landlords and, thereafter, sold them at a fair price through a duly constituted committee.[52]

Mazumdar was very much involved in the historic Tebhaga Movement, reports the CPI M-L publication on him.[53] Having been arrested in 1948, he was eventually released in 1951.[54] In January 1963, when a bye-election was held for the Siliguri Assembly seat, he filed his nomination papers from a prison cell, where he was once again incarcerated. However, he had to forfeit his statutory deposit since he could not even garner 3,000 votes.[55] His political posture was clearly seditious: he condemned the Indian government as an aggressor against

51 A CPI (ML) publication, *Charu Mazumdar: The Man and His Legacy*, New Delhi, July 2012, p.9.
52 Ibid, p. 14.
53 A CPI (ML) publication, op. cit., p. 18.
54 Ibid.
55 A CPI (ML) publication, op. cit., p. 21.

China.[56] Furthermore, Mazumdar propagated the politics of armed struggle against the democratic Indian state.

Already by April 1967, Mazumdar had penned down his radical viewpoints in the *Eight Documents*,[57] the first of which he wrote in January 1965. In these documents, writes Basu,[58] "Majumdar talked about agrarian revolution, formation of secret political and military units, and area-wise capture of political power." Mazumdar declared, resoundingly, that "China's Chairman is our Chairman."[59]

Mao Zedong, the man whom Mazumdar revered to this extent, was born on December 26, 1893, in a rural family in Shaoshan village, in China's southern province of Hunan.[60] While Mazumdar's father Bireswar was the Darjeeling District President of INC,[61] Mao's father was a soldier-peasant, who later turned to moneylending and trading in grain.[62] Nevertheless, Mao felt his father was 'mean, harsh and demanding'. Both Mazumdar and Mao were close to their mothers, with Uma Shankari Devi playing an important role in shaping Charu Mazumdar's life, while author Delia Davin emphasizes that "Mao's love of his mother was in sharp contrast to his hostility towards his father."[63]

Mao had once cursed his father (during an altercation) in front of many guests, and then his left residence. After

56 Ibid, p. 21.
57 Charu Mazumdar, *Eight Documents (1965-1967)*, http://cpiml.org/category/library/charu-mazumdar-collected-writings/eight-documents-1965-1967/.
58 Monalisa Basu, op. cit., p. 67.
59 Ibid.
60 Delia Davin, *Mao: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013, p. 3.
61 A CPI (ML) publication, op. cit., p. 11.
62 Delia Davin, op. cit., p. 3.
63 Ibid, p. 4.

being persuaded by his mother to return, he demanded that his father stop physically abusing him. Thereafter Mao would seek forgiveness. His father relented. With this incident, Mao arrived at the conclusion that resistance could be effective.[64] Mao had also once grabbed the collar of a teacher with whom he was arguing.[65]

In addition, Mao did not like the natural sciences, but scored heavily in the social sciences. At the other end, Mazumdar was a loving father who would guide his two daughters in their studies. He asked them to read English novels without the help of grammar and dictionary. He also encouraged his daughters to read the literary works of Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore, and Bengali stalwarts Sarat Chandra Chatterjee as well as Bankim Chandra. Mazumdar was a connoisseur of classical music too.[66]

Interestingly, as Mazumdar was enamoured by Mao's teachings, Mao in turn was attracted by *The Communist Manifesto*, translated into Chinese, a path-breaking document written way back in 1848 by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, in an altogether different geographical and cultural setting.

Many thinkers however have termed Mazumdar as a left adventurist and anarchist. Interestingly, as we learn from Basu's thesis,[67] specifically after his death, Mazumdar was targeted by his erstwhile followers. Kanu Sanyal, one of his closest comrades, who went to China to learn the art and craft of waging an insurrection, wrote in his 1973 treatise *More about Naxalbari*, about the mistakes committed by Mazumdar. Another of Mazumdar's erstwhile comrades, Asim

64 Ibid.
65 Ibid, p. 9.
66 A CPI (ML) publication, op. cit., pp. 23-24.
67 Monalisa Basu, op. cit., p. 71.

Chatterjee (then a student of Presidency College in Kolkata) later overlooked any exclusive role of Charu Majumdar in the Naxalite movement, but at the same time blamed him for the movement's collapse.[68]

Pramod Sen Gupta, a Marxist intellectual, believed that work for mass organisations, on the one hand, and building up secret squads, on the other, exposed the contradictory postures adopted by Mazumdar. Sen Gupta criticised Mazumdar, arguing, "what Charu made in the name of CPI (ML) was not at all a Marxist-Leninist party but a new version of Bengal's old petty bourgeois terrorist party."[69] Sen Gupta squarely blamed "the blind faith of his followers on him (Mazumdar)"[70] for the ignominious failure of the Naxalbari insurgency.

Kanu Sanyal went to the extent of challenging the relevance of Majumdar's Eight Documents, considered to be the ideological kernel of the Naxalite movement.[71] Sanyal in fact wrote that[72] Charu Mazumdar wanted to establish "anarchism in a new form." Asim Chatterjee, once Mazumdar's blind follower, later termed[73] the "socialism of Charu Mazumdar as social terrorism."[74] While Mazumdar was reprimanded by his colleagues and contemporary thinkers and authors after his demise, the man (Mao) he idolized insofar as the notion of revolution was concerned, had this to write[75] about the concept of 'revolution':

68 Ibid.
69 Ibid, p. 73.
70 Ibid, p. 74.
71 Monalisa Basu, op. cit., p. 75.
72 Ibid.
73 Ibid, p. 76.
74 Ibid.
75 Delia Davin, op. cit., p. 21.

> A revolution is not a dinner party, or writing an essay, or painting a picture, or doing embroidery, it cannot be so refined, so leisurely, so gentle, so temperate, kind, courteous, restrained and magnanimous. A revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence by which one class overthrows the power of another.[76]

And if we arrive at the conclusion that Mao learnt the nuances of revolution only from Marx, then we might be taken by surprise. Mao read a Chinese translation of *A System of Ethics* by the neo-Kantian philosopher Friedrich Paulsen.[77] He was attracted by Paulsen's ideas of self-cultivation through self-discipline. He applied these ideas in his life – by studying hard, with regular exercises and by dressing simply. He stressed that intellectuals ought to engage in physical labour too. Though Mao focused on learning modern thought and Marxism, in no way did he relegate traditional Chinese history and culture to the background.

Author Dilip Simeon described Mazumdar as "a man whose sole contribution to socialism consisted in elevating homicidal mania to a political principle."[78] Mazumdar did talk about the annihilation of class enemies by carrying out squad-based armed actions at the village level. In this context however, way after Mazumdar's demise, Vinod Mishra applauds Mazumdar, arguing that "even his (Mazumdar's) mistakes showed us the deeper meaning of being a true Communist."[79] Interestingly,

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76 Mao Zedong, "Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan, March 1927," *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1_2.htm.

77 Ibid, p. 10.

78 Dilip Simeon "Permanent spring", *Seminar 607*, March 2010, https://www.india-seminar.com/2010/607/607_dilip_simeon.htm.

79 A CPI (ML) publication, op. cit., p. 36.

Mishra alerts us, "Charu Mazumdar formulated (the theory of) annihilation (of class enemies) on the basis of confidence in the masses."[80]

On the contrary, scholar Pradip Basu, in his doctoral work,[81] elaborates on the evolution of the Naxalbari insurgency and brings out that Mazumdar's leadership in the Naxal movement was action-based and not because of any better theoretical understanding on Mazumdar's part. Rather, Pradip Basu asserts that Mazumdar's analysis of the contemporary political and strategic questions was simplistic and superficial. Perhaps this was a fundamental reason for the lack of proper organisation of the Naxalites in the late 1960s and early 1970s, which ultimately failed to credibly challenge state authority, though the state was taken aback by the suddenness and bravado of the insurgent activities. Celebrated subaltern historian Ranajit Guha, in an interview to Milinda Banerjee, showered praise on Charu Mazumdar, although lamenting the organisational [in]capabilities of the erstwhile Naxals which, according to Guha, proved to be the nemesis of the otherwise revolutionary outbreak.[82]

A physically frail and chronic cardiac patient Mazumdar somehow does not synchronise with the striking, commanding figure of Mao, though Mazumdar's eyes had a hypnotizing effect, as admitted by many of his contemporaries and followers, even police officers. Both Mazumdar and Mao smoked heavily. Mao had gifted cigars[83] to the four-man Naxalite contingent

80 Ibid, p. 42.

81 Pradip Basu, *Towards Naxalbari: An Account of Inner-Party Ideological Struggle*, Progressive Publishers, Calcutta, 2000.

82 Uddipan Mukherjee, "Marx, Mao and Rajanna: Aim and Shoot", *Uday India*, April 27, 2013, https://udayindia.in/marx-mao-and-rajanna-aim-shoot/.

83 Julia Lovell, op. cit., p. 362.

from India that visited China, led by Kanu Sanyal. Mao was, nonetheless not at all happy[84] with Mazumdar's slogan of "China's Chairman is our Chairman."

Ironically, Mao never met his disciple Mazumdar. Mazumdar too, never attempted to meet his idol Mao – possibly due to his ill health and also, perhaps, because he wished to remain in imaginary touch with his guru, interacting only in the ideological space. That unfortunately didn't work out for Mazumdar. Though Radio Peking applauded the 'Naxal revolution', Mao was not appreciative of the working of the Naxalites, and especially that of his name being tagged to the movement. Mazumdar nonetheless, went ahead, with his idiosyncratic interpretation and understanding of how to usher in the insurrection.

Expectedly, after Mazumdar's death, the Naxal movement splintered into several groups, several of which, however, again coalesced under the Maoist banner in 2004, in a much more aggressive and organised armed *avatar*. Mao on the other hand remained more or less unscathed during his lifetime, even as he conducted the social experiments under the terminology of the GPCR. After his death however, criticisms began to pour out into the open.

Though Mao had asserted that the Chinese communist party ought not to follow the Soviet practice of preserving the body of its leaders, yet the Politburo decided to embalm Mao and placed his dead body in an imposing mausoleum in Beijing's Tiananmen Square.[85] And, as if to perpetuate the hero-worship, his immediate successor Hua Guofeng imitated Mao's hairstyle.[86] Hua even went to the extent of proclaiming

84 Ibid.
85 Delia Davin, op. cit., p. 112.
86 Ibid.

a policy called 'two whatevers', in which he declared that whatever policy Mao had decided upon, it shall be resolutely defended, and whatever instructions Mao had given in his lifetime, they would be obeyed.[87]

Deng Xiaoping however criticized Mao Zedong and his thoughts. Nevertheless, he was cautious and was not ready for a complete rejection of Mao's legacy. He declared, "We will not do to Chairman Mao what Khrushehev did to Stalin."[88] The "Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of our Party since the Founding of the People's Republic of China" was approved by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party in June 1981. The key passage was as follows:

> Comrade Mao Zedong was a great Marxist and a great proletarian revolutionary, strategist and theorist. It is true that he made gross mistakes during the cultural revolution, but, if we judge his activities as a whole, his contributions to the Chinese revolution far outweigh his mistakes. His merits are primary and his errors secondary. He rendered indelible meritorious service in founding and building up our Party and the Chinese People's Liberation Army, in winning victory for the cause of liberation of the Chinese people, in founding the People's Republic of China and in advancing our socialist cause.[89]

However, on the 'two whatevers', the resolution stated that it would be wrong to regard whatever Mao said as the sacrosanct truth.[90] At the same time, the Resolution acknowledged that 'Mao Zedong Thought' would be the Party's guide to action

87 Ibid.
88 Ibid, p. 114.
89 Ibid, p. 115.
90 Ibid.

for a long time to come.[91] Chen Yun on the other hand was harsh:

> Had Mao died in 1956, there would be no doubt that he was a great leader of the Chinese people... Had he died in 1966, his meritorious achievements would have been somewhat tarnished, but his overall record still very good. Since he actually died in 1976, there is nothing we can do.[92]

Earlier, in a 1957 address to Chinese students in Moscow, Mao had said:

> The world is yours, as well as ours, but in the last analysis, it is yours... Our hope is placed on you. The world belongs to you. China's future belongs to you.[93]

In 1976, Mao's last recorded remarks to the Politburo were:

> What will happen to the next generation if the revolution fails? There may be a foul wind and a rain of blood. How will you cope? Heaven only knows.[94]

In this context, it is interesting to note what Mao told Edgar Snow in 1970, in a prophetic manner:

> Future events would be decided by future generations and in accordance with conditions we could not foresee… The youth of today would assess the work of the revolution in accordance with values of their own. A thousand years from now, all of us, even Marx, Engels and Lenin would probably appear rather ridiculous.[95]

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91 Ibid.
92 Ibid, p. 116.
93 Ibid, p.118.
94 Ibid, p. 119.
95 Ibid.

In India, within the organisation, criticism snowballed. For instance, Pramod Sen Gupta, who was close to Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose in his German sojourn, did not approve of Mazumdar and his coterie's decision to boycott the parliamentary election – a decision that was arrived upon on May 14, 1968, without much discussion.[96] As already mentioned, Kanu Sanyal too contested this decision. Sengupta charged Mazumdar with arrogance:

> The arrogance of Charubabu… comes partly from (the) assumption that the revolution is (his) monopoly, no one else is a revolutionary except (him).[97]

Sushital Ray Choudhury strongly criticized the attacks on educational institutions, breaking of furniture, damage to laboratories and disruption of examinations, among other unwarranted acts of violence. He also criticized the destruction of portraits and statues of some famous personalities of 19th century India, including Ram Mohan Roy, Vidyasagar, Rabindranath Tagore, Vivekananda, etc.[98]

Criticism also sprang up from outside the party confines. Kang Sheng held that it was wrong to call China's Chairman Mao the leader of CPI (ML) in India.[99] In this context however, Sumanta Banerjee's critical comments are noteworthy:

> ...none of these leaders who later so vehemently criticized Charu Mazumdar, were honest enough to admit their own faults. They refused to acknowledge their own responsibilities in transforming Charu Mazumdar into a demi-god... Had they realized their

96 Ashoke Mukhopadhyay, *Charu Majumdar: The Dreamer Rebel*, Niyogi Books, New Delhi, 2022, p. 85.
97 Ibid.
98 Ibid, p. 89.
99 Ashoke Mukhopadhyay, op. cit., p. 91.

> mistakes earlier and cooperated with the dissenters (like Kanu Sanyal and Sushital Ray Choudhury), the cult of personality that was growing round Charu Mazumdar would have been curbed…[100]

In June 1966, after he returned to Siliguri from Kolkata's Dum Dum Jail, Kanu Sanyal went to meet Mazumdar.[101] He wanted to share his views on the revolutionary strategies suggested by Mazumdar. As Sanyal narrates:

> In the Eight Documents, Charu Da had prescribed an immediate armed insurrection. To realise this, he suggested the formation of small combat groups of dedicated Communist revolutionaries who were to operate secretly. Charu Da identified the landlords, high officials from the police and the civil administration as the immediate target. Those opposed to the revolutionary activities were also in the list. Significantly, Charu Da denounced the need for nurturing mass organisations.[102]

Sanyal points out, "He labelled mass organisations as revisionist tools and held (them) responsible for weakening the revolutionary zeal of the comrades."[103] Though Sanyal, Keshav Sarkar, Jangal Santhal and Sourin Bose were in disagreement with Charu Mazumdar on the need for an armed insurrection, Sanyal further differed on the timing and strategy to implement the proposed uprising.[104]

However, after Sanyal and the other three Naxalites met a delegation of the Chinese People's Liberation Army, an

100 Ibid, p. 93.
101 Bappaditya Paul, *The First Naxal: An Authorised Biography of Kanu Sanyal*, Sage, New Delhi, 2014, p. 85.
102 Ibid, p. 86.
103 Ibid.
104 Ibid.

argument erupted between Sanyal and his three comrades, especially with Deepak Biswas. Biswas could not appreciate the fact that, while presenting a narrative about the Naxal uprising, Sanyal did not mention Charu Mazumdar. Sanyal, though, had his own defence, arguing that, since Mazumdar was not physically involved in the Naxalbari uprising, he did not find any logic to mention Mazumdar's name. However, Biswas was not satisfied with this logic and became annoyed with Sanyal.[105]

While critical of Mazumdar, Sanyal was enthralled when he had a glimpse of Mao Zedong. "On taking a few steps, to our sheer delight, we saw Mao Tse-tung (Zedong) and Chou En-lai standing at the tail end of the long corridor. One cannot simply gauge the level of our excitement; holding high the Red Book in hand, we took to sloganeering in spontaneity: Mao Tse-tung Zindabad, Chou En-lai Zindabad (Long Live Mao Zedong, Long Live Chou En-Lai)…", was Sanyal's explicit admission. Sanyal was overwhelmed when Mao Zedong embraced him. He says that he was "robbed of words for the next few moments", and [though] "there were so many issues I wanted to ask Mao about, but nothing was coming to my mind!" Sanyal was completely blown away by the cult of the 'Father' of the Communist revolutions.[106]

Interestingly, Charu Mazumdar had also, on previous occasions, had a similar hypnotic effect on young Kanu Sanyal.

> Many legends, some fictitious and some true, were being circulated about Charu Da's extraordinary genius. These included his reported ability to make an exact prediction about his exam score in college days; being able to read through voluminous books

105 Ibid, p. 124.
106 Ibid, p. 129.

> overnight; leaving his opponents awestruck with logical arguments on any topic under the sun; a daredevil attitude and so on and so forth. He was also well revered in the Communist circle for his role in the Tebhaga Movement of 1946.[107]

It was at Jalpaiguri Central Jail that Sanyal finally did meet his imagined hero Mazumdar. Sanyal was exposed to the political thoughts of Mazumdar through brief discussions in jail itself. When Mazumdar was the District Secretary of the CPI Jalpaiguri unit, on one occasion, as he spoke on the sufferings of the poor and the peasantry, by the time he summed up, Sanyal "found himself enthralled and motivated."[108] Thereafter, Sanyal came out of his dilemma and finalized his decision to become a whole-timer for the communist party. Mazumdar's so-called magnetism had worked wonders on young Sanyal's mind. Incidentally, the same Sanyal would vehemently criticize his hero Mazumdar later – perhaps after critical thinking overpowered the youthful romantic in him.

A Failed Internal Critique

In 2015, then general secretary of the Indian Maoists, Ganapathy, admitted that they (Indian Maoists) were keen to preserve the party's top leaders (from being targeted by the security forces).[109] Recent reports indicate that Ganapathy was in a sorry state of health.[110] In this context, it is significant to

107 Ibid, p. 34.

108 Ibid, p. 35.

109 Mohua Chatterjee, "Interview with CPI (Maoist) General Secretary Comrade Ganapathy", *The Times of India*, August 9, 2015, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/interview-with-cpimaoist-general-secretary-comrade-ganapathy/articleshow/48415945.cms.

110 NewsTap Bureau, "Top Maoist Leader Ganapathi in crippled condition, says surrendered senior Naxalite", October 8, 2022, https://www.newstap.in/national/top-maoist-leader-ganapathi-in-crippled-condition-says-surrenderedsenior-naxalite-1442510.

note that the policy of targeted incarceration and elimination of Maoist leaders has been an effective instrument in curbing the Maoist insurgency in India.[111] A senior Indian Police Service officer has upheld the efficacy of the targeted approach against the Maoists.[112] Furthermore, intelligence officials have confirmed that loss of leadership has dealt a heavy blow to the Maoists.[113]

Interestingly, after Mazumdar's demise, though leaders cropped up at local levels, the metanarrative of the cult was missing in the palimpsest of the Naxalite/Maoist insurgency in India. That could be one major reason for the movement to have splintered from mid-1970 onwards, until its regeneration through a merger of two major groups in 2004. The lack of a cult leadership implied a lack of binding energy for the movement. Ganapathy became the general secretary of the merged Maoist neo-avatar after 2004 and re-established the cult image of the leader to some extent. Nonetheless, his failing health overcame his energy and zeal and, of course, his cult was affected. Once Ganapathy superannuated in November 2018, his successor Basavaraju took over. Basavaraju is, however, yet to establish a cult status, despite the fact that, being an explosive expert himself, Basavaraju has influenced the operations and tactics

111 Mukherjee, Uddipan, "Targeted Killings of Insurgents, Terrorists and Armed Combatants: Exploring the Legal Dimension", in Sarfaraz Ahmed Khan and Hifajatali Sayyed ed. *Crime Prevention and Crime Control: An Indian Perspective*, Thomson Reuters, Gurgaon, 2022, pp. 283-293.

112 ANI, "Loss of senior CPI (Maoist) leaders would deplete Naxal movement strength, says Bastar IGP", October 16, 2021, https://www.aninews.in/news/national/general-news/loss-of-senior-cpi-maoist-leaders-would-deplete-naxal-movement-strength-says-bastar-igp20211016042541/.

113 Namrata Biji Ahuja, "One third of CPI (Maoist) central committee leaders neutralized in last 9 months : MHA", *The Week*, May 9, 2022, https://www.theweek.in/news/india/2022/05/09/one-third-of-cpi-maoist-central-committee-leaders-neutralised-in-last-9-months-mha.html.

of the insurgency accordingly.[114] After all, Ganapathy and Basavaraju are no Mao Zedongs – Mao could have camouflaged his ill health with the aid of an entire army of followers and the state apparatus. Mao's cult grew along with his success in armed insurgency, and finally solidified into a demi-god status once the Chinese insurgency became a successful Revolution in 1949 from a working 'revolution'. Some of Mao's followers achieved that success too and attempted to perpetuate their cult. Interestingly, even though some of the followers could not achieve comparable success, yet they could gain cult status within their parties, viz., Mazumdar and Sison.

Through the facts, anecdotes and discussion presented in this paper, it may be derived that the leaders of Maoist/ Communist insurgencies could establish a cult status due to a combination of factors:

- Imposing physical attributes (hypnotic eye in case of Mazumdar, Mao's shining forehead).
- Propaganda of mythical stories portraying a larger-than-life picture of the leader (that Mazumdar could predict his college examination scores, and Guzman's reading of loads of books).
- Lack of constructive opposition within the organisation (in the cases of Mao, Prachanda).
- Oratory skills (of Mao, Mazumdar, Guzman, Prachanda, Sison).
- Success in the armed insurrection and/or coup (especially for Mao Zedong, later for Ho Chi Minh and Giap, and then Pol Pot).

114 Uddipan Mukherjee, "IEDs and the Maoist insurgency", MPIDSA, May 7, 2019, https://idsa.in/idsacomments/ieds-and-maoist-insurgency-umukherjee-070519.

In fact, 'lack of dissidence', has been pointed out to be one of the structural factors for the cult of personality to develop.[115] Additionally, causes enumerated in terms of creating cult figures find analytical support in Wright and Lauer[116]:

> The cult of personality phenomenon refers to the idealized, even god-like, public image of an individual consciously shaped and moulded through constant propaganda and media exposure. As a result, one is able to manipulate others based entirely on the influence of public personality.

On the other hand, success in the armed insurgency is a very realistic reason for glorification and solidification of the cult. However, even this success should not in any way shield the leaders from criticism within the organization – for instance, the free hand Mao was given in the GPCR is a valid case in point in this regard. Pol Pot's construction of inhuman concentration camps is another example.

Interestingly, physical appearance is more of an image worship, which is completely antithetical to Marxist/Communist thought.

The second aspect worth illuminating is the influence that these leaders wielded or still wield in the trajectory of the Maoist/Communist insurgencies. It is difficult not to accept that these leaders fundamentally 'drive' the insurgencies,

115 Adrian Teodor Popan, *The ABC of Sycophancy: Structural Conditions for the Emergence of Dictators' Cults of Personality,* Dissertation presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of The University of Texas at Austin, August 2015, https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/bitstream/handle/2152/46763/POPAN-DISSERTATION-2015.pdf.

116 Wright, Thomas A. and Lauer, Tyler L., "What is character and why it really does matter", Business Faculty Publications. 2., 2013,https://research.library.fordham.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=gsb_facultypubs.

by swaying their followers, unless and until some of the followers understand the follies in the purportedly infallible approaches and policies of their leaders. Whether it was Mao Zedong's guerilla warfare techniques or Prachanda's middle path, the followers or cadres (foot soldiers) toe the line of the leadership. This is somewhat inherent in Communist paradigm, since decision-making in Communist structures is based on the principle of democratic centralism – in which a decision is arrived at after discussions at all levels, from local to district to state to politburo – yet once a finality is reached, every cadre must implement the decision without questioning; treating the politburo and its helmsman – the leader (from Mao to Mazumdar) as the infallible, his wisdom as sacrosanct. On most occasions however, discussion based on dialogue and logic is hardly adhered to while arriving at decisions to fundamental questions.

Finally, it is interesting to ponder why an internal critique is unable to dismantle the cult? The answer to this query lies in the cult of the leader itself. The cult becomes so strong, that it is tantamount to blasphemy if anyone challenges it during the life of the leader. Even if, in a few cases, this is done, for instance, in Mazumdar's case, the renegades are in a minority and are unable to displace the leader.

Moreover, the strength of the cult is formidable only when the leader has done something at a pioneering level – Mao, Mazumdar, Guzman, Prachanda, Sison, Pol Pot and the Ho/Giap duo – were the first in their respective countries to prop up a communist insurgency and hence received a large fan following, with a sort of blind faith shared by supporters. And naturally, it becomes difficult for the minority dissenters to topple the pioneers even if their ideas appear irrational. It is seen that even the dissenters (viz. Deng Xiaoping) from a long-

term perspective in mind, adopt a middle path while positing a critique of the leader. Though the leader's faults are indicated, the legacy of the leader is carried forward. In fact, in the case of Mazumdar, Indian Maoists after 2004 and to date, consider him as the torchbearer of the 'revolution'. Again, this middle path approach is adopted because the original cult status of the leader could not be shattered.

Accounts of such cult leaders of Maoist/Communist insurgencies need to be explored and written on in much greater depth, no doubt. Detailed qualitative research in this aspect would help to unravel entwined issues, a few of which I have tried to discuss in this chapter. And when philosopher Michel Foucault.[117] in his seminal work 'Power' stresses that even 'infamous' lives of 'those men of terror or scandal' could be narrated for posterity, then why not the cult leaders of Communist insurgencies that have perturbed and are still disturbing sovereign democracies, especially India and Philippines, be written about and analyzed in detail?

Nonetheless, such accounts ought not to leave out the subaltern cadre of the insurgency as a mere listener and follower. These accounts have a responsibility to uplift the cadre from the abyss of a mere worshipper to a rational human being: not at least like the silent man (while being tried) in the Paris criminal court.

> The presiding judge asked the accused: 'Have you tried to reflect upon your case?' Silence.
>
> The judge continued, 'Why, at twenty-two years of age, do such violent urges overtake you? ….. Explain yourself.' Silence.

117 Michel Foucault, *Power: Essential Works 1954-84: Volume Three*, Penguin Random House, UK, 1994, pp. 162-164.

> 'Why would you do it again?' Silence.
>
> Then a juror cried out, 'For heaven's sake, defend yourself'.[118]

The subaltern cadre, the foot soldier, needs to defend him(her)self and not just remain a mute follower of the leader, overawed by the cult.

In sum, the Indian Maoist insurgents and their global counterparts, in 2023, barely survive and ideate, in an ever-shrinking geographical domain, militarily cornered by the security forces. Nevertheless, they still worship their leaders and revere the cult, without acknowledging that the ideological space of their cult leaders is under serious existential threat from several quarters; the most vulnerable being their leadership itself.

The entire structure of Communist insurgencies is based on the cult of the leader and when the leader is targeted, the structure collapses. This is surely a welcome thought for security forces of the sovereign states affected by the Maoist/Communist insurgencies in the 21st century, as targeted incarceration and elimination of the top leadership emerge as a cardinal principle of counterinsurgency.

118 Ibid, p. 176.