

ALPA SHAH



In the Shadows of the State

INDIGENOUS POLITICS, ENVIRONMENTALISM,
AND INSURGENCY IN JHARKHAND, INDIA



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WITH A DROP OF *HADIA*,
TO BA AND BAPUJI,

*my grandmother and my late grandfather,
otherwise known as Motiben and Somchandbhai
Punamchand Raja Kheta Lakha Rajpar Nayani Shah*



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This book has its origins in my contemplating the pursuit of doctoral research. The fieldwork for it began in January 1999 when I landed in Ranchi City, Jharkhand, India, as a research assistant on a project evaluating a development project funded by the U.K. government. Three months later, at the end of this assignment, I was convinced that I wanted to pursue independent academic research in Jharkhand. I moved to the market town of Bero, where I stayed until June 1999. Having enrolled in the Ph.D. program at the London School of Economics and Political Science in September 1999, I returned to Jharkhand in November 2000 for a longer period of field research that lasted until June 2002. This time I was based in the village I call Tapu, but I also rented rooms in Bero and Ranchi as I wanted to situate Tapu in the broader context of what was happening in the state and national arena. I returned for further periods of fieldwork: January through February 2004, and January through March 2007 and 2008.

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Paintings by Kundan, Seema, and Deepa have been reproduced in this book, and I am very grateful to my father-in-law, John, who kindly helped to get the artwork and map ready for publication. I could not have completed this book without the kindness, love, and support of my husband, Rob, who painstakingly read several drafts, was a great source of both criticism and encouragement, and has made all things possible.



Map showing the location of Jharkhand in India.

Map prepared by John Higham.



Prologue

6:00 A.M., 4 DECEMBER 2000

Knock, knock, knock. The flimsy wooden door of my mud house was rattling.

“Not again,” I thought, waking up from deep sleep, rubbing my eyes.

“Alpa, Alpa! Get up! Get up! This is the Jungle Raj, the Forest Kingdom! In Tapu village you can’t sleep till midday,”¹ teased Safid Khan.

I lay in bed, registering that I was waking up in this little-known part of India, in the newly formed State of Jharkhand, listening to the rhythmic pounding of rice in the house next door.

“Come on, Alpa! Get ready! It’s market day!”

“Okay, okay, I’m coming!” I replied, clumsily climbing out of my blankets and spilling the hay that Somra Munda — my neighbor, who later became my adopted brother — had put under my thin mattress to keep me warm.²

Safid Khan is dead now, but I often smile to myself when I remember the glint in his eyes; his large, smiling face; and the spindly legs that supported his hunched back. I didn’t particularly like being woken up that early every day, but I was fond of the old man. His teasing and joking helped to break many boundaries for me in the early days.

It was less than two weeks since I had arrived to live in Tapu, but I was already aware that the village was deeply divided. On the one hand, there were the poorer tenant descendants of the old landlord system, who made up about 80 percent of Tapu’s 102 house-



The house I lived in, Tapu village, Jharkhand. *Painting by Seema Shah.*



Tapu. *Photo by author.*

holds. Most of them were *adivasis* (indigenous people or Scheduled Tribes), and the majority of these *adivasis* were of the Munda tribe, but there were also a handful of Muslim households and some *dalits*, members of the Scheduled Castes. And on the other hand, there were the remaining 20 percent of the village, who were *sadans*, middle and higher castes, who in Tapu were mostly descendants of the historically dominant Yadav caste landlords. Despite my conscious decision to live in a house in a Munda courtyard, most of the *adivasis* seemed extremely shy and kept away from me. It was the landlord descendants who wanted to wine and dine me.

I opened the door into the courtyard. Characteristically, Safid Khan had already left. It was a cold morning, crisp and clear. I wrapped my shawl tightly around me, closed my eyes, and took a deep breath. I could hear the swish of dry leaves against the mud floor. Somra Munda's wife, Ambli, was sweeping the courtyard. The steady rhythm of her broom was pierced by the jingle of bells. Brass on brass, I thought, but also the occasional hollow ring of wood on wood. Old Onga Munda was shuffling his water buffalo and oxen out of his house and into the courtyard, to take them to graze in the forests. Mangra Munda, his nephew, came out to call his children into the house to eat some rice.

Seeing me, Mangra said, "Come on, you come with me to the market today." I tried to hide my delight as I replied, "Definitely."

Mangra had barely spoken two words to me since I arrived, and I was thrilled at this invitation to walk with him to the market town of Bero. Market days were like ritual occasions. From the time I had lived in Bero in 1999, I knew the crowds it attracted from the surrounding villages, its exciting buzz, and the smell of dust and dry spices it left in the air. *Adivasis* went to Bero to buy the week's supplies, sell their wares, and meet friends and relatives from other villages. On their way back home, many stopped in the forest for a drink of rice beer or *mahua* — wine made from the flower of the same name — brewed and sold by male and female villagers who poured it from their clay and aluminum pots into cups sewn together from *sal* leaves or into small steel bowls.

A few hours later, Mangra came to get me, saying: "Let's go, I need to come back quickly." He had made an effort to dress in his market best. His skin was glowing against his clean white shirt, and he had put on his one good lungi. His hair was slickly oiled, parted, and neatly combed. As he turned, I caught a waft of the mustard oil moisturizing his body. In one hand, he carried an empty cloth bag.



The market in Bero. *Photo by author.*



Drinking rice beer on the way back from the market. *Photo by author.*

"Is there nothing to take to the market today?" I asked.

"The tomatoes and eggplants are not ripe yet. I'm just going to buy the weekly supply of kerosene, soap, salt, sugar, and spices."

"Where's *bhavji*?" I was conscious that by calling his wife my sister-in-law, I was stating that he was my brother.

"She's gone to chip stones and look after the goats," he replied. Mangra had four young children, and although — like everyone else in the village — he had some land, the family was finding it difficult to make ends meet. Whenever they could, both husband and wife spent their days digging and chipping stones for the sadans, who supplied local contractors with gravel from Tapu.

We made our way onto the mud track that snakes from Tapu to the next village, climbs into the sal forest, and then descends into the Chotanagpur Plateau. Here, the track joins the paved road that leads into Bero and eventually, thirty-five kilometers or so later, is engulfed by Ranchi, the growing capital of Jharkhand.

We walked in silence. It was an hour's walk to Bero, and there was no one else from Tapu who looked likely to join us. Mangra was shy, and I wondered how best to break the ice. I noticed that, although he was dressed in his best clothes, he had come barefoot.

"Why have you left your slippers?" I asked.

"I've lost so many in the market. I leave them somewhere and then forget them." He smiled wryly. "The problem is I'm not used to slippers. So now I've just given up wearing them to Bero."

I laughed and nervously joked back, "Well, now that Jharkhand State is formed, Tapu will develop. Electricity will light up the village, and water will spurt out of taps. Tapu's mud houses will become brick mansions. Everyone will want their children educated. You won't have to walk as far as Bero to see a doctor. And shops will open in the village. You will be inundated by people trying to sell you slippers! There'll be no problem if you leave them in Bero."

I felt rather stupid for having made such a silly remark. But Mangra grew serious and asked, "I heard that there might be some change in *sarkar* [the state] — has Jharkhand sarkar formed?"

Before I could reply, he reflected on his own question. "In any case, what does it matter? What will it bring? As far as I'm concerned, it will probably only bring our *soshan* [exploitation] closer."

I was stunned by Mangra's comment. Less than a month earlier, on the stroke of midnight, 15 November 2000, India's twenty-eighth state, Jharkhand, had been created. Mangra and I were standing less than fifty kilometers from its capital, Ranchi. On the day of its cre-

ation, at 12:05 a.m., Governor Prabhat Kumar had taken his oath of office and had later paid tribute to all the adivasi martyrs of the Jharkhand movement for independence from Bihar. The Jharkhand movement was often described as one of the oldest autonomy movements in India, having made its first demands for a separate state within India to the Simon Commission in 1928. After the independence of India, these demands were reiterated to the 1952 States Reorganisation Commission. The struggle for autonomy initially revolved around the idea that the culturally autonomous indigenous people, or adivasis, were exploited and oppressed by the high-caste Hindu governments that had ruled them from Patna, the capital of Bihar. Therefore, activists argued that adivasis such as Mangra had the right to a separate state.

On 15 November 2000, I had arrived in India to pursue fieldwork in rural Jharkhand. Reading the front pages of national newspapers such as *The Pioneer* and *The Economic Times* at a friend's house in Delhi, I had realized that a mixture of celebration and anxiety would welcome me a few days later in Ranchi. The first government called itself a National Democratic Alliance, and it was led by Chief Minister Babulal Marandi of the Bharatya Janata Party, the Hindu nationalist party, rather than by Shibhu Soren, leader of the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (Jharkhand Liberation Front, or JMM) that had spearheaded the long fight for autonomy.

Nevertheless, when I arrived in Jharkhand, I found its separation from Bihar was a cause for great celebration by many people in Ranchi. Activists from different parties were euphoric and made merry for days. While separation from Bihar took place at the behest of the Hindu nationalist government, undoubtedly the long history of the struggle for autonomy led by Jharkhand's activists was crucial. Moreover, the separation of Jharkhand from Bihar intensified the activists' campaigning and advocacy to protect the region's adivasis. The streets of Ranchi were jammed with demonstrations for the protection of adivasi "jungle, *jamin*, and *jal*" (forest, land, and water). Indigenous rights activists promoted Sarna as an adivasi religion of nature worship, and one of the many annual festivals, Sarhul, was celebrated with great pomp and ritual in Ranchi as *the* adivasi festival of the year (equivalent to the Muslim Id, the Christian Christmas, and the Hindu Diwali). The newspapers were full of articles against the migration of adivasis out of the area, and for an antimigration bill to be passed. And workshops were held to point out the short-

comings of current forms of local governance, and to argue that legal recognition be given to indigenous forms of self-governance.

The formation of Jharkhand State was a success not just for India's adivasi activists, but also for indigenous rights activists around the world. The long struggle for independence had been fought in the name of the many adivasis living in rural Jharkhand. Therefore, I expected them to share this excitement. But I did not realize then that many of the poorest adivasis I would meet in rural Jharkhand, people like Mangra, did not really know, and moreover did not care, much about these major political changes.

We walked down what is considered to be a national highway. The pavement under Mangra's feet must feel hot, I thought. Suddenly the town of Bero burst upon us. Brick buildings and construction had exploded everywhere around the central hub of state administration which catered for the surrounding 114 villages—and included the local police, forest, and the block development offices. The latter was the most localized office of the Ministry of Rural Development in India, and through it thousands of rupees are distributed each year to develop the area's marginalized communities of adivasis in the forest fringes. Bero was also the destination of a growing number of sadans, whose migration to the town had made its population rise from a mere 3,500 in 1991 to at least double that figure in 2007. The sadans were leaving their mud houses in the forest; opening small businesses, mainly shops; and seeking the benefits of running water, easier access to the development resources coming into the area in the name of the poor, better schools for their children, and at least sporadic electricity.

Mangra dropped his head and started to walk faster, as if trying to stay ahead of me. He seemed to be having second thoughts about being seen with me in the market. I knew what he was about to say.

"You wait at Odhar's shop," he said. "I'll go to the market and come back to get you."

I didn't really want to wait at the shop of the Tapu sadan. But I didn't want to push the boundaries with Mangra, either. A bit disappointed, I agreed.

Neel Odhar was sitting behind a rotting wooden counter in the shop. Against the peeling blue paint, his crisp blue-and-white checked shirt, beige trousers, and gray Nike running shoes made him stand out. On one side in front of him, his brother's scooter was parked; on the other side was a line of bicycles. I recognised Gego Munda from

Tapu repairing the bicycles. Behind Neel were stacks of dusty red chairs, piled almost to the ceiling. His brother rented the chairs for weddings and other functions. Neel pulled a chair out, wiped it with a rag, and called me in.

Chatting to Gego, Mangra loitered around the front of the shop for a few minutes. Neel looked disapprovingly at him. “Couldn’t you even have got a bicycle to carry her on?”

“I really enjoyed our walk,” I piped up, a bit embarrassed and trying to defend Mangra.

When Mangra left, I told Neel how surprised I was that he did not even know that Jharkhand had been formed. Neel responded, “Ah, this *jangli log*!” I grimaced in distaste at his derogatory use of the term “forest people,” by which he meant they were savage, wild, dirty, backward, and uncouth. He continued, “What would they know about such matters? All they think about is one day at a time. They eat, drink, and are merry. Why should the formation of Jharkhand matter to them? It matters to us, us *parha-likha* [educated] people. Jharkhand’s formation is going to bring more money to the rural areas for us, more state contracts, more development, and more benefits. It’s great for us.”

I was struck by the contrasting perspectives on Jharkhand’s independence held by Neel Odhar, Mangra Munda, and the indigenous rights activists who represent people like Mangra internationally. Why did some Tapu adivasis, Mundas in this case, not care about the formation of Jharkhand State? How did Munda views about the formation of Jharkhand coexist and interrelate with other imaginings of Jharkhand — for instance, those held by rural elites (usually higher caste, though sometimes adivasi) and by indigenous rights activists living in the larger urban centers of Jharkhand? This book is my journey to understanding how, *in the shadows of the state*, these contrasting perspectives coexist in Jharkhand; what implications they may hold for transnational debates on indigenous people, rights, and development; and, relatedly, what the unintended consequences of global indigenous rights activism may be for poor, rural indigenous people in Jharkhand, India.



1. The Dark Side of Indigeneity

The last two decades of the twentieth century witnessed increasing transnational concern about the lack of a universal system of protection for indigenous rights and development. This concern gained prominence with the formation of the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations (UNWGIP) in 1982. United Nations established a Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in 2000 and appointed a Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous people the following year.¹

More generally, the first United Nations International Decade of the World's Indigenous People (1995–2004) promoted global interest in the protection of indigenous rights and a second such decade began in 2005. While indigenous peoples are highly heterogeneous in their views and agendas,² advocates for most groups make certain familiar arguments. These include the ideas that indigenous people around the world have been marginalized for centuries, various settler populations have stolen and colonized their lands, their numbers are in decline, their cultures are threatened, and they live in states that give more weight to the values and interests of the nonindigenous than to those of the indigenous.

The global spotlight on indigenous issues goes hand in hand with an increasing interest in global warming, environmentalism, and people-centered nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Indigenous communities around the world have collaborated with NGOs such as the Minority Rights Group International, the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, the Environmental Defense Fund, the Forest People's Movement, Survival International, Human Rights Watch, Cultural Survival, and the Rainforest Action Net-

work. Some anthropologists who seek to defend indigenous rights to land and resources have also championed the cause of these peoples.³ A number of scholars argue that these indigenous actors are resisting their historical subjugation not through the “hidden transcripts” of “weapons of the weak,” but through flamboyant “open transcripts” of overt representations and public acts of opposing the nation-states in which they live.⁴ Thus they are part of the genre of (new) social movements that lies between mass revolution and small-scale resistance,⁵ and that offers marginalized people a political voice besides that offered by mainstream development or Marxism and socialism.⁶ The idea is that poor, colonized, exploited, indigenous populations must be protected; their cultures must be preserved; and their rights must be enshrined in U.N. human-rights legislation. As I will show, these are controversial arguments made in the name of the protection of indigenous rights. Globally, they have produced renewed and heated debate among scholars.

India, a country which some say has the second largest indigenous population in the world,⁷ is home to over eighty-four million people classified as members of Scheduled Tribes—that is 8.2 percent of India’s total population. The official position of the Indian government, however, is that there are no indigenous people in the country. The government’s claim is based on the country’s complex migration patterns which means that unlike in other nations such as Australia or Canada, it is impossible to identify the original settlers of a particular region. However, beginning in 1985, Indian activists have participated in the UNWGIP meetings. These activists sought to claim indigenous status for India’s adivasi populations, peoples previously known as tribals, and who are recognized officially in government censuses as members of Scheduled Tribes. In 1987 the Indian delegates to UNWGIP represented a newly founded Indian Council of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, affiliated with the World Council of Indigenous Peoples. The leading members of the Indian group were from what is now the State of Jharkhand.

The Jharkhandi activists claimed that India’s Scheduled Tribe populations qualified for the new transnational term “indigenous peoples” because they were culturally different from mainstream Indian society, and especially because they had been internally colonized and dominated by a system of values and institutions maintained by the ruling groups of the country. They argued for the need to secure “the collective right of self-determination” in order to restore “land and forest rights” to India’s indigenous people⁸—something that they

felt would be possible through negotiation via internationally approved rights and safeguards.

This argument has historical roots. Activists in Jharkhand had been struggling for the autonomy of the region from Bihar State, within the Indian federal union, since the late 1920s. The initial struggles argued for a separate state on the basis that the region housed culturally autonomous indigenous people, classified as Scheduled Tribes by the government, and more popularly known as adivasis.⁹ Later, realizing that the demographic reality meant that a significant Jharkhandi population did not count as members of a Scheduled Tribe, at least according to the census, the independence promoters became more inclusive. Their new rhetoric was that Jharkhand was an internal colony of Bihar — that Bihar was reaping the benefits of Jharkhand's mineral, forest, and land resources. This enabled the movement to broaden its social base while maintaining that the area's identity emerged from the exploitation of its population and its distinct cultural heritage,¹⁰ and therefore the region should be restored to its original "sons of the soil."¹¹ The linking of the cultural politics of Jharkhand with transnational concerns some sixty years later was thus the latest phase of an old movement. Nevertheless, Jharkhand's separation from Bihar on 15 November 2000 was in many ways a triumph for Jharkhand's transnational activists.

The implications of such transnational indigenous rights activism for targeted people in specific localities, however, are far from clear and have received very little in-depth scrutiny. In this book, I explore the lives and experiences of some of the poorest adivasis in rural Jharkhand to analyze common claims made at a global level on behalf of indigenous populations. For instance, I will examine the promotion of special forms of indigenous governance (chapter 2), the way development takes shape in the name of the poorest people (chapter 3), what I will call the eco-incarceration of indigenous people through arguments about their love for and worship of nature (chapter 4) as well as their attachment to their land (chapter 5), and claims that they harbor revolutionary potential (chapter 6).

I show that the opinions, desires, and concerns of the poorest rural adivasis often contradicted and subverted those of the well-meaning urban-based middle-class activists, as well as those of local rural elites aspiring to rise up the class hierarchy. I move between the small village of Tapu, surrounding villages, the local administrative town of Bero, and Jharkhand's capital city from January 1999 to March 2007. I follow the everyday lives of some of the poorest villagers as they

chase away protected wild elephants, try to cut down the forests they allegedly live in harmony with, migrate to work in distant brick kilns to experience amorous relationships, maintain a healthy skepticism about the revival of the indigenous governance system, and escape Maoist guerrillas who claim to represent them. I juxtapose these experiences to the accounts of the village elites, as well as to the rhetorical arguments of the Ranchi-based indigenous rights activists fighting on behalf of the villagers. My central proposition is that the activists' arguments actually further marginalize the people they claim to speak for.

In writing this book, my hope is to open up grounded scholarly examination into the unintended effects of well-meaning measures for indigenous protection and development. I want to move the debate beyond both the arguments that consider the concept of indigenous people anthropologically and historically problematic, and those that consider indigeneity a useful political tool. I focus on one specific locality, a region in Jharkhand, to illuminate the broader point that there may be a dark side of indigeneity that it is well worth highlighting, especially to those who urge us to shelve our critical scholarship in case we weaken the advocacy of promoters of indigenous rights and development.

The dark side of indigeneity suggests that local use of global discourses of indigeneity can reinforce a class system that further marginalizes the poorest people. This class dimension to the indigenous rights movement is likely to get erased in the cultural-based identity politics it produces. Moreover, the transnational movement for indigeneity may obscure those spaces of hope, of a good life, that may lie beyond the shadows of the state. These are the spaces inhabited by people like those of the Jungle Raj in Tapu, the spaces from which a radical politics could emerge to better serve the poor.

Before I explore the history of debates and concerns that leads to the arguments of this book, I would like to make a brief comment about my style of writing. I hope this book will engage not only a varied academic audience but also journalists, human rights and political activists, environmentalists, development workers, policymakers, and the general reader. In this endeavor, I have tried to make my theoretical analysis emerge from the stories of Jharkhand without burdening the body of my text with the conventionally voluminous academic references to comparative, theoretical, and regional literature. For the specialist, I have developed my engagement with the latter through extensive endnotes. Where particular authors are ab-

solutely central to the arguments being developed, I have tried to make them appear and disappear from the text like my Jharkhandi friends and informants. I hope that these decisions will mean that the book is detailed enough for the specialist while being accessible enough for the generalist. The writing of academics is a political act, and I believe we should make every effort to make our texts as accessible as possible to a wide audience.

TRIBES OF MIND?

The transnational concerns over indigenous people, rights, and development have reignited a controversy over indigeneity.¹² On the one hand, there are those who argue for the special categorization and protection of indigenous peoples. On the other hand, there are those who question whether indigeneity is a product of the mind, whether those classified as indigenous are in fact an “invention of the primitive,” to borrow Adam Kuper’s phrase,¹³ and whether policies should actually be aimed at assimilating these people into the mainstream of society. To understand how the Tapu situation speaks to these transnational concerns, it is important to historically trace the key issues in the Indian context. As in many other countries, in India debates central to indigeneity have a much longer history than the recent transnational concerns.

The contested issue of tribal status goes back at least as far as India’s colonial period, when British anthropologists and administrators viewed the country’s aboriginals as primitive tribes. The need to order Indian society was at the heart of nineteenth-century anthropology in India.¹⁴ At first sight a confusing kaleidoscope, India presented the administrator and the anthropologist with the challenge of meaningfully ordering a hierarchical society in which caste was understood to embody racial and cultural difference. Race and racial ideology were the norms of a broader political order at the time and affected the categorization and classification of India’s primitive tribes.¹⁵ For one of India’s most influential administrators, H. H. Risley, who directed the 1901 Census, caste status was inscribed on the permanent physical exteriors of Indian bodies. In particular, Risley saw what he called the nasal index as a guide to the status of the nose’s owner. Those with the finest noses (and lightest complexions, closest to those of Europeans) were descendants of the Aryan invader upper castes such as Brahmans, Rajputs, and Sikhs, and those

with snub noses (and dark complexions approaching those of black Africans) were the aboriginal primitive tribes, the forest and hill dwellers, occupying the oldest and lowest strata in India.¹⁶

This racial anthropology was conveniently appropriated by some Indian elites seeking to both justify local hierarchy and assert parity with upper-class Europeans.¹⁷ Some scholars argue that Indians played a greater role in colonial constructions of the tribe.¹⁸ Nevertheless, one conclusion is that members of the Indian elite and colonial administrators and anthropologists together created the representations that have a powerful effect on society and politics in India today—stereotypes of the forest folk as living in a timeless harmony with nature, disturbed only in recent times by the market and the state. Twentieth-century isolation of remote jungle tribes is, then, not just some survival of an earlier period but a product of the mind of both colonial rulers and Indian elites.

THE PRODUCTION OF ADIVASIS

While the nineteenth century in India was, in many ways, a period that marked the invention of the primitive, a number of policies and events also served to unite a wide variety of communities living in India's forests and hills. One set of policies were those that extended state control over land and forests, via revenue collection. This state expansion was enabled and accompanied by a new influx of exploitative state officials from outside the region, moneylenders, and landlords, forming the trinity of "sarkar, *sabukar*, and zamindar." Where they could not hide or flee from this officialdom, some affected people, like those in western India, mobilized through a religiously inspired purifying struggle espousing upper-caste norms.¹⁹ In other areas, most notably in the Chotanagpur region of eastern India that is now Jharkhand, there were a series of more violent rebellions.²⁰ Despite these multiple reactions, increased state control in many forested and hilly tracts created a shared experience of domination and subordination, and thus united a wide range of people.

A unifying event, especially for inhabitants of the Chotanagpur Plateau, was the reaction of the colonial administration to the nineteenth-century resistance movements. The government made some effort to provide a range of protectionary measures for adivasis based on a codification of their customary rights to land. For instance, following the 1830s Kol rebellion, the Wilkinson Rule provided for