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The Adversary

Karnataka and Naxalism are not often spoken about in the same breath. But for a whole decade, an enigmatic man named Saketh Rajan led the movement in the state. It wasn't even his sole name, or claim to fame.

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The sixth of February, 2005. Five Naxalites are moving through dense forest near Chikmagalur. Among them are Saketh Rajan, the leader of the pack, and his bodyguard Shivlingu. When the sudden noise of vehicles startles them, Saketh dispatches the three others to investigate. The party comes across a civilian jeep. They conclude these are just visitors to a nearby temple.

In reality, they have been deceived by the Karnataka State Police, whose jeeps have stealthily encircled them for hours. When the five find themselves coverless, at the head of a small hill, the police begin firing from below. Shivlingu dies

immediately after taking a bullet to his gut. [1] Saketh's rifle fails to fire, and he takes shelter behind a rock. On his walkie talkie, he urges the others to retreat safely. A message that ends with a cry of 'lal salaam' turns out to be his last. He is killed soon after, by a close shot to the head.

When news of the encounter was made public, Saketh's mother asked Karnataka's then-chief minister Dharam Singh to hand her son's remains over to a civil body called Citizens' Initiative for Peace, established by Bangalore-based activists to encourage dialogue between the Naxalites and the state. But Singh had little control over the police force, and the bodies of Saketh and Shivlingu were disposed of at an undisclosed location. The following day, in the state assembly, Singh expressed his anguish at "such a brilliant man" being killed.

Who was Saketh Rajan? Why did he have to be cremated surreptitiously? What made the chief minister remark on his brilliance? The answers to these questions are tied to a phrase that isn't heard very often: Naxalism in Karnataka. Compared to the insurrections in West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh, and later Chhattisgarh, it was only a flicker, easily extinguished. But while it burned, Saketh was one of its leading lights, both materially and intellectually.

He was a product of the 1970s, swept up by the revolutionary moment that characterised the time: Naxalbari, the civil rights movement in the US, student agitations in Europe. As with so many reasonably affluent young men before and after him, his entry into Marxism was through the theory. His life's biggest project was a Marxist history of Karnataka titled Making History. (He was working on the third volume when he was killed.) But Saketh also loved being out in the field, among ordinary people. Perhaps that is what propelled him to the top rung of Naxalite leadership.

When I first came across his name, I was struck by the similarities in our lives. We were both from Tamil Brahmin families in Mysore; we had become disenchanted with engineering and gravitated towards the humanities; we had even learnt to play the mandolin when young. Chasing the arc of Saketh's life led me to a wider project chronicling Karnataka's many and varied social movements since the 1970s. Over the last two years, I have been speaking to activists and writers who were at the heart of these upheavals. A handful of them knew Saketh personally.

On the internet, he now survives in a few blogs, the odd journalistic piece, a terrible short film, and some hagiographic sketches. If you see only these, you are likely to come away with a vague and abstract notion of a rebel—with or without a cause, depending on what you read.

But in my interviews, I encountered something more textured, a shadowy trail of his many aliases. He was Saki the scholar, Prem the man of revolution, Pandu the teacher who would regale students with stories from world history.

Saketh shunned the privileges of his upbringing to become a guerrilla. Those privileges inevitably shaped his fantasies. He moulded himself in the image of a staunch idealist even as realpolitik demanded flexibility. Those who knew Saketh often critiqued him harshly. But, in the same breath, they also acknowledged the deep sensitivity that marked his quest.

Coloured by the shades of these perceptions, what follows is an impressionistic portrait of an unusual revolutionary.

Saki

Saketh was born, circa 1960, in an affluent Iyengar family in Mysore. His father Sounder Rajan was a former army-man and owned a petrol bunk. Rajan Senior was a globetrotting meat-eater, unorthodox in many ways. He often reprimanded his son for being too austere in his habits. (Saketh owned only two pairs of clothes later in life.)

His son was a precocious boy. Having initially sought refuge in the spiritual writings of Osho and Jiddu Krishnamurti, Saketh soon gravitated towards historians like Romila Thapar and theorists like Frantz Fanon. In 1977, he enrolled in Maharaja's College, Mysore, for an undergraduate degree in English and Journalism.

Saki's intellectual origins may be traced back to a small library near Kukkarahalli Lake in Mysore, set up in the early 1970s. This was when the labour movement was steadily gaining ground in Karnataka. I heard about this from T.S. Venugopal, a retired mathematics professor who lived two streets away from Saketh's family home. (Venugopal told me that the Mysore-based motorcycle company Ideal Jawa, makers of the iconic Yezdi, had a particularly strong labour union. It was backed by the Communist Party of India.)

For more than a decade, the library bequeathed a legacy of political dialectic to youth on different shades of the Left spectrum. [2] "Back then, the big debate was about how to characterise the state," Venugopal explained. "The members of the CPI(M)"—Communist Party of India (Marxist)—"would assert that it was a capitalist state, with only a few feudal remnants." Saketh would take the Marxist-Leninist line, arguing that the state was "semi-feudal and semi-colonial." The

CPI(ML) was then the most radical of the Left groups, and allied strongly with the Naxal movement.

“Once he finished writing a piece, he would make three copies of it, in the hope that at least one would survive his unpredictable lifestyle.”

V.S.S. Shastry
Venugopal vividly recalled his last meeting with Saketh. “Sometime in the 1980s, he came to my house when I was in Bhadravati. [3] *I could barely recognise Saketh, because he had grown a beard. He wanted some material from me because he had started writing Making History. After that, I only saw him in the papers.”*

Making History was epic in its scope. The first volume begins with a delineation of Karnataka’s geological origins, before theorising the progression of Indian society from pre-feudalism to colonialism. The second volume details the rise of Tipu Sultan and scathingly mocks the Wodeyars, royals of Mysore, for being colonial puppets. Volume one was published in 1998, over a decade after Saketh had started work on it. By this time, Saketh had gone properly underground, and there was even a bounty on his head.

The perils of putting together a serious history while having to remain incognito came alive in my conversations with V.S.S. Shastry, who lives in Kolar. Now retired, Shastry used to work as a clerk in Canara Bank, and became part of Left circles through his involvement with the bank’s labour union. When they first met, Saketh had started work on Making History. The two men had bonded over their love of books.

“He would come at night and we would talk till morning. He would quote endlessly from the books he was reading. And once he finished writing a piece, he would make three copies of it, in the hope that at least one would survive his unpredictable lifestyle.”

“Unpredictable” is a mild way of putting it. One night—sometime in the late 1980s—Rajan showed up at Shastry’s house with a bullet wound on his forearm but did not reveal what happened. Despite the dangers, Saketh visited Kolar because of its proximity to southern Andhra: some pockets in the region had sympathy for the Naxalite cause.

The Dalit movement was also particularly strong in Kolar. The movement had started in the early-1970s, when a precocious Dalit student named Munivenkatappa was killed by his feudal-caste classmates, as they couldn’t stand the fact that he had scored better marks than them. His enraged hostel-mates started an agitation in the town. Over the next decade, Dalit hostels would play a key role in fomenting agitations across the state.

Saketh frequented these hostels to deliver speeches and recruit young blood for the cause. Already, in the years that preceded his peripatetic lifestyle, Saketh had shown deep engagement with civil society endeavours. After his undergraduate degree, he went on to get two postgraduate degrees in journalism: first from Bangalore University and then from the Indian Institute of Mass Communication in Delhi, where he won four gold medals.

He began working as a journalist in the early 1980s, and wrote several pieces highlighting environmental concerns. Writing in the Star of Mysore, Saketh had warned against the setting up

of a uranium enrichment plant outside Mysore. He also wrote about preserving the ecosystem of Kukkarahalli Lake, and the troubles of tribal people living near H.D. Kote, who were being displaced because of the establishment of Bandipur National Park.

In 1984, he published a sociological piece on the tribulations of the Soliga tribal people living in B.R. Hills, 80km south of Mysore. [4] That same year, as a representative of the Pragathipara Vidyarthi Kendra—Progressive Students Union—he was part of a fact-finding committee that travelled to Nagasandra near Bangalore to investigate the persistence of bonded labour. [5]

He tapped into all these lived experiences for his history-writing. But "Saki was not a professional historian," said Vijay Thambanda, professor of history at the Hampi Kannada University, in a talk delivered in Mangaluru in 2019. [6] "He had dreams of liberating Karnataka, which he threw into his writings, and called it history. Although it seems like he relies on D.D. Kosambi a lot,"—the polymath Marxist who wrote An Introduction to the Study of Indian History—"Saki's real inspiration is Rajani Palme Dutt's India Today, which was heavily critiqued by Kosambi for being too mechanically Marxist."

Thambanda, however, acknowledged the ambition of Saketh's work and the conditions under which it was produced. "There is passion, certainly. Marxism itself had become a passion for Saki. But is that enough to write history? I don't know."

Saketh's personal reference library was distributed across numerous "underground dens" he maintained around the state. During the early 1990s, he seems to have disappeared into this

world, to work uninterruptedly on his labour of love. He emerges from obscurity at the turn of the century, in the bosom of the Western Ghats.

Prem

In the mid-1980s, during his IIMC days in Delhi, Saketh had come into contact with Cherukuri Rajkumar, a Naxalite from Andhra who had a bounty of ₹10 lakh on his head. Rajkumar was a leader of the People's War Group, a Marxist-Leninist organisation founded in 1980. By 1985, Saketh had joined the first generation of Naxalites from Karnataka, initially led by Rajkumar. Contact with hot-blooded souls like Saketh, who were chomping at the bit to contribute to the movement, must have convinced Rajkumar about the potential to expand operations to Karnataka.

Kotiganahalli Ramaiah, a Kannada poet and playwright, happened to meet Saketh a few months before he went underground. "In all honesty, I didn't like him the first time we met. One of my friends had taken me to meet him in a hotel. We urged him to eat, but he refused solemnly. I could see he was hungry."

Later, Ramaiah found out that Saketh was practising to stay hungry. "He was going to be recruited into a Naxal squad in northeast Karnataka, where life was going to be tough." He laughed at the memory. "Saketh had a good heart. He was just not realistic enough, that's all."

It was in northeast Karnataka, close to the Andhra border, that the Naxals had first tried to find a base. To learn more about

this period of Saketh's life, I spoke to two of his ex-comrades—Sirimane Nagaraj and Noor "Sridhar" Zulfikar. Both of them presently live in Bengaluru.

"It's either the mind or the stomach that drives one towards the extreme Left," said Zulfikar, who had been next-in-line to take over as leader after Saketh's death. However, both Nagaraj and he were disillusioned with the way the Naxals had operated in Karnataka. They disengaged from the movement completely in 2006.

Like Saketh, both of them came from reasonably well-off backgrounds. Moderation was an acquired trait but one they had internalised by now. Nagaraj's house, where I met them, was austere. It reminded me of writer and journalist Chidanand Rajghatta's description of Saketh's spartan hostel room in Bangalore.

In that article, Rajghatta had written about Saketh preparing coffee without milk or sugar, "in a beaker clearly purloined from the chemistry lab, and with coffee powder retrieved from a balled-up newspaper." [7] But this wasn't the case at Nagaraj's, where milky chai flowed as generously as the conversation.

Zulfikar, from a Sufi family in Chitradurga, had grown up listening to tales about revolutionary life from his classmates, many of whom were from Andhra. He grew convinced that he needed to fight the state on behalf of the oppressed. His elder brother, however, believed that one had to reach a certain stature in society before being able to give back.

In a manner that recalls the Hindi film Deewar, his elder brother joined the police, and Zulfikar decided to dedicate his life to

grassroots social movements. He dropped out of engineering college to join the agitation against the nuclear plant in Kaiga. Later that decade, he joined the Naxalites.

“If you think you can wage war against the state from 20 backward villages, it is not a people’s war, it becomes a romantic war.”

Noor Zulfikar

Nagaraj had also been involved in people’s protests against a large-scale energy project. In the early 1990s, he had been an active member of the Karnataka Vimochana Ranga, which played a big part in the movement to save the source of the river Tungabhadra. [8] This inclination towards environmentalism, they told me, is what separated the Naxalites from the Communists: the Communists were generally quite accepting of developmental and industrial projects, because of the jobs they created.

In 1995, Saketh was handpicked by the CPI(ML) leadership to lead the movement in Karnataka. This is when he came to be known as State Secretary Prem. While the specifics of what transpired in the early 1990s are still hazy, it was clear that Naxal action in Karnataka was limited to Bidar and Raichur. The movement’s goals came from the established playbook: capture power after liberating villages from landlordism and encircling the cities. The plan was to do this in phases: keep the protracted people’s war going while creating pockets of liberated areas.

During the 1990s, Saketh seemed to have been travelling across the state, juggling his multiple identities. “His research faculty was always on,” Nagaraj told me. “He knew karate, and was extremely fit and well-built. I remember once there was a

party meeting at eight in the morning, and he had woken up at five to go excavate an archaeological mound." These archaeological insights would inform his writings about Karnataka's geological past.

Not long after Saketh had thrown himself into the movement, it became obvious that Raichur and Bidar were not ready for a revolutionary uprising. Zulfikar referred to the Naxalites' efforts there as "experiments" which failed. Saketh and Zulfikar disagreed about the reason for the failure. "The Naxalite movement had been failing in the country for over three decades at that point," Zulfikar said. "I used to tell Saketh it's because we have failed to tune our ideology to Indian conditions. We cannot hope to transpose Maoism as it was practised in China."

Saketh would always push back against Zulfikar's inference. He would frame the defeat as a military failure, saying: 'No, we failed because we didn't attack the police offensively enough. Had we fought strongly, we could have prevented them from entering villages and gotten ourselves space to mobilise.'

Saketh was an extraordinary man, Zulfikar was quick to add. "Even though we had many political disagreements, I can't even begin to conceive of his stature as a political person. But then, he is also a good example for how a man from such a strong intellectual background could stumble in life. One may be able to think about a lot of grand things, but completely fumble up simpler ones."

Zulfikar felt that uncritical idealism was the primary reason for the movement's downfall: "If you think you can wage war against the state from 20 backward villages, it is not a people's

war, it becomes a romantic war. We had no plan of building a comprehensive and sustained struggle."

Saketh's romantic idealism also shaped his personal life. He married a fellow revolutionary named Rajeshwari, who was killed in an encounter near Visakhapatnam in 2001. Introducing her as his writing partner, he wrote a moving remembrance for her in the second volume of Making History, published in 2004.

'Raji had seen the past. She wanted to see the future. She chose to visit the villages of Andhra Pradesh where new democratic people's power was being forged. She wanted to study it, record it and broadcast its prowess among the masses of Karnataka…Her intellect was not insipid. She wanted to see and share the living popular experience of the proletarian democratic revolution.'

In the years following her killing, Saketh retreated further into the forests, even as his enmity with the local police intensified. It was at this tipping point, caught between imagined pasts and futures, between insipid intellects and courageous crusades, that Saketh's life would go on to become irrevocably imperilled.

Pandu

At the turn of the millennium, the Naxals had retreated from the plains of northern Karnataka, licking their wounds. Their new destination was Kudremukh, a thickly forested haven in the Western Ghats. Over here, the movement to save the Tungabhadra was picking up momentum. At the same time, the state government was seriously considering a proposal for the creation of a national park at Kudremukh. The Adivasi

communities of the region had started receiving relocation notices. They knew they would have to fight for their homes.

Saketh and his comrades had initially participated in democratic protests, but had slowly become disenchanted with civil disobedience. On the other hand, the Adivasi cause had also been taken up by an organisation led by the activist and novelist Kalkuli Vittal Hegde.

In early 2022, I met Hegde at his home in the temple town of Sringeri. He had just finished writing a PhD thesis on the biodiversity and natural environment of the Malnad region.

Naxalite activity in the region began in 2001, Hegde recalled; and a man by the name of Murthy had been appointed as the Divisional Forest Officer. “He organised several sabhas and tried to convince the Adivasis that their land was being used for the noble cause of wildlife conservation. He passed orders to fence the forests. The villagers couldn’t graze their animals because Murthy had them tied up. He jailed people for fishing, for even having matchboxes in their pockets.”

When the Naxals arrived, the frustrated villages took their problems to them. Hegde remembered one man in particular. “I knew him as Pandu. Many youngsters were influenced by him. It wasn’t the right way. The locals here slip away from trouble, and adjust to life in street-smart ways.”

“A lot of people would gather to listen to him. If only he had stayed outside the forest—what an asset he could have been.”

Kalkuli Vittal Hegde

The police felt Hegde and his associates were in cahoots with the Naxalites, and treated them as such. “We told them we were democratic protestors,” Hegde said. “Talk to us, not the Naxals. But they never came into a dialogue with us. After the Naxalites went into the forest, everything became about them.”

Hegde told me that many of the locals appeared to have been in thrall to Pandu’s personality and his erudition. “We used to call him meshtru,”—master. “He would deliver history lessons. He would expound on Marx. A lot of people would gather to listen to him. If only he had stayed outside the forest—what an asset he could have been.”

As a leader, Pandu had taken a leap of faith. But his instincts betrayed him. Nagaraj, who had also moved into the jungle, confirmed Hegde’s assessment about local attitudes: “The atmosphere there was such that the people were hesitant to join us in arms. They supported us in principle, and had regard for us. Saketh was practically living in their homes. But you need more than admiration. You need active participation.”

The hesitancy reveals the forced nature of the Naxalite insurrection in Kudremukh. The cause was just, but opposing the might of the state machinery with a few dozen cadres was always going to be a dangerous game. And while Pandu from the Mahabharata succumbed to a moment of forbidden lust, Saketh, too, would perish in his quest for a Marxist utopia.

Saketh

In June 2004, a team of journalists trekked into the forest in an attempt to broker peace between the Naxals and the state. One of them was Gauri Lankesh, who was shot dead by a

right-wing affiliated assailant in 2017. During this meeting, she realised that the man she had known as State Secretary Prem was in fact Saketh Rajan, her senior at Bangalore University and IIMC, Delhi.

Lankesh was among those who set up the Citizens' Initiative for Peace to initiate a reconciliation that ultimately never took place. The state didn't cease its combing operations, and the band of about 30 Naxals didn't lay down their arms. Things deteriorated after Saketh's death. The Naxals retaliated, killing six policemen and a civilian in an attack near Pavagada on the Andhra border. [9] The state redoubled its efforts to crush the movement after this attack. The resulting repression also dealt a body blow to other Left movements in Karnataka. [10]

The unkindest cut of all, however, was reserved for Saketh's aged mother, who never saw him after he went underground. I learnt from T.S. Venugopal that she had spent her last years alone, having lost not only Saketh and her husband, but also Saketh's brother, who had died of an illness many years earlier. The police would visit her repeatedly, but she faced them bravely.

Now, Hegde told me, Kudremukh is the undisputed dominion of forest officials and affluent tourists. Some of the tribal people left after accepting moderate rehabilitation packages. Many continued to stay along the margins of the protected area. The Malekudiya community, for instance, has long been protesting the lack of basic amenities like healthcare centres and tarred roads. In 2012, Vittal Malekudiya, the first ever journalist from the community, was arrested with his father, both as suspected Naxalites. They had to spend four months in prison, and it eventually took them nine years to get acquitted.

It is hard to find a yardstick that can gauge the legacy of Saketh's intense life. From all the conversations I had, the overarching sense conveyed to me was one of lost potential and shattered dreams. "What a committed group of boys they were," Ramaiah told me. "If only they had been trained to experiment within the democratic setup. Just imagine if they had decided to join the Dalit Sangharsha Samiti and strengthen it from within. We would have got a great vision from them." [11]

These ruminations are retrospective. The fact remains that history is a sequence of experiments whose outcomes are unpredictable. The story of Saketh Rajan is, in equal parts, inspiring, cautionary, gripping and moving. His life may have ended on a tragic note but I suspect he would have appreciated this afterlife as a martyr. He had once mused: "After all, is it not with blood and tears, the sacrifice of what is most precious—life—that history enriches posterity?"

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Corrections and clarifications

An earlier version of the story said that T.S. Venugopal was involved with setting up the library near Kukkarahalli Lake in Mysore. Venugopal later clarified that a man named Ramalingam was primarily responsible for its establishment, and that he joined him only later. Additionally, Murthy was a Divisional Forest Officer, and not a District Forest Officer. We regret the errors.

The earlier version also said that Hegde "promised Pandu and the Naxalites that he wouldn't oppose them." After the piece was published, Hegde told the author that the sentence was misleading in the context. The author regrets the misunderstanding.

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