

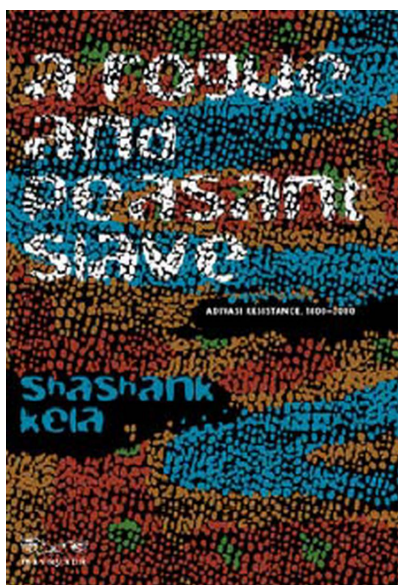
## OTHER

## Victims of development

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**A Rogue and Peasant Slave:****Adivasi Resistance, 1800-2000**

By Shashank Ke

Navayana, New Delhi, 2012.

**Pages: 392****Price: Rs.595**

Infused by his activist, non-neutral perspective, Kela narrates the historical roots of the Adivasis predicament today.

EVERY once in a while, an activist produces an academic work. Or perhaps I should put it the other way around: an academic writes with perspectives that are infused by his or her activist background. The result, either way, is a book that is not only scholarly and competent in its research, but also unafraid of taking positions, shunning any attempt to be apologetically neutral.

Shashank Kela's *A Rogue and Peasant Slave* excels in being solid in both facts and analysis, while also being strongly relevant to the real life situation of some of India's most marginalised populations.

Based on personal experiences of working in Adivasi-related movements and on extensive understanding of primary and secondary sources, the first part of the book is a rich, nuanced history (1818-1947) of the Bhil Adivasis in the Nimar region of Madhya Pradesh.

The main focus is on what colonial policies and politics did to this group and how the Bhils responded. The second part of the book then expands into the wider experience of Adivasis in India, especially resulting from state-led policies of development and assimilation in the late colonial and post-colonial phase (1900 to the present).

Kela begins by asserting that Adivasis can be considered distinct from agricultural castes, despite what some scholars have said about the essential similarities between the two. A substantial dependence on forests, modes of production largely based on hunting-gathering, small-scale or shifting cultivation, and socio-political systems that are relatively independent (even if influenced from outside) are elements of this distinct identity.

It is important to realise this to understand how colonial and independent India's policies have impacted Adivasis differently from agricultural caste communities.

In eight subsequent chapters, Kela provides a fascinating account of Bhil society and livelihoods and changes in these over a 150-year period of colonial rule. A number of relevant aspects are described: the political and economic differences amongst various subdivisions of the Bhils inhabiting different parts of the central Indian hills and valleys; the long history of conscious autonomy and relative

independence from surrounding peasant societies and kingdoms in pre-colonial times; the assertion of territorial authority over their region; the practice of raiding nearby communities, especially in times of scarcity; the institution of chieftains as fluid leadership within a relatively non-hierarchical set-up; and the predominance of cooperation in production systems, amongst others.

Kela then examines the impact of colonial rule on the Bhils. Steeped in their own cultures of political hierarchy and idea of being civilised, successive British administrations viewed the Bhils as wild people who had to be subdued. This was initially attempted by aiding non-Adivasi elite of the region, who anyway shared their cultural biases against Adivasis and were glad to have a powerful ally to deal with Adivasi excesses in the form of raids. As this was not entirely successful, attempts were made to divide and rule, by enlisting willing Adivasis into a special Bhil Corps and entering into agreements with willing chieftains (naiks). Additionally, Bhil raids were increasingly treated as rebellions against British rule, and at times dealt with through brutal reprisals; increasingly, the tribe came to be labelled as criminal (a label that survived well past Independence).

Post-1845, policies began to change, with the administrations Bhil Agents role being transformed from that of a bridge between the local rulers and the Bhils into that of a kind of potentate to whom obedience had to be rendered. In 1857, a series of raids and attacks by the Bhils (using the Mutiny as an opportunity, though there is no evidence of any collusion between the uprisings leaders and the Bhils) shook the British, and temporarily their hold on the region was loosened. But there followed even more brutal reprisals, the establishment of a permanent military outpost in the hills, and specific targeting of the naiks. This is the time of the legendary Bhim and Khajia chieftains, both of whom resisted colonial impositions but were ultimately defeated.

The final phase of 1875 onwards saw a marked step-up in colonial presence in the region. Political and military power was supplemented with fiscal policies that imposed taxes on individual cultivators, forest produce, liquor, village products, and livestock sale. All these went into the coffers of the local Rajput rulers; the post of village patwari was created to make collections efficient. Taxes were imposed even in drought years, leading to famine-like situations. While sahuikars (moneylenders) may have existed even in earlier times, it is in this period that even the ordinary Bhil, who otherwise lived relatively non-monetised lives, went into serious debt. All this provided the fodder for a rebellion by the Bhils in the Alirajpur area, but it only achieved some minor relaxation in the taxes. Simultaneously, 1880 onwards, forests began to be enclosed and governed by a centralised forest department. And increasingly, Bhils were forced to take to settled agriculture, easier to control and tax by the administration, and non-Adivasis from outside were enabled to cut forests and start farming.

The period 1875 to 1925 witnessed a drastic change in Bhil society, economy and polity. Kela says: The chief elements of the traditional economic ensemble were eroded through warfare, enclosure, and taxation. To top the list of external influences, the Bhils also faced increasing acculturation by caste society.

In modern India

The second part of Kelas book takes a more pan-Indian view of the last phase of colonialism (1918-1947), and of the impact of Indias development policies and Adivasi politics after Independence. Though the canvas is nation-wide, most of the focus is on central and eastern India, with Jharkhand being singled out for more detailed treatment than other regions.

Similar to the significantly enhanced intervention in Adivasi areas seen in Nimar, the last phase of colonialism saw a huge impact on Adivasi regions in most parts of India. Territories hitherto predominantly inhabited by Adivasis were opened up, forcibly, for settlement by outsiders; the forest department took over more and more lands and carried out timber felling to levels never seen before; and Adivasi rebellions and protests were brutally put down. The result was widespread loss of livelihoods, forced sedentarisation on the one hand and massive distress emigration on the other, and periodic bouts of drought and famine. Overall, the traditional biases of the cultivating castes, Rajput rulers, and other dominant parts of Indian society towards Adivasis (barbaric, uncivilised) were added to their characterisation as backward in comparison to the modernisation and development taking place in the rest of society. There was increasing stress on acculturation through both revivalist and reform movements, including Hinduisation, or anti-liquor and anti-meat campaigns, or a stress on mainstream education. The latter, ironically, did help in some Adivasi self-assertion movements such as the demand for a Jharkhand State by the Adivasi Mahasabha, but

strikingly, even its leader, Jaipal Singh, tended to discard old Adivasi ways and adopt more Hinduised ones. Meanwhile, the Congress mostly considered Adivasi movements and demands as being anti-national, and while Gandhi himself was more pluralistic, his followers wanted to reform Adivasis often in the Hindu mould.

The only dissonance, if it can be called that, was that of some anthropologists who portrayed Adivasi cultures as being a valuable part of India's cultural diversity. Some, like Verrier Elwin, argued for allowing them to forge their own paths (though even he abandoned this in the case of the north-eastern tribal peoples).

Kela briefly compares the impact of this period on Adivasis with what happened to cultivating castes and Dalits. He notes that while colonial policy tended to reduce the political influence of the rural elite and landed peasantry, it created a prosperous, aspiring middle class, conflicts between the upper and backward castes in the race to join the state in sharing power, and aggregations of smaller social units into larger caste conglomerations with significant subsequent political impact. In the case of Dalits, agricultural commercialisation, industries, and infrastructure such as railways provided avenues to escape from their traditionally oppressive conditions, and the intellectual space for emancipation (though not necessarily reflected in any significant economic change). In both the cases, therefore, the impact was different from what happened to Adivasis.

Post-Independence, the lot of Adivasis did not change much. The people who replaced the British belonged to the same sections that viewed Adivasis as backward and primitive, so even though there was some special treatment built into the Constitution, in practice they continued to be discriminated against. Adivasi demands for political independence in central and north-eastern India were mostly ignored, and centralised bureaucratic controls (for example, over forests) were continued or even enhanced. Jawaharlal Nehru remained ambivalent, but, for the most part, convinced about the need to bring Adivasis into the mainstream, a view that was manifest in policies post-Independence. Policies and practices of development, focussing on rapid industrialisation, alienated more land from Adivasis, including in areas where all activities were supposed to be only for their benefit (for example, for the Tata Steel plant in Jharkhand), and widespread incursions of non-Adivasis in such areas were allowed. In tribal heartlands such as Jharkhand and Bastar, Adivasis were reduced to minorities, cultivators transformed into agricultural or industrial labour, and forced displacement and dispossession became commonplace.

Meanwhile, the cultural mainstreaming of Adivasis continued apace. Hindu right-wing parties and organisations gained greater foothold in their territories, and even the organisers of movements such as the Adivasi Mahasabha and the Adivasi Ekta Parishad used Hinduised imagery. The official policy of reservations resulted in recruiting the Adivasi middle class into structures of power and patronage. A viciously cynical campaign by the Chhattisgarh government to arm Adivasi youth against Maoists resulted in further divisions. Jharkhand's creation was hardly an Adivasi triumph, as non-Adivasis were in the majority and the first government was formed by the BJP. No genuine decentralisation to the masses of Adivasis was ever achieved.

And yet, Kela notes, Adivasi resistance has continued. The Jharkhand Party first and later the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha mobilised Adivasis on a large scale; Maoism provided an opportunity for Adivasis to regain lands or forest access. None of these, however, has had lasting benefits for the mass of Adivasis. In more recent times, two kinds of movements have emerged: the Adivasi mass organisation and the spontaneous Adivasi movement. The former, illustrated by the Shramik Sanghatana and the Kashtakari Sanghatana in Maharashtra and the Khedut Mazdoor Chetna Sangath and the Adivasi Mukti Sanghatana in Madhya Pradesh, is characterised by a mix of Adivasi and non-Adivasi organisers carrying out struggles on issues of land and forest rights or protesting against government harassment. The latter includes movements against displacement and dispossession, led mostly by Adivasis themselves for example, in Koel Karo, Kashipur, Kalinganagar and Niyamgiri and has proved to be more resilient.

Interestingly, Adivasi movements have not linked up to, or been supported significantly by, the organised Left. According to Kela, this is perhaps due to its tendency to stick to the orthodox understanding of social and economic transformation and a reluctance to see the fundamental contradictions of the dominant development paradigm.

Adivasi movements in recent times have had to deal with a number of challenges: forging their own

identity, especially when intertwined with the politics of non-Adivasis; confronting internal differences and inequities; integrating conservation ethics into the language of rights; and trying to forge a larger platform, overcoming the geographically dispersed and culturally diverse nature of Adivasi communities. Yet, they have been and remain an important part of the overall struggles against the destructive development brought about by the excesses of contemporary capitalism, imparting such struggles with their own flavour.

#### Contemporary relevance

Kelas work is undoubtedly academic in nature, but much of the book is refreshingly free of jargon. Flow and readability do not suffer even in the more theoretical and conceptual parts of the analysis, and some parts (like the account of Bhima Naik's war against the British) read like a racy thriller. Nor does Kela gloss over the nuances and greys of the situations he describes, including the internal divisions and conflicts within Adivasi society; many accounts of the Adivasi-colonial interface tend to be more black and white. A crucial part of the narrative and analysis is the role of the non-Adivasi elite and middle classes, which, with some exceptions, sided with the colonial state and then with the equally elite independent Indian state.

Kelas account of several Adivasi and related movements and events outside his study area of Nimar is brief, perhaps necessarily so given the scope of the book. But this does give a lingering impression that perhaps nuances and greys are glossed over and the implications of these movements are not fully brought out. Given this, the interesting distinction that Kela draws between mass and spontaneous Adivasi movements gets less than comprehensive treatment. Curiously, significant developments resulting from Adivasi (and other) movements such as the Forest Rights Act, with the potential to return some governance over territories to Adivasis, are not mentioned.

Finally, the last chapter in which the author presents some personal vignettes is evocative, even at times poetic, but one wishes he had found ways to integrate these memories and anecdotes into the main narrative. As they stand, they appear to be disjointed, random notes from the field. These, however, are somewhat minor faults of the book. Kela has transcended academic barriers to present a narrative that brings together historical, contemporary, sociological, cultural, and environmental aspects of a complex reality. It is also a narrative that is, most importantly, humane.

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