***In the shadows of the state: indigenous politics, environmentalism, and insurgency in Jharkhand, India***,by Alpa Shah, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2010, xiii + 273 pp., US$23.95 (paperback), ISBN: 978-0-19-807148-8.

For academics and activists fighting for the rights of indigenous peoples, the ‘moral force of indigenous politics’ (Jung 2008) is never in doubt. Leftists who once mobilized factory workers, landless laborers, students, and prostitutes in the name of *class* now speak dreamily of the unfettered joys of indigenous community and the threat posed to them by the modern state and capitalism. India is no exception to this powerful new wave of indigenous rights activism. Nor do activists and academics in India shy away from the inevitably vitriolic debates over the idea of indigeneity. Sociologists and historians have denounced *adivasi* or indigenous activists for perpetuating the colonial conception of ‘tribe’ under new guises (e.g., Beteille 1986, Guha 1999). Yet indigeneity activists and their academic supporters have repeatedly attacked their critics for being out of touch with the everyday realities of *adivasi* oppression and mobilization today.

Transcending this longstanding intellectual deadlock, Alpa Shah systematically deconstructs the rhetoric of indigeneity activism, and contrasts it with the lived realities of *adivasi* existence in contemporary India. Her intimate ethnographic accounts display her deep commitment to understanding the social bases of subordination and freedom for *adivasi* men and women in her fieldsites. Shah avoids the easy temptation to score points by invoking the European romantic or colonial origins of the notion of ‘tribe’ (Kuper 1988, Mamdani 2012). History, after all, cannot become a stick for scholars to join the state in beating up marginalized populations and their middle-class activist defenders. *In the Shadows of the State* (*ISS* hereafter), therefore, presents a ‘critical ethnography’ (p. 27) of the political and economic realities that structure everyday *adivasi* lives, bypassing urban activists in order to engage directly with the politics of the rural poor in the forest state of Jharkhand in eastern India. *ISS* seeks to make sense of ‘the social networks, forms of political representation, and economic structures that produce and subvert indigeneity as both an idea and a lived experience’ (p. 32). In doing so, Shah stands apart, admirably, from both armchair academic scholarship as well as urban middle-class ventriloquists who speak in the name of the poor and marginal in contemporary India. Her wonderfully detailed ethnographic accounts reveal that those whom these academics and activists aim to represent often experience politics and articulate their interests in ways that do not dovetail with the agendas of sympathetic patrons. The classic methods of participant-observation thus enable Shah to argue that ‘the local appropriation and experiences of global discourses of indigeneity can maintain a class system that marginalizes the poorest people’ (p. 32).

*ISS* opens with the underwhelming response of the poorest *adivasi* villagers to the formation of the fledgling state of Jharkhand in November 2000. For Jharkhandi activists, this was a significant achievement that marked the culmination of nearly a century of claim-making by *adivasis* on colonial and postcolonial states. Shah explains the contrast between these responses to the formation of Jharkhand in terms of how the two groups saw and related to the modern state (*sarkar*). Whereas a small but growing middle class among *adivasis* sought eagerly to participate in the political economy and electoral rituals of the postcolonial polity, most Mundas in Shah’s rural fieldsites ‘would prefer to have nothing to do with sarkar and expect nothing from it’ (p. 54). Poor Mundas keep away from the postcolonial developmental state on account of their long engagement with the ‘oppressive visions and policies of Hindu high-caste Biharis’ (p. 55) over the twentieth century. These visions and policies, as Shah shows in Chapter 3, support a ‘moral economy of corruption’ (de Sardan 1999) that cuts across the blurred boundaries between state officials and rural elites in Jharkhand. The state, always a fuzzy entity when viewed from below (Corbridge et al 2005), thus remains a familiar object of fear of suspicion for its rural subjects in these margins of modern India.

Away from the exploitative postcolonial state, poor Munda villagers turn to their inherited ‘sacral polity’, the *parha*. This is, Shah explains in Chapter 2, a democratic alternative to the modern state that is characterized by ‘mutual aid and reciprocity’ (p. 59). It is defined, above all, by the communitarian bonds between Munda men and women, youth and elders, who are, as their lore suggests, locked in endless combat with spirits (*bhuts*) who must be appeased and tamed. This is not too different from the kind of cosmological politics that David Graeber (2007) found among the Betafo of highland Madagascar. In both cases, sacrificial and other ritual relations with the spirit world serve to preserve the earthly communitas. Here, we encounter a clear contrast from the secularized state-centric worlds of indigeneity activists in Jharkhand. This contrast is most clearly seen in the activists’ approach to human-animal relations in rural Jharkhand (Chapter 4). Drawing on Edenic ‘[i]mages of environmental bliss among precolonial communities’ in India and elsewhere, contemporary indigeneity activists follow the colonial and postcolonial Indian states in imagining *adivasis* as ‘living in harmony with nature and worshipping it’ (p. 108). Yet it is important to acknowledge that Munda cosmology sees spirits, especially malevolent ones, assuming the form of flora and fauna, and traditional ways of managing landscapes have thus entailed an antagonistic relationship with wild animals such as tigers and snakes as well as inhospitable hill and forest environs. The typical tale of Munda settlement in Jharkhand valorizes forest-clearing (*khunt + katti*) (Singh 1978), and the colonial archive amply documents *adivasi* agency in ‘vermin eradiction’ initiatives undertaken by the Raj in the forests of eastern-central India (Sivaramakrishnan 1999: 90-107). Against this backdrop, it is hardly surprising to read in *ISS* that, even today, the residents of Bero are locked in an antagonistic relationship with marauding elephants in the area (pp. 111-14). In other words, as Shah argues, *adivasis* are anything but the Na’vi-like ‘eco-savages’ that state and activist discourses imagine them to be.

The basic problem with these all-too-common discourses about *adivasi* life, Shah shows, is their denial of agency and voice to those being represented. Academic ventriloquism, as champions of ‘subalternity’ and ‘resistance’ discovered with much dismay, has its peculiar dangers (Spivak 1988, Abu-Lughod 1992). Colonial and nationalist rulers, too, had deployed similar rhetorical tropes to buttress their wafer-thin claims to political authority. Those who are patronized in this manner, however, do have voices to express their dissent and the political agency to upset elite designs. In Chapter 5 of *ISS*, for instance, we get a sense of exactly how *adivasis* in Jharkhand can chase their aspirations away from the prying eyes of their well-meaning spokespersons. Young Munda men and women migrate seasonally to work in brick kilns outside Kolkata, where they experience much hardship but also the freedom to explore the city, fall in love, and, however intermittently, to craft their lives in ways that are not bound by traditional norms enforced by village elders back home. To indigeneity activists, these seasonal migrants are merely ‘victim[s] of poverty, dispossession and oppression, with little alternative but to leave the home area for the dry six months of the year in order to survive’ (p. 140). Yet migrant youth invariably describe their experience away from their homes as an ‘escape’ from the ‘claustrophobic restrictions…in the village’ because ‘life at the kilns is seen as free’ (pp. 138, 142-3). Migration also figures prominently, it ought to be noted, in the oral histories of *adivasi* communities in Jharkhand and beyond. There is, thus, an irresolvable tension here between the post-materialist agendas of activists and the ‘authentic’ victims for whom they speak. Anna Tsing (1999: 8) has argued that ‘authenticity is only an issue for those who yearn for it to complete their own imagined loss’. However, for *adivasi* migrants, as Shah explains, grappling with the politics of authenticity entails combating a curious conservatism that seeks to confine them to particular spaces even as they strive to escape to pursue their myriad trysts with modernity away from home.

*ISS* presents, in sum, an intimate portrait of *adivasi* lifeworlds and aspirations that are at odds with the well-meaning intentions of their state and non-state patrons. Maoist rebel groups, who have gained ground in Jharkhand over the past decade, are no different (Chapter 6). The Maoist Communist Centre (MCC), the leading rebel group in eastern India, expanded their operations in the area studied by Shah by offering rural elites a kind of ‘protection – both for access to the informal economy of the state, and from the possibilities of MCC’s own activities’ (p. 166). In the shadows of the state, such protection rackets confound our neat conceptual binaries separating the legal and illegal, state and anti-state, formal and informal (Roitman 2004: 14-22). Consider, for instance, how the MCC flexed its muscles to enable one of Shah’s rural interlocutors to secure a local state ‘contract’ that permitted him to ‘siphon off illicit money from state programs’ (p. 172). In this manner, Maoist activists, too, came to be enmeshed in local moral and political economies of corruption, and their attempts to adapt to local conditions by patronizing rural elites paradoxically reinforced existing social inequalities. Yet at least ‘the initial stages of MCC operations reveal little commitment to…[its] ideological reasoning among grass-roots supporters’ (p. 171). Once again, we encounter the familiar disjuncture between activist agendas and the everyday lives of the poorest *adivasis* in rural Jharkhand. Maoist activists are not very different in this regard from those who speak for *adivasis* in the idiom of indigeneity. Both class and culture, Shah argues, permit elite activists to engage in a politics of representation that reinforces the status quo and even intensifies the oppressive social conditions faced by *adivasis* in contemporary India.

*ISS* offers a cautionary tale of what can go wrong when activists pretend to know what is best for subordinated *adivasi* populations. Alpa Shah demonstrates persuasively that the best antidote to misguided activism is a critical ethnographic understanding of the joys and sorrows, trials and tribulations, aims and aspirations of those poorest individuals and groups whose voices rarely get heard in academic and policy circles. Such a close-to-the-ground understanding of subaltern politics paves the way for a truly radical politics that seeks to transform the structures of power and profit that entrap *adivasis* in India today.

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