

# Fractured Communities



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Adivasi Histories and the  
Politics of Power

Umar Khalid

 juggernaut

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*To  
Robith Vemula and Gauri Lankesh,  
who fought resolutely in their lives, and continue to inspire  
millions even today*



'The most beautiful thing for those who have fought a whole life is to come to the end and say; we believed people and life, and life and the people never let us down.'

— OTTO RENE CASTILLO



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## List of Abbreviations

Admin.	Administration
Agri.	Agriculture
App.	Appendix
Assist.	Assistant
BSA	Bihar State Archives
DCRR	District Collectorate Record Room
Col.	Colonel
Commnr.	Commissioner
Dep.	Deputy
Dept.	Department
Desp.	Despatch
For.	Forests
Front.	Frontier
Gen.	General
Gov.	Governor
Govt.	Government
GOI	Government of India
Jt.	Joint
Jud.	Judicial
L.P.	Lower Provinces
Let.	Letter
Lt.	Lieutenant
No.	Number
Offic.	Official
Officiat.	Officiating

Para.	Paragraph
Polit.	Political
Proc.	Proceeding(s)
Rep.	Report
Resol.	Resolution
Rev.	Revenue
S.W.	South-West
Secy.	Secretary
Settl.	Settlement
Spl	Special
Transl.	Translation
Vol.	Volume
WBSA	West Bengal State Archives
Yr.	Year

# Foreword

*Ramachandra Guha*

Early romantic crushes rarely endure, but early scholarly interests often do. I began my career as a historian of forest communities whose lives were rudely disrupted by British colonial rule. Though I have since meandered off in other directions, I have always retained a connection to the field I first began to till. It was therefore with great interest that I recently read a doctoral thesis by a young scholar, which explores the social and environmental history of what is now the state of Jharkhand. This scholar is named Umar Khalid who, in one of those tragic ironies in which history abounds, has become known not for his scholarship but for having spent almost six years in prison without bail under a draconian law altogether unworthy of a country that claims to be a constitutional democracy.

Hopefully, with the publication of this book, at least some attention will refocus on Umar Khalid the scholar. Khalid's dissertation, and hence this book, deals with the transformations of Adivasi society in the region of Singhbhum under the British rule. It first documents how the East India Company steadily acquired military and administrative control over the territory. It then examines how colonialism radically reshaped the natural landscape, the legal framework, and the economic and political structures

of Singhbhum. Among the important themes covered in this book are the commercial biases of colonial forest policy, the changing status of village headmen who had to negotiate with the new order, and the responses of tribal communities to the transformation in their lives that colonial rule wrought. While focusing on ecology, society and politics, Khalid also pays due attention to intellectual history, presenting insightful analyses of the works of both European officials and Indian anthropologists on the tribals of Singhbhum.

There are six significant attributes that this work by Umar Khalid displays, which I discuss below:

First, an authoritative command of the literature on Adivasis by previous writers, both well known and obscure, whether on the tribes of Jharkhand or on the tribes of other parts of India. Second, the ability to locate and use a wide range of primary sources. The book now in your hands draws on an enormous amount of research in national, state and district archives, and in obscure essays and books published more than a century ago. Third, the willingness to acquire supplementary knowledge through fieldwork in the region under study. Umar Khalid seems to have taken to heart the dictum of the great French historian Marc Bloch that a historian needs thicker boots as well as thicker notebooks. Fourth, an eye for vivid quotations from primary sources to illustrate his arguments. This, for example, is a British official in the nineteenth century writing about a hunt in the forests, and presenting a colourful picture of an apparently unchanging tribal life: 'Here are the ever dancing and singing Sontals, dressed out in flowers and feathers, with flutes ornamented with streamers made of pith, the wild Kurrias, or hill men, from the Luckisinee hills in Borahbhoom; the Koormies, Taunties, Soondees, Gwallas, Bhoomijes &c, with sonorous "dammas" or kettle drums, and other uncouth music, armed with swords, bulwas, and bows and

arrows of every description; the Hos, simple and unpretending, but with the heaviest game bags ...'

Another quote, from a century later and sourced from a file in the archives, has a participant in the Non-Cooperation Movement of the 1920s saying (in translation): 'Swaraj has now been attained and Gandhi is head of it. The English are leaving the country and the few Englishmen in Chaibasa would run away in three or four months' time. ... No rents would be paid. Gandhi Mahatma would establish a school and the schools of Government would be destroyed. No fees would be paid in Gandhi's school'. Fifth, the ability to write up his material in clear and often compelling prose, with little academic jargon. Khalid clearly has a curious and deeply inquiring mind. Moreover, unlike some of his peers, he recognizes that history is a branch of literature as well as of social science. Sixth, a nuanced and subtle elaboration of his arguments. Khalid is particularly careful not to reproduce the stereotypes of tribal life common to colonial officials and contemporary activists. He provides a thoughtful critique of writings that present a straight line between tribal protests in the colonial era and the present, 'as having been prompted by the modern state's disturbance of the previously idyllic custom-based world of the Adivasis'. Khalid speaks of how these writings are guilty of 'essentializing Adivasis as homogeneous communities operating through age-old and unchanging customs and traditions'. His own research, on the other hand, shows that while many Adivasis 'resist the incursions of the state', other 'sections of them also collaborate with it; some also negotiate to enhance their standing vis-à-vis others in their communities'.

Altogether, this was one of the most accomplished doctoral dissertations that I have read, and I am delighted that it is now appearing in book form. However, I must note that Khalid is one of many fine, upright men and women who have languished

in jail under dubious charges hastily filed by the police under orders from their political masters. Some of these Indians are also scholars and researchers. Others are social workers and civil society activists who, in their life and work, have shown themselves to be steadfastly committed to non-violence and the founding values of the Indian Constitution. It is this commitment to pluralism and democracy, and perhaps nothing else, that has made them fall foul of the authoritarian and majoritarian tendencies of the ruling regime. These remarkable young compatriots of ours have thus come to spend their best years in dark, dingy and insalubrious prisons, when they could be contributing so much to the life of our Republic. It is surely past time that our judges find the decency and the courage to deliver the freedom that is currently denied to them all.

Umar Khalid's friends and colleagues have recently published a collection of writings by and about him. This book, called *Umar Khalid and His World*, presents a moving portrait of the scholar in his current predicament as a prisoner of the Indian State. The volume contains several quite detailed descriptions of the arduous conditions of prison life in our country: the oppressive heat, the insanitary facilities, the loneliness and neglect and, not least, the fear and paranoia felt by prisoners during the years and months of the Covid pandemic.

His scholarship apart, Umar Khalid is an individual of enormous courage and an unquenchable zest for life. To illustrate this, I can do no better than quote his description of the unexpected benefits of being incarcerated. In a letter to a friend in September 2022, Khalid remarked: 'For all its hardships, jail has also led to several "positive" changes in my life. I have quit smoking. For two years I have lived without a mobile phone, which means I am over that other drug too – social media. I came here with the concentration span of a

tweet, but now I read several novels every month. And finally, after several years of trying, my sleep cycle is back in place (my mother would be glad to hear this).’

I have never met or spoken with Umar Khalid myself. However, on one day in December 2019, we both took part in a peaceful countrywide protest against a discriminatory law, he in Delhi and I in Bengaluru. In the years since, I have sometimes wondered at the different paths our lives have taken, and the reasons for this. Have I been able to carry on my research and writing whereas he has not because my first name is Ramachandra and not Umar?

Both as a historian and as a citizen, I deplore Umar Khalid’s extended and cruel incarceration. I hope that he may soon be freed so that he can resume his scholarship and writing, and give us other books that take forward the themes of *Fractured Communities* in fruitful directions.



# Acknowledgements

Almost a decade spent at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) draws to a close. Time, as usual, has flown like a whirlwind. I consider myself extremely lucky to have been able to spend a third of my life here. I feel so even more today considering that public education itself is fast being turned into a relic of the past. The present dispensation in the country and its foot soldiers in the administration are unabashedly attempting to accomplish their mission of shutting down JNU. But if anything these years spent at JNU have taught me, it is to seek possibilities in the most difficult of situations; it is to be audacious in our hopes. I leave this space with immense hopes from the student movement of JNU, of which I am extremely proud to have been a part. Notwithstanding all the lies and attacks, JNU will not only survive but will play its part in bringing down the fascist forces currently at the helm.

It is therefore pertinent that I first of all acknowledge this entity called JNU that has shaped me for life. This university, for me, as for anyone else who has studied or taught here, is not just an abstract entity. Its life and soul stand for certain values and convictions. It teaches you to interrogate not just the world but also yourself constantly. As we fought over the years to democratize this university, we also strived to move an inch towards the much more difficult process of democratizing ourselves. And of course, JNU also teaches you to speak truth to power, which the ruling dispensation would do well to realize only gets strengthened in the face of their attacks. I

wish to thank each and every constituent of this university – be it the students, teachers, workers, guards, shopkeepers, staff, *karamcharis* – who have helped me in this direction.

Never have I invested so much thought, energy and time in something as in the present work, while there has been so much uncertainty surrounding it. Even as I write this acknowledgement, I am not sure whether I will be allowed by the JNU administration to submit this thesis. But another thing that JNU has taught me is that education and research cannot be reduced to a mere paper degree. The goal in undertaking this research was never that. If the present work can clear the way for a more nuanced understanding of the present struggles of the Adivasis in Jharkhand, I would be more than content. The social worth of education is therefore the teaching I take from JNU. However, had it not been for the constant support of many people, I would not have been able to pull through this work.

An eccentric and irregular student like me was extremely fortunate to have a most tolerant and encouraging supervisor in Dr Sangeeta Dasgupta. I missed many deadlines, postponed my presentations, went missing for months, but she was not only bearing of all of it but also stood by me at one of the most difficult junctures in my life. At a time when several people were hell-bent on demonizing me, she humanized my image in front of the world through her article in the Indian Express. In 2010, when I took up her course as an MA student, I had several incoherent and, as I now understand, naive ideas about the Adivasis and their past. Conversations with her have not only broadened and nuanced many of these ideas but have also pushed me to interrogate what I initially held to be the most politically convincing ideas but which lacked intellectual rigour. She and Dr Padmanabh also welcomed me to their home for conversations that went beyond the academic.

I also want to acknowledge Prof. Neeladri Bhattacharya, whose lectures on ‘Historical Methods’ made me attentive to

several significant dimensions of history writing. Prof. Tanika Sarkar's lectures on religion made me aware of the need to look beyond what appears on the surface, and this helped me considerably while reading the archives. Prof. Rajat Datta not only bailed me out from jail and welcomed me into his home but has also kept his wit alive in these otherwise difficult times for the university. I also want to thank Prof. Aditya Mukherjee, Prof. Mridula Mukherjee and other professors of Centre for Historical Studies, and also teachers from other centres of JNU who have stood by me. I also want to thank all other teachers from different schools and centres, and the JNUTA, which led from the front and took away the fog of fear that had descended upon the university in February 2016.

I wish to acknowledge the immense help provided by Prof. Carol Upadhyay and Dr. Joseph Bara. In the last phase of my PhD, when I could no longer travel for reasons beyond my control to conduct my fieldwork, they were kind enough to share with me some of the primary materials. These materials have been crucial in finishing this work. Conversations with Dr A.K. Sen in Chaibasa helped me acquaint myself with the extremely rich district record room there.

The team of lawyers – Jawahar Raja, Chinmay Kanojia, Gautam Bhatia, Shahana, Trideep Pais, Vrinda Bhandari as well as Akhil Sibal, Rebecca John and Kamini Jaiswal – brought us out of jail and then kept us safe from the vindictive actions of the JNU VC. Anandji was always kind enough to greet me with a smile despite all the time that I kept him waiting at the courts. I wish to apologize to him here, with a promise to reach on time in the future to sign my petitions.

Apeksha, Amir, Albert, Baasit, Chepal, Jatin, Hamid and Shubham have been comrades in arms in Bhagat Singh Ambedkar Student Organization, from whom I have learnt a lot in the struggles we have fought together. Aswathi, beyond just being a comrade, has also been a fellow traveller in this

arduous task of writing a PhD, and both of us now need to figure out what to do in our lives. The fact that she is as visionless as I am about what to do next is reassuring as we both now step out of JNU. Over the years, Ufaque remains one of the closest friends that I have had in JNU, and her help was crucial in the completion of this PhD. Rajat and Azram have been people who have helped me understand the importance of detachment for the purpose of any analysis – be it an ongoing struggle on the campus or academic work. Priyaranjan remains the big boss, my go-to person for any advice on anything under the sun for the last nine years. I have had some of the most intellectually stimulating conversations with him, some of which also reflect in this work. Over the years, I have borrowed so many ideas and expressions from fellow history-sheeter, historian, ‘seditionist’ and comrade AnirBan that it is difficult for me now to say whether any of my ideas are my own. We have spent so much time together, but the time spent together in Tihar Jail with him will remain the most memorable. I have irritated him many times, but he has remained rock-solid by me every single time.

Komal, Chanya, Anwasha, Reyaz, Rubina and Kanupriya are friends and comrades who have strengthened me and each other in difficult times. Muntaha and Sagrika have kept checking on me over the past few months about the progress of this work and pushed me back to work when I tended to drift away. Akash and Preeti, along with me, are some of the survivors at the Centre for Historical Studies who have stayed on over the years and marched in defence of history. When I try to recall the first seven out of the nine years spent at JNU, I can only remember being involved in acrimonious debates with Kanhaiya, Rama, Fayyaz, Shehla, Mohit, Chintu, Anant, Ashutosh, Shweta, Sucheta, Suresh and many others as to how their idea of revolution was wrong and ours was correct. But when fascist forces sought to attack us, all of us stood and

fought back from the same side of the barricade. Samim Da has captured numerous historical moments of the last two years in JNU and has treated me to biryani and tea whenever I was tired and down and out.

Ammi and Baba taught me the value of standing up for one's convictions no matter what, and it is this teaching that has strengthened me over the last few years. They have not only been extremely supportive in letting me pursue the decisions I have made for my life but have also never asked me to withdraw from anything out of fear of consequences for them or for me. I also wish to thank my sisters, Maryam, Kulsum, Zainab, Ayesha, Sarah, and my brothers-in-law, Abdul and Monis, for being strong pillars of love and support.

I possibly cannot thank Buno enough for the manner in which she tolerates my idiosyncrasies with such love and care. Her support has been crucial not only in my writing this PhD but also in standing up and fighting every time the tides have been tough.

Lastly, I also wish to acknowledge the present regime and its foot soldiers for instilling in me the resolve to go through the extremely difficult task of writing a PhD. Every time they attacked me and my comrades, it only strengthened my resolve to finish this work. As we smiled and fought back their attacks, we were reminded of the following words of Rumi:

In the slaughterhouse of love, they kill only the best, none of the weak or the deformed. Don't run away from this dying, whoever is not killed for love is already dead meat.

Needless to say, the responsibility for all the errors in the work remains mine.

July 2018

Syed Umar Khalid



## Introduction

Towards the close of 2014, I was in Ranchi for my fieldwork for the present study when the results of the Jharkhand State Assembly Elections were declared. For a state beleaguered by factional alliances, the midterm collapse of previous governments and the imposition of President's Rule thrice, the election results were unusual. It was the first time that a pre-poll alliance between the BJP and All Jharkhand Students' Union (AJSU) managed to secure a majority in the state assembly. The BJP then went on to do something further unusual – they appointed Raghubhar Das, a person who did not belong to any of the communities categorized as Scheduled Tribe, as the chief minister of the state. For the supporters of the new government, the victory of the BJP–AJSU represented the 'final dawn of stability in the state,<sup>1</sup> and Raghubhar Das's appointment a challenge to the traditional entitlements of power'.<sup>2</sup> However, the mood among certain activists that I interacted with in Ranchi, from from various organizations involved in mobilizing people against displacement due to several so-called developmental projects, was quite sombre. For them, the choice of a 'non-tribal/outsider' for the post of the CM was a declaration of the 'anti-Adivasi' (*Adivasi virodhi*) intent on the part of the new government. Another prominent activist in Jharkhand, Dayamani Barla, was cited in the press calling this choice an affront to the legacy of Jharkhand and the decades-long movement that had led to its creation.<sup>3</sup> The

stability of the government was also not necessarily seen as positive, and these activists pointed out that the ruling party was no longer dependent on allies to carry out far-reaching changes. As I sat in one of their meetings, I heard members, who had come from different parts of Jharkhand, forewarn of an escalation of the 'attack' on the Adivasis. Invariably, the discussion would come down to the corporate scramble for land in Jharkhand. Just a few weeks before my arrival in Ranchi, massive farmers' protests across the country had forced the central government to retreat on its amendments, via an ordinance, to the Land Acquisition Act. Citing this, these activists feared that the new government would now zero in on the land laws of Jharkhand, most specifically the Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act (CNTA) and the Santhal Pargana Tenancy Act (SPTA).

These two acts were introduced by the British in the backdrop of the Munda Ulgulan (in 1908) and the Santhal Hool (in 1855) as an attempt to safeguard tribal rights to land and forests vis-à-vis 'non-tribals/outsideers'. They sought to give statutory recognition to Adivasi claims to land and forests, which were seen as being closely tied to their customs and traditions, and safeguarded them against alienation and transfer. One of the leading activists of the protests, in his speech, pointed out that big businesses were now eyeing these lands in Jharkhand, rich in minerals, and that this was the reason they ensured that the person closest to them was appointed as the CM. 'This is the return of Company Raj to Jharkhand,' one of the speakers concluded with this forewarning, and the meeting ended with a plan of agitations across different districts of Jharkhand to save the most revered legacies of the *ulgulan* and the *hool*.

A leaflet distributed prior to the meeting, inviting people to attend it, had described the challenges of the present in the following words:

Under the leadership of Birsa Munda, Sidu-Kanu, Tilka Manjhi, Nilambar-Pitambar, Adivasi movements forced certain legislations (on the British), and using their rights put up a struggle to claim ownership of land that had been appropriated by the zamindars, traders, moneylenders, contractors, land mafia, mining mafia, etc and resisted land acquisition by government for various companies. Today, the government is trying to amend Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act and the Santhal Pargana Tenancy Act in order to facilitate land acquisition for various multinational corporations... The right over land produced through the CNTA was the result of the struggle by the masses, whereas the bureaucrats and politicians today are flouting this law to loot the land of the struggling Adivasis by hook and crook. Adivasis today with nothing in their hands except for the bows and arrows will have to rage a storm of mass movements against the loot of their land and resources.<sup>4</sup>

The fears of my hosts in Ranchi were not unfounded. After giving many indications, the BJP–AJSU government moved towards amending the CNTA and SPTA two years later. It first brought in an ordinance to amend the acts in May 2016. The ordinance did not receive Presidential nod, following which the ruling party, commanding an absolute majority, introduced and passed it in the state assembly. The amendments sought to ease several restrictions imposed by the two acts regarding the acquisition and transfer of land in the state. The changes led to massive protests across Jharkhand, precipitating a far-reaching crisis for the government. Opposition parties and their leaders – ironically including former CMs who had themselves tried to amend the CNTA during their tenure – now seized upon this moment to attack the government. Responding to the amendment, Babu Lal Marandi, for example, commented: ‘You

can't apply age-old mentality of land acquisition in tribal area which has always been hesitant to embrace non-tribal world.<sup>5</sup>

Beyond Jharkhand, platforms had sprung up even in the national capital to 'Save the CNTA/SPTA'. In popular perception, these changes were portrayed as a body blow to the Adivasi communities inhabiting Jharkhand and the breach of the 'last firewall' that protected them and their lands.<sup>6</sup> As people mobilized to save these legislations, memories and invocations of the past were conspicuous by their presence all around. A journalist reached the village of Birsa Munda, to witness the following scene:

Past the tamarind and jackfruit trees, and the hens and chickens flitting from hut to hut and across the road, men are gathering in the common hall of the village, marked by an arch that says 'The birthplace of Bhagwan Birsa Munda'. Children sit watching on the boundary wall, and gun-toting CRPF commandos in fatigues strut about. From within the hall is heard the voice of men solemnly pledging to fight against the amendments to the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act (CNTA) and Santhal Pargana Tenancy Act (SPTA)... The pledge is being read out in front of a statue of Dharti Aaba, or 'father of the earth', as the tribals have deified Birsa Munda.<sup>7</sup>

The outpouring of protestors on the streets was followed by outpouring of several quasi-historical writings that sought to explain the historical 'origins' and 'legacy' of the CNTA. To take one example, a journalist sought to answer the question as to 'why are the tribals angry over proposed changes' with the following historically informed explanation:

Land is at the core of tribal societies' survival. As per the customs of Munda and Santhal tribals, the ownership of

land belongs to all the families of the same *killi* (clan), who cleared the forest and made land cultivable. This age old custom provides an identity of being a Munda or Santhal and their country. The British fought many wars against tribals of Chotanagpur and Santhal Pargana for almost 100 years. They were unable to deal with continuous grievances of tribal against usurpation of their land rights. With the passage of time, the violence started getting lethal and spread like wildfire. It led to killing of thousands of tribals. The violence in Santhal Pargana came to halt after British came up with a different district administrative set up in 1855 to appease Santhals and redress their grievances. It had helped strengthening the sense of security among the tribals about their homeland. This different administrative set up culminated into separate act in 1949 as the SPT Act. Whereas, with the enactment of the CNT Act, the British tried to end the simmering discontent among the general population of Chota Nagpur Plateau. Given the fact that people of Chota Nagpur were greatly attached to their land assets, the CNT Act 1908 went a long way in establishing peace in the region.<sup>8</sup>

It was not for the first time that these tropes of difference and the mutual antagonism of tribals versus non-tribals were invoked. Right from the early decades of the twentieth century, the movement for the separate statehood of Jharkhand had repeatedly articulated that Jharkhand was an abode of the tribals, to whom it should be restored, and in whose interests it should be governed. Sanjay Basu Mallick articulated this view very clearly in his 'historical analysis' of the Jharkhand movement when he stated that the centuries-long conflict in Jharkhand is basically a conflict between two different social systems (tribal and non-tribal).<sup>9</sup> The Adivasis are represented as an 'other' to the people of caste societies, a homogenous

people, who share a symbiotic relationship and whose claim over resources are based on custom and traditions. Over the last decade and a half, as vast parts of the Adivasi hinterland have been embroiled in a civil war between the Maoists and the security forces of the state, these tropes of difference have neatly coalesced with another related theme. In several writings that emerged in response to the initiation of military operations against the Maoists in 2009, the Adivasi rebel (constituting the basic cadre of the Maoist guerrilla army) was represented as a modern incarnation of a primitive rebel, who, by standing up armed in defence of his commons, epitomizes the critique of modern capitalism and its individualistic values. In her celebrated essay *Walking with the Comrades*, based on her visit into the heart of the rebellion, noted writer Arundhati Roy sought to place the present Maoist movement within a trajectory of several tribal rebellions since the colonial period. In her words, the history of the 'resistance' of the tribal people in this part of the country predated the Naxalites, and their ideological inspiration, the Chinese communist leader Mao Tse-Tung, by several centuries. In a very evocative passage, she sought to mark off the distinctiveness of these (as a police officer told her) 'greedless'<sup>10</sup> people, in contrast to those who are waging a war on them. Describing the annual celebrations of the Bhumkal Revolt of 1908, Roy writes:

The sound of drums becomes deafening. Gradually, the crowd begins to sway. And then it begins to dance. They dance in little lines of six or seven, men and women separate, with their arms around each other's waists. Thousands of people. This is what they've come for. For this. Happiness is taken very seriously here, in the Dandakaranya forest. People will walk for miles, for days together to feast and sing, to put feathers in their turbans and flowers in their hair, to put their arms