Books

A ROGUE AND PEASANT SLAVE: Adivasi Resistance, 1800-2000 by Shashank Kela. Navayana Publishing, New Delhi, 2012.

ACTIVISTS and academics in contemporary India rarely appreciate each other's work. For most activists, academics are too caught up in arcane theoretical questions that carry little significance for those engaged in everyday social struggles. For academics, activists are too myopic to develop a critical understanding of the wider socio-cultural and historical contexts in which they work. Into this snake pit steps Shashank Kela with a monograph that seeks to bridge the discursive gap between activists and academics. Kela, who worked with the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) and the Khedut Mazdoor Chetna Sangath (KMCS) in Alirajpur from 1992 to 2004, asks what animates adivasi resistance to the modern Indian state over the past two centuries. For him, understanding the 19th century history of Bhil communities in the Nimar region of western Madhya Pradesh holds the key to understanding contemporary adivasi politics in India.

A Rogue and Peasant Slave (henceforth ARPS) is an ambitious book. It is true that we sorely lack comprehensive narratives connecting adivasi pasts to their present predicaments. It is also true that regions such as Nimar, Jharkhand, Bastar, and the Jangal Mahals are victims of internal colonialism in post-1947 India. We must, therefore, laud Kela's ambition to fill an existing gap in our understanding of adivasi history and politics by telling a tale that is rarely heard in Indian academic circles. After all, precious few among our academic pundits in India or abroad have lived and worked extensively in places such Nimar or Jharkhand. Kela draws on colonial archives, his own experiences in Nimar, and existing scholarship on adivasis in modern India to craft a well-written historical ethnography of adivasi-state encounters in Nimar from circa 1800 to the present.

Yet ARPS is also a cautionary tale of how non-fiction writing can fail to rise beyond polemics of an ideological kind. Kela's overarching narrative will be familiar to anyone who has worked among adivasis in contemporary India. Bhils in Nimar, he says, may have been in contact culturally and economically with plainsmen, but they nevertheless lived in isolated tribal habitats that supported their distinctly egalitarian and independent ways of life. Colonialism meant the imposition of an alien apparatus of the modern European state on tribal and non-tribal places alike, but the effects were most disastrous on tribal populations whose lands, livelihoods, and lifestyles were put at risk. Because colonialism privileged the 'civilized' plainsmen over the 'savage' forest-dweller, adivasi history in the 19th century is a story of relentless exploitation and iniquity that is matched by the courage and simplicity of closely-knit tribal communities under threat. If this is a familiar story, it is because it has been repeated by Christian missionaries and anthropologist-administrators down to defenders of indigenous rights in India today. Salvage anthropology of this nature rests on a primitivist ideology[1] whose apotheosis is the recent Hollywood film Avatar. To separate good and evil so neatly, selective aspects of reality need to be reified to the status of myth so that the moral foundations of one's politics are never in doubt. Such an ideological endeavour is, unfortunately, opposed inherently to critical thinking and an empirical knowledge of society and politics.

Broadly, two sets of problems present themselves in ARPS. First, consider Kela's view of tribal peoples and places as culturally, ecologically, and economically isolated from the rest of the subcontinent. He alleges that historians such as Sumit Guha, Ajay Skaria, and David Hardiman 'make a fetish of contact', miss how the 'spatial and technical limits of precolonial agriculture had preserved tribal religions despite the influence of Hinduism', conflate the categories of peasant and adivasi, and fail to understand that 'adivasi movements claim rights in districts where their precedence is not a matter of serious dispute' (pp. 27-29, 34). These allegations make a mockery of the empirical evidence available to us. Nimar and neighbouring Khandesh, being on 'the famous dakshinapath (road to the south) of ancient times', teemed with Buddhist, Saiva, and Jaina monastic orders, much like other so-called tribal habitats in Jharkhand and Orissa.[2] Kela himself mentions 'medieval Jain and Hindu temples…scattered amidst the Bhil villages' in Alirajpur, and that 'the juxtaposition… is an old one' (p. 78). Texts produced by these monastic orders refer explicitly to forest-

dwelling groups, often outcastes, who were enmeshed in socio-economic and cultural-religious exchanges with them. The isolationist line favoured by colonial administrators and indigeneity activists alike, is hard to sustain empirically. That 'tribes' may be secondary formations that arise during successive waves of state formation[3] is not apparent to the isolationist.

Additionally, Kela simply misunderstands Sumit Guha's insightful observation that, in the precolonial period, 'archipelagoes of tillage were found in a sea of modified woodlands and open savannah',[4] ecological zones as protean in character as the cultural identities of those living in them. Swidden agriculture, hunting or foraging are, thus, not so much traditional practices from a bygone era, as human adaptations to the demands posed by a particular environment.[5] There is not a shred of evidence to suggest that any group in India has been engaged in only one such activity, whether in the plains or hills, for millennia. The sharp distinction between peasant cultivators in the plains and forest-dwelling tribal non-cultivators is the logical counterpart of a racial anthropology that has equated plains with castes and forests with tribes since the 19th century. Regrettably, Kela falls right into this old colonial trap, utterly unmindful that his preference for a historically distinct tribal identity can be matched word for word in the colonial archives.

Second, Kela's conception of adivasi resistance suffers from the same defects that beset the Subaltern Studies collective in the 1980s and 1990s. Much like Ranajit Guha's overly romanticized account of tribal rebellion,[6] ARPS, too, pits entire tribal communities against the state. This is the left romantic's idea of resistance, and in our times, Arundhati Roy has emerged as the leading representative of this genre.[7] A more empirically grounded conception of resistance may be located in negotiations between adivasis and the state. The 'political agreements' that Kela derides emerge, on his own evidence, as the principal means by which Bhil chieftains and headmen negotiated their rights and payments (tankahs) in exchange for preventing raids and protecting passes for the colonial state. Often, these negotiations involved the use of force: Nadir Singh of Jamnia, for instance, received 'an annual stipend or tankah of 2,564 rupees from Holkar' and the right 'to the revenue of several villages in the kingdoms of Holkar, Dhar and Scindia' in recognition of his status. This is hardly an exceptional arrangement. After the Kol insurrection of 1831-32 in Chotanagpur, there were scores of similar negotiations between mundas and mankis, village headmen of different ranks, and Captain Thomas Wilkinson, the Governor-General's Agent. Subsequent raids described by Kela, however heroic they sound to him, seem to have had the more prosaic purpose of negotiating better terms with the Raj.

Negotiations with the colonial state, however, did not involve entire village communities. Neither did they emerge from a pristine 'adivasi consciousness' that sought to 're-establish an older balance of power' (pp. 98, 119). Kela's account shows clearly that negotiations were invariably led by either village headmen or naiks. This calls for a detailed sociology of rebellion that is conspicuous by its absence in ARPS. That a Badwani naik such as Bhima of Dhababwadi was also a witch-hunter (p. 144) suggests that, there as in Chotanagpur, dealing with internal enemies within the village was as important as negotiating terms with the Raj.[8] Often, the category of 'tribal rebellion' obscures the social processes by which old or new elites within adivasi villages seek to remake community for their own ends, whether in the days of Birsa Munda and Surmal Das or among youth who participate in and lead Maoist groups today. What Kela labels innocuously as 'cultural reform' may, as for the Tana Bhagats, become the basis for non-elites within the adivasi community to claim land, status, and power at the expense of incumbent elites.[9] Without a clear sense of internal stratification within adivasi villages, Kela's tendency to hitch 'resistance' to a mythical 'community' betrays activist simplifications whose ideological character is now well understood.[10]

Tellingly, the archival evidence presented in ARPS work against the ideological predilections of its author. This is arguably because 'much of the historical research' was done by the author's wife, not him (p. 16). Nonetheless, we can still discern the creativity of adivasi agency in negotiating the modern state. From the very onset of colonial rule, adivasi elites deployed the language and machinery of the modern state in ways that Kela fails to recognize. As early as 1832, a petition from village headmen to their colonial overlords reads: 'Let enquiries be instituted and whatever we are found to be entitled to, of huks, customs and lands be awarded to us – and a settlement be made for us' (p. 113). Noting the tone of defiance in this petition, we may note a direct parallel to the petitions written a generation later by Munda youth leaders in Chotanagpur. The Sardars, as they were popularly known, deployed the language and logic of colonial ethnography and law to make first-settler claims on the state and demand comprehensive settlement surveys. Those well-versed with the myriad forms of adivasi assertion today will be on familiar ground here. Whereas middle class activists

continue to pursue their post-materialist fantasies by patronizing imaginary tribal communities, modern adivasi subjects continue to wrestle with the state and stake claim to rights and resources that are justly theirs. ARPS offers glimpses of adivasi agency in negotiation, though it is, ultimately, hamstrung by the preconceived ideas of its author.

Uday Chandra

Footnotes:

1. Uday Chandra ‘Liberalism and its Other: The Politics of Primitivism in Colonial and Postcolonial Indian Law’, Law and Society Review (forthcoming).

2. Gail Omvedt, Seeking Begumpura: The Social Vision of Anti-Caste Intellectuals. Navayana Publishing, New Delhi, 2011, p. 110. On Jharkhand and Orissa, see, for example, Surendra Jha, Synthesis of Buddhist-Saiva and Sakta Tantras: An Unknown Siddhapitha Maluti. Pratibha Prakashan, New Delhi, 2009, and Thomas E. Donaldson, Iconography of the Buddhist Sculpture of Orissa. 2 volumes. Abhinava Publications, New Delhi, 2001.

3. Morton H. Fried, The Notion of Tribe. Cummings Publishing Company, Menlo Park, 1975.

4. Sumit Guha, Environment and Ethnicity in India, 1200-1991. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, p. 40.

5. For an elaboration of this argument in two vastly different contexts, see Edwin Wilmsen, Land Filled With Flies: A Political Economy of the Kalahari. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1989 and James C. Scott, The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia. Yale University Press, New Haven, 2009, pp. 178-282.

6. Ranajit Guha, Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India. Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1983.

7. Alpa Shah, ‘Eco-incarceration?: "Walking With The Comrades"?’ Economic and Political Weekly, 26 May 2012.

8. Shashank S. Sinha, ‘Adivasis, Gender and the "Evil Eye": The Construction(s) of Witches in Colonial Chotanagpur’, Indian Historical Review 33(1), pp. 127-149.

9. Sangeeta Dasgupta, ‘Reordering of Tribal Worlds: Tana Bhagats, Missionaries and the Raj’, Ph.D Dissertation, Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 1998.

10. Alpa Shah, In the Shadows of the State: Indigenous Politics, Environmentalism, and Insurgency in Jharkhand, India. Duke University Press, Durham, 2010.