



FAREWELL TO ARMS

**HOW REBELS
RETIRE WITHOUT
GETTING KILLED**

RUMELA SEN

Farewell to Arms

MODERN SOUTH ASIA

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To my family

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Farewell to Arms

1

Introduction

How do rebels give up arms and return to the same political processes that they had once sought to overthrow? The question of weaning rebels from extremist groups is highly significant in the context of counterinsurgency policy and in the broader context of pacification of insurgencies. Existing explanations for conflict mitigation focus mostly on state capacity, the efficacy of counterinsurgency operations, or on socioeconomic development. This book builds on the existing scholarship and highlights what is almost always missing in it: the rebel's perspective. Moving away from the dominant trend of portraying rebellions and their alleviation from the perspective of policymakers, it breaks down the protracted process of rebel retirement into a multi-staged process as the rebels see it. From the rebel's perspective, what is of paramount importance is in whether or not they quit extremism is the ease with which they can exit and lay down their arms without getting killed in the process.

The central empirical puzzle of this book manifests itself in the Maoist conflict in North and South India, which claimed 6,760 lives between 2005 and 2015.¹ By 2008 a total of 223 districts across 20 (out of 29) states in India came under Maoist influence (SATP 2017). This book draws on several rounds of interviews with current and former Maoist rebels, as well as security personnel, administrators, activists, politicians, and ordinary people outside of the Maoist movement. This book also highlights how the various steps in the process of disengagement from extremism are linked more fundamentally to the nature of societal linkages between insurgencies and society, thereby bringing civil society into the study of insurgency in a theoretically coherent way.

The Maoists in India are distinct from the mainstream communists, primarily on the question of whether to pursue armed struggle or seek change through participation in elections.² The first invocation of Mao's idea of a peoples' war in India dates to the Telangana rebellion in the South of India between 1946 and 1951. However, it was only after the violent uprising of landless peasants and sharecroppers in Naxalbari in the Darjeeling district of North Bengal

in May 1967 that the idea of a Maoist revolution spread like wildfire, creating a contagion of planned seizure of land and confiscation of food grains by the poor in various parts of India (Banerjee 1980, 1984; Basu 2000; Ghosh 2009; Donner 2004). These were tumultuous times in Indian politics. Economic problems, like chronic food shortages, sharp inflationary price spirals, unemployment, low industrial output, and stagnant rates of public investment, created mounting popular frustration. The Congress Party, known to bear the formidable legacy of Gandhi and India's freedom struggle, was, for the first time since independence, defeated in eight states in the 1967 elections.

The early Maoists, known as Naxalites based on their resurgence in Naxalbari in 1967, attacked not only the localized systems of exploitation but also called for the violent takeover of the foundational institutions of the democratic state of India that they considered irrevocably complicit in the exploitation of the poor. However, the Naxalite leadership in the 1960s was largely college-educated and urban middle class, who the Indian state swiftly identified, arrested, or executed, fully disbanding the movement by 1972. Surviving cadres disintegrated into many bickering factions and retreated into virtual oblivion until 2004, when they sprung back into national headlines as various Maoist factions in different parts of the country unified to form the CPI(Maoist) (Mohan 1971; Mohanty 1977; Balagopal 2006).³ During their nearly three-decades (early seventies to late nineties) long strategic retreat from the public eye, Maoists incrementally built localized support bases in various parts of India and raised a guerrilla army of the rural poor trained to confront the might of the Indian state. By 2006, the former prime minister of India identified CPI(Maoist) as "the biggest internal security threat the country has ever faced."⁴

Yet as the conflict raged on, a number of Maoist rebels also quit the ongoing insurgency, more so in their strongest pockets of influence in the South of India than in the North. According to South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP) data, between 2006 and 2012, 781 Maoist rebels disarmed in the conflict zones in the South of India (primarily the states of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh), while only 54 rebels quit in the North (comprising primarily the state of Jharkhand) during the same period.⁵ Although this data is in absolute numbers rather than a proportion of the total number of rebels in each state (that data is not available), the huge North-South variation in the number of surrender event holds up when the percentage SC/ST (scheduled caste/scheduled tribe) population (the recruitment pool of Maoists) and conflict intensity in Andhra Pradesh are taken into account.⁶

It is common knowledge in India that there is a regional variation in surrender of Maoists across various states, and the SATP data illustrates it well.⁷ In course of my study, I found that all the politicians, bureaucrats, media persons, and scholars in India that I interviewed already knew and further substantiated this pattern of subnational variation and the success of former Andhra Pradesh (including Telangana) compared to all other Maoist-affected states.⁸ This huge regional variation in retirement from the same insurgent movement is an interesting puzzle particularly because the Maoist Party is a highly centralized organization and the counterinsurgency policy of the Indian government against the Maoists, although locally executed, is funded and managed centrally through the Integrated Action Plan (Lalwani 2014).⁹ In other words, the popular explanations of surrender of armed rebels in terms of variation in strength of insurgent organization, counterinsurgency operations, and intensity of conflict fall short in explaining why so many Maoist rebels retire in the South while so few do the same in the North. What can this regional variation of Maoist surrender in India tell us about the process of retirement from extremist organizations in general?

This question about factors contributing to rebel retirement resonates around the world, from Afghanistan to Sierra Leone, from Syria to Colombia. The use of the term “retirement” to describe the protracted process of disengagement of Maoists from the insurgent organization, as discussed later in this chapter, was born in the field.¹⁰ By retired rebels, this book refers to former Maoist combatants who were active in the militant or political wings of the Maoist Party and eventually quit the insurgency to return to the mainstream. I have included only those retired rebels who have been “underground” in the organization for at least five years. I interviewed many activists, poets, academics, and journalists who were involved in various frontal organizations of the Maoist movement in different capacities. But they do not count as retired rebels in this study.¹¹ From the perspective of these retired rebels, the process of retirement begins as soon as armed actors decide to leave their organization and lay down arms, and it continues through the actual surrender of arms to the early stages of reintegration. Policymakers, in sharp contrast, focus mostly on surrender of arms by rebels, which, in reality, is only an intermediate step in the process of retirement. It is often assumed that material incentives are effective to lure rebels away from extremism because “ex-combatants must be able to earn a livelihood through legitimate means” (International Peace Academy 2002) to stay away from extremism. Given that a higher risk of conflict is associated with an

absence of income-earning opportunities for young men, the trajectory of disengagement is expected to be a mirror image of the process of radicalization. For example, the U.S. military in Afghanistan calls its approach to the reintegration of insurgents “golden surrender,” which promises rebel reintegration into their communities with “dignity and honor,” “protection and security,” education, vocational training, and cash awards (Waldman 2010; Horgan and Braddock 2010; Kurtenbach and Wulf 2012).

The government of India, in its policy statement on the Surrender and Rehabilitation of Maoists, also places a premium on economic incentives to “wean away the misguided youth . . . who have strayed into the fold of Naxal movement.” The Surrender and Rehabilitation program, drawn primarily from the literature on disarmament-demobilization-reintegration (DDR) and security sector reform (SSR), argues: “As the (Maoist) problem has arisen on account of real and perceived neglect, deprivation, and disaffection, mainly towards the downtrodden, the solution should aim at providing gainful employment and entrepreneurial opportunities to the surrendered Maoists so that they are encouraged to join the mainstream and do not return to the fold of the movement.”¹² Surely, financial assistance, when it really reaches former combatants, is not detrimental to their well-being, and perhaps certain kinds of insurgencies are more amenable to such enticements than others (Weinstein 2006). However, these incentives only become relevant during reintegration, after the rebels have already disarmed. By focusing on them, the literature sidesteps the arduous process of rebels’ disengagement that precedes the formal surrender of arms and subsequent process of reintegration.

This book breaks down the protracted process of rebel retirement into multiple stages according to the rebels’ point of view. I highlight the crucial role of informal exit networks in encouraging and facilitating rebel return and reintegration. These networks grow out of grassroots civic associations in the gray areas of the state-insurgency interface. High retirement in the South is due to the emergence of “harmonic” exit networks that weave together multiple stakeholders in an amalgam of roles and alliances to build momentum for exit and manage myriad uncertainties of reintegration. In contrast, retirement from the same insurgent group is very low in the North of India due to the development of “discordant” exit networks that exacerbate mistrust and fear among key players, deterring retirement significantly.

The State of the Art

A lot has been written on why men and women rebel (Gurr 1970; Scott 1977; Lichbach 1994; Wood 2003; Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Kalyvas 2006). A rich, methodologically diverse literature has also developed on the Maoist insurgency in India, particularly since 2010. It is focused mostly on explaining the origins, spread, and patterns of Maoist violence (Kapur, Gawande, and Satyanath 2012; Shah 2006; Shah 2009; Hoelscher, Miklian, and Vadlamannati 2012; Miklian and Carney 2010; Khanna and Zimmermann 2014; Dasgupta, Gawande, and Kapur 2014; Balagopal 2011; Sen and Teitelbaum 2010). But we know very little about how rebels, particularly Maoist rebels, retire.¹³

There is a large literature on insurgent democratic transition, including policy research on ex-combatants, transitional justice, and reintegration in the context of various conflicts in Africa, Central America, and Latin America. Looking at this broader literature for clues, one explanation of insurgent democratic transition is *institutional cooptation* in which movement leaders “demobilize mass defiance” by scaling down organizational goals to avoid conflict and accommodate societal norms (Jenkins 1983). In various quid pro quo arrangements with the state, the leaders defang the movement’s ideological content, dilute their demands, and gradually surrender, forcing the cadres to retire, too. Collective disengagements are typically executed as a result of calculated strategy on the part of the group’s leadership (Ribetti 2010). Along similar lines, other explanations centered on *elite strategy* argue that movement leaders shun bullets and choose ballots if the probability they attach to being victorious in democratic competition is greater than some minimum (Przeworski 1991; Weingast 1997; Colomer 2000). Specific to India, where militant movements are frequent, they are expected to follow an inverted U-curve of rapid escalation and eventual dissipation, if the democratic institutions are strong enough and their capacity to compromise and accommodate is high (Kohli 1997). These explanations reduce the ordinary people in conflict zones to mere bystanders, although they often have family members in the movement and share a very high stake in the prospect of their return.

A rich literature on the *exposure to violence on the part of noncombatants* (Dyregrov, Gjestad, and Raundalen 2002; Husain et al. 1998), on the other hand, concedes that ordinary people do have an impact on rebel transition insofar as high civilian casualties breeds hostility toward returning rebels, who are resented locally for their role in the mayhem. Some single-country

studies, in Sierra Leone, for example, have highlighted distinctive dynamics in the reintegration process of particular subgroups of combatants, notably youth (Richards et al. 2003) and women and girls (Mazurana et al. 2002). Other studies found that individuals do leave terrorist movements and paramilitaries in Colombia for largely *idiosyncratic reasons*: fear of excessive punishment, disillusionment with the group's leadership, or recognition of the impossibility of achieving the group's goals (Kaplan and Nussio 2018; Nussio 2011). This literature, however, focuses more on the various conditions under which rebels choose to quit or rearm and sheds little light on the long, tortuous trajectory of disengagement.

The literature on disarmament-demobilization-reintegration (DDR) and security sector reform (SSR) focuses directly on weaning rebels from extremism but reduces the challenge of rebel exit to one of economic anxiety and poor institutions. As a result, this literature is limited to proposing the most lucrative incentives (land, cash, or vocational training) policymakers can design to entice rebels away from extremism, while simultaneously increasing the accountability and effectiveness of security institutions (via human rights and rule of law). It also recommends removing armed actors from politics as a condition for durable peace (Humphreys and Weinstein 2005; Gilligan, Mvukiyehe, and Samii 2013; Baaré 2005; Paes 2005; Alden 2002). The vast policy literature on democracy promotion, and associated academic research on peacebuilding and international election monitoring, on the other hand, generally concur in advocating rebel electoral participation under international oversight as a path to durable peace (Soderberg Kovacs 2007; Girod 2008; Kelley 2008; Carothers 1997; Bjornlund 2004; Brancati and Snyder 2009; Manning 2008; Fortna 2008). Recent research on rebel governance and postwar trajectories of rebel factions investigate the transition from civil conflict to peace, but the process of retirement is at best peripheral to these accounts (Arjona 2016; Daly 2016; Balcells 2017; Matanock 2017).

Both the DDR-SSR and democracy promotion literature largely build on the untested assumptions that rebels are beset either by economic insecurities or political ambitions, which lucrative surrender packages and electoral participation provisions can address, tempting them to retire. Regardless of whether economic rehabilitation is more enticing to certain kinds of insurgencies than others (Weinstein 2007), as mentioned, these incentives only become relevant during reintegration, after the rebels have already disarmed. Scholars have begun to emphasize that ex-combatants who gain acceptance

from family members, friends, and neighbors through formal or informal processes of reconciliation are more likely to integrate into civilian life (Hwang 2018). However, stories of parental persuasion in bringing their children back from extremism do not explain why these networks are available to some rebels and in some places and not others, which is one of the central contributions of this book.

The widespread use of the term “surrender” to indicate the process of return of rebels to the mainstream is problematic primarily because it implies that rebels disarm under duress, and it ignores that rebels, as in the case of many former Maoists I interviewed, also quit voluntarily for myriad reasons. This book shows that the process of Maoist rebels quitting the insurgent organization cannot be called desertion because many former rebels secured permission of the Maoist Party to quit the organization (McLauchlin 2011; Oppenheim et al. 2015). In addition, “defection,” defined as a faction leaving one side of a conflict to collaborate with the opposing side, also does not adequately capture the Maoist exit depicted here (Christia 2012; Kalyvas 2008; Staniland 2012; Bakke, Cunningham, and Seymour 2012; Findley and Rudloff 2012; Fjelde and Nilsson 2012; Tanner, Tubiana, and Griffin 2007). Former Maoist combatants, more in the southern conflict zone than in the North, revealed during conversations with this author, that in rejecting violence and ceasing combat they did not agree to fight against their former comrades. Thus side switching is not an appropriate description of this phenomenon. Side switching takes factions as units of analysis, and focuses more on the group dynamic rather than individual incentives, and it does not adequately capture the dynamics of individual rebels leaving the insurgent organization (Seymour 2014; Otto 2018). Former rebels referred to themselves as “retired.” Many, more so in the South than in the North, asserted their abiding belief in the Maoist ideology of armed revolution and expressed no remorse for taking up arms against the state that they still considered essentially unjust. The reasons for quitting the insurgency were idiosyncratic, and those reasons are not the focus of this book. Regardless of their respective reasons, the rebels perceived the process of quitting insurgency as ending their life long career, much like retirement. After voluntarily retiring from the insurgency, the rebels do not necessarily deradicalize or join the state forces, which makes this process distinct from surrender, defection, or side switching used customarily in the literature.

The Empirical Puzzle

Around the same time (2004–2012) the Maoist insurgency spread to various Indian states, recruiting and carrying out a series of brazen assaults—including beheading an inspector, hijacking a crowded passenger train, kidnapping bureaucrats, attacking elected politicians, killing almost the entire Chhattisgarh state committee of the Congress Party, and slaughtering 76 officers of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF)—Maoist rebels also began to quit the party, more so in the South than in the North. Between 2006 and 2012, for example, compared to 781 surrender events in the state of Andhra Pradesh in South India, only 54 surrendered in the state of Jharkhand in North India.¹⁴ Figure 1.1 illustrates the variation in the number of Maoist surrender cases across affected states.

By the time of my fieldwork in the South in 2013–2014, ordinary people in my fieldwork areas in the South (Telangana region, formerly part of Andhra Pradesh), in the historically worst affected districts of Nalgonda, Warrangal, Karimnagar, Adilabad, and Khammam, reported that they had not seen as many armed guerrillas scouting their villages for recruitment in the last four years (2009–2013) as previously.¹⁵ They shared vivid memories of rebels visiting their villages almost regularly before that for propaganda, recruitment, or recreation purposes. The most tangible reminders of the violent uprisings in these areas that date to the 1970s and 1980s are the numerous tombs that the rebels erected across rural Telangana to honor their dead comrades. These modest structures are now shrouded in thorny shrubs and animal excrement, lying dilapidated by the pitch-black roads built recently by state governments to connect villages that were once remote.¹⁶ However, during

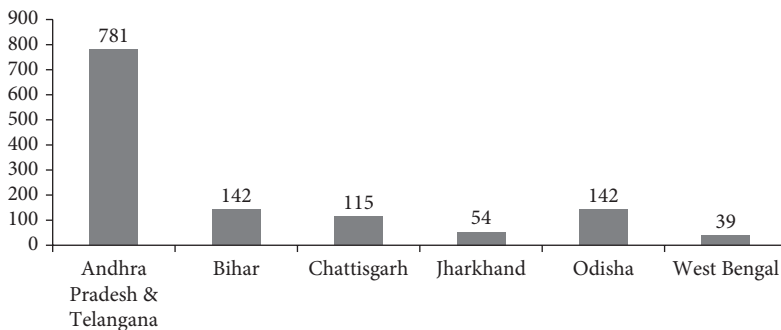


Figure 1.1 State-level Variation in Rebel Retirement, 2006–2012

my visits, I was witness to body bags still coming to villages, mostly from the neighboring state of Chhattisgarh.

The retired rebels are known as “*majhis*” in the South. This is a unique, local honorific used to refer to former Maoists, with no comparable equivalent in Maoist-affected states in the North.¹⁷ The dominant popular sentiment in the South, as I have experienced it over the years, is respectful and sympathetic toward majhis. During interviews, ministers, activists, lawyers, poets, journalists, academics, bureaucrats, and policemen eagerly proclaimed their past association with Maoist politics that reportedly left an indelible mark on their personal lives, political views, and public careers. In the villages, despite initial hesitation, there were hushed admissions of how the revolutionaries gave them hope and self-confidence.

In contrast, I found that ordinary people were either critical or fearful of the Maoists in the North. Government officials, media persons, civil society activists, and ordinary villagers were quick to denounce Maoists as violent thugs terrorizing people and extracting rent from local miners and small businesses. At the most sympathetic end, my informants in the North condemned the Maoists for their military excesses and corrupt rent-seeking practices that included kidnapping for ransom, which negated their past progressive politics and revolutionary zeal.

Retired rebels in the North live secluded lives around the capital city, away from their villages and families and protected by their own private militia or bodyguards. They work either as informants for the police, as part of political/mining mafia, or as aspiring politicians. I met them in various locations, including shady roadside dance bars, inside the premises of state legislative assemblies, in street corner tea shops, or in empty apartments, with them always heavily guarded by privately hired armed men. I found them bitter and beaten, rejected by the people, and hunted by their former comrades for betrayal of the revolutionary cause.

This is in sharp contrast to the retired rebels in the South who have gone back into virtual anonymity of quiet, “normal” life with their families, which indicates their successful reintegration. They are well assimilated into diverse professions, from farmer and homemaker to doctor, professor, and village headman (or headwoman). Figure 1.2 shows the current professions of the 67 retired rebels I met in the South and 50 former rebels I met in the North.

There are two other aspects of the retirement data that are significant in explaining the process of rebel retirement. First, although most studies on Maoist insurgency in India focus on post-2005 data (Gwande, Kapur, and

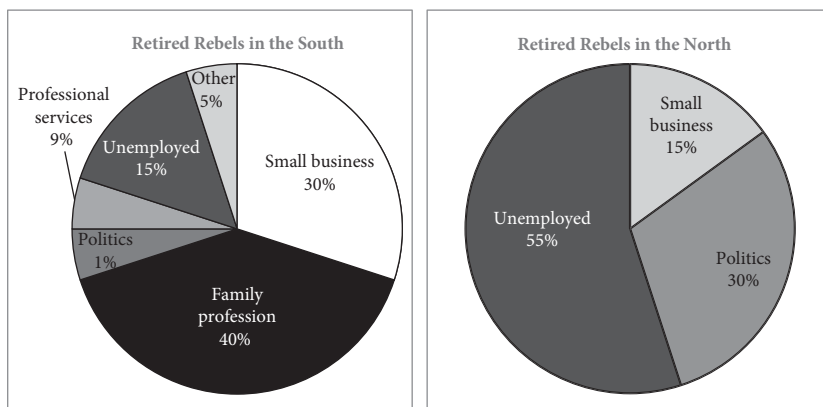


Figure 1.2 North-South Comparison of Post-Retirement Occupations of Retired Rebels

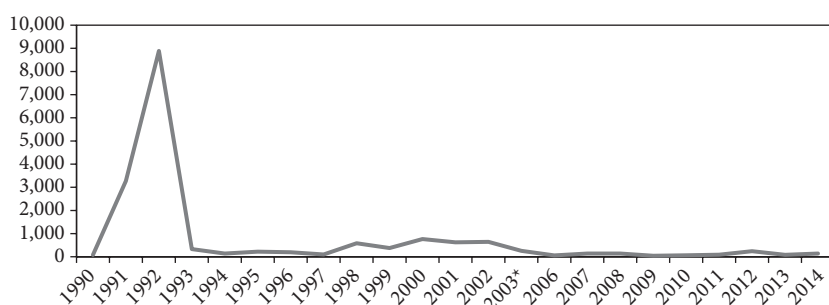


Figure 1.3 Rebel Retirement in the South, 1990–2014

Satyanath 2012; Hoelscher, Miklian, and Vadlamannati 2012; Khanna and Zimmermann 2014), Maoist surrender in the South was actually notably higher in the 1980s and 1990s (Figure 1.3). Thus rebel retirement in the South was high even when the insurgency was still popular and strong. The special commando police (Greyhounds) credited with driving rebels to surrender was barely constituted back then, and the lucrative surrender package of the southern state had not yet been introduced.¹⁸ This sequence of events pokes holes in the dominant narrative that credits efficient policing, arrests and assassinations of Maoists, and lucrative financial incentives for high rebel retirement in the South (Ramana 2009, 2006; Singhal and Nilakantan 2012).

Second, district-level data reveals that rebel retirement, both in the North and South, were concentrated in certain districts and not others

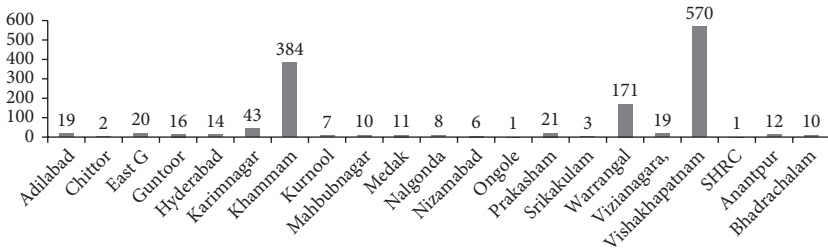


Figure 1.4 District-level Rebel Retirement in the South (Andhra Pradesh), 2006–2013

(Figure 1.4). For example, in the South, rebel retirement was concentrated in two districts (Warrangal and Khammam) in Telangana and one district (Vishakhapatnam) in coastal Andhra Pradesh, although other districts (particularly Karimnagar, Nalgona, and Adilabad) were equally affected by the insurgency. In Jharkhand in the North, retirement was also concentrated in two districts (Khunti and Ranchi).¹⁹ This pattern holds up in other Maoist-affected states as well. Police capability, welfare policies, and financial inducements, the three most popular explanations of rebel retirement among policymakers, varies little across districts.

Throughout the rest of the book, I show that this specific spatial pattern of rebel retirement—higher in the South and concentrated in some districts and not others—is a function of informal exit networks that grow, drawing sustenance from local associational life, in some places and not others.

Theoretical Strategy

The theoretical premise of this book is derived from what former rebels shared with me during more than 100 conversations in both the North and South of India.²⁰ The primary dilemma that holds rebels back even when they want to quit is this: While they might be killed and their families massacred as after they disarm, the state would not lose much if they failed to keep their side of the bargain. The threat to rebels' lives comes from families they attacked during their rebel career or, in some cases, from the police and their former comrades. Theorizing the rebel's dilemma as a problem of credible commitment, I argue that informal exit networks resolve this problem locally by offering alternative enforcement mechanisms that facilitate retirement