

Alpa Shah: India is not a safe place any more

Monday 8 April 2024, by [JACOBSON Gavin](#), [SHAH Alpa](#) (Date first published: 23 March 2024).

Narendra Modi's Hindu supremacism is capturing major state institutions while repressing minority groups and political activists.

In March 1967, in the Indian village of Naxalbari, tucked in the foothills of the Himalayas, a revolutionary peasant organisation rebelled and forcibly seized land from landowners. Inspired by its actions, similar groups of "Naxalites" emerged across the country over the years that followed, with many strongholds located in the jungles and forests of central and eastern India. This was favourable terrain for guerrilla warfare. It also happened to be land under which some of [India's](#) richest mineral reserves lay – coal, bauxite, iron ore, and more.

In 2006, after claiming that Maoist groups were preventing large multinational corporations from accessing these resource-rich lands, the then prime minister Manmohan Singh launched a counter-insurgency operation, backed by attack helicopters, troops, special forces and vigilantes, to eliminate them. Villages were burned to the ground and their inhabitants murdered, incarcerated or dispossessed.

Under the premiership of [Narendra Modi](#), this counter-insurgency has been let loose across [the country](#). As Alpa Shah writes in *The Incarcerations: BK-16 and the Search for Democracy in India*, which is published in the UK this week:

"This repression, or the threat of it, is not just hidden in the remote Adivasi forests, but can descend on anyone anywhere, including the middle classes right in the heart of India's great cities. Maoist thought, and some Naxalite parties, have been part of mainstream political thinking and praxis in India for decades. However, now the 'urban Naxal' or 'urban Maoist' label is one that is used to tarnish anyone as "anti-national", and allows the application of anti-terror laws that enable incarceration without trial."

There have been plenty of comparisons made between Modi, a plebeian upstart with a disdain for elites, and reactionary strongmen around the world – characterised by majoritarianism, cocksmanship and brute manliness (Modi boasts of his 56-inch chest), thuggery and the demotic appeal to violence against minorities. But the comparisons, especially those with Donald Trump, tend to conceal the unrivalled extent to which the Modi regime has, since he came to power in 2014, captured the major institutions of state – the courts, the legislature, the media, the corporations, and civil society – as part of a plan to transform India into an ethno-religious nation known as the Hindu Rashtra.

Founded in 1925 by men infatuated with Italian fascism, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) – a cadre force that has no equivalent in the world and is the mother ship of Hindu nationalism – has become the most powerful organisation in India today. Alpa Shah calls it the head of a "multi-armed octopus". Among its affiliated groups is the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which has governed India for the past decade and which has, under Modi, been remaking India into an authoritarian, Hindu nationalist state. As the writer Arundhati Roy described it in 2019, the RSS:

“...has thousands of local branches and hundreds of thousands of dedicated ‘volunteers’ all over the country. Its people are now in place in almost every institution in the country. It has penetrated the army, intelligence services, courts, high schools, universities, banks. The institutions that made up what Turks call the ‘deep state’ are either entirely under its control or heavily influenced by it. India has become a country in which writers and intellectuals are assassinated in cold blood, and lynch mobs that regularly beat Muslims to death roam through the cities and villages, assured of impunity. RSS ideology – a peculiarly Indian brand of fascism – has transcended election cycles and will continue to be an existential threat to the fabric of the country, regardless of which political party is in power.”

Concerns about whether [Americans are threatened by fascism](#) appear to be of diminishing moment when held up against this real, existing fascism more than 8,000 miles away. Roy wrote a few years later: “What’s happening in India is not that loose variety of internet fascism. It’s the real thing.”

Modi has also turned India into a haven for invulnerable oligarchs, who in turn fund the BJP. [As the scholar Jairus Banaji has written](#), “New Capitalists are the most fervent supporters of prime minister Modi. This is the case among both bigger groups – Ambanis, Adani, Sunil Mittal (Airtel), Anil Agarwal (Vedanta), the Hinduja, and Sudhir Mehta of the Torrent Group – and some smaller and less solid ones (eg the media tycoon Subhash Chandra who recently lost control of his flagships, with Zee Entertainment passing to Sony)”.

Although India’s decision to turn itself into an attractive investment zone for capital took place in the 1990s, well before Modi came to power, oligarchic capitalism is a key foundation on which the BJP hegemony rests. As the historian of contemporary India Ravinder Kaur [has argued](#), “This great [economic] transformation activated a seemingly unlikely alliance between global capitalism and hyper-nationalism, a foundation on which 21st-century Hindu nationalism would begin taking shape.” Kaur continues:

“The infusion of capital promises progress and prosperity, and is a sign of the nation’s arrival on the world stage. Capital appears as a curative force that can efface the shame of colonial subjugation and violence, and redeem the nation’s lost glory via economic growth.

“Identity economy entails reimagining the nation as a commercial enclosure that can be put at the disposal of investors – its territory as a vast reservoir of untapped natural resources, its population as a “demographic dividend” that provides both labour and consumer markets to sustain growth, and its cultural essence to be turned into a corporate brand identity. Thus, the emergent nation form – the brand-new nation – is erected not just upon the scaffolding of economic growth, but also on the promise of civilisational glory and rejuvenation.”

Alpa Shah, the Kenyan-born and British-educated professor of social anthropology at the London School of Economics, is a leading scholar of India and arguably better placed than anyone to show where the sources of democratic renewal might emerge from within the grip of BJP rule. Her first book, *In the Shadows of the State* (2010), which drew on extensive ethnographic research in Jharkhand, provided a sobering critique of how the well-meaning work of indigenous and environmental activists unintentionally marginalises the region’s poorest people. She followed this up with her award-winning *Nightmarch* (2018), based on a seven-night trek that Shah undertook with [communist](#) guerrillas through the forests of eastern India, which showed why some of India’s poor have taken up arms to fight for a more just society.

The Incarcerations (2024) documents the chilling case of 16 human rights defenders – academics, lawyers, journalists and poets – who from 2018 were framed and then imprisoned on charges of instigating a riot in the small town of Bhima Koregaon, waging war against the Indian state and

plotting Modi's assassination. All of those arrested – Sudha Bharadwaj, Hany Babu, Jyoti Jagtap, Mahesh Raut, Ramesh Gaichor, Sagar Gorkhe, Rona Wilson, Shoma Sen, Varavara Rao, Stan Swamy, Anand Teltumbde, Gautam Navlakha, Sudhir Dhawale, Surendra Gadling, Vernon Gonsalves and Arun Ferreira – have spent their careers fighting for the rights of Muslims and the marginalised Adivasi and Dalits.

Shah exposes how the state engaged in a prolonged act of cyberwar against the so-called “BK-16”, hacking their emails and implanting incriminating evidence on their computers in order to prosecute them. It is the best book I've read about the full-scale assault on [democracy](#) in India, and with the general elections scheduled to conclude in June, it's essential reading for an understanding of what is happening to the country right now.

On 18 March I met Shah at her office at the London School of Economics.

Gavin Jacobson: When did you decide to write a book about the BK-16?

Alpa Shah: It was around the middle of the Covid lockdowns in 2020. I had just tragically lost my very dear colleague, [David Graeber](#), and I was in a rather dark place. In the middle of all that, I had a message from one of the HarperCollins editors of *Nightmarch*, who said, “this is a book that we really need, and you're the person to write it”. I was initially reluctant, but a number of the people who have been incarcerated in the BK case are people whose scholarship I deeply appreciate, who had advised research projects that I've run here out of London, who I'd invited to give keynote speeches at our conferences, whose work as intellectuals has been crucial to the development of my own thinking, understanding and analysis.

So over time, I thought I had to find a way to do it. I began working on the book in bits and pieces around the time that the Jesuit priest Stan Swamy was incarcerated in October 2020. [His tragic death in judicial custody in July 2021](#) compelled me to really commit to it.

The project grew as I realised that the work of these activists told the whole story of a fight for democracy for India's most marginalised people – Adivasi, Dalits, and Muslims – and while I don't want to idealise the history of Indian democracy, the BK case also told the whole story of the collapse of what was a fairly thriving democratic culture. The research took me into new areas that I never imagined I would end up investigating, such as a riot in the middle of Bhima Koregaon, a town I had never heard of before, the takeover of the media and the collapse of the judiciary, as well as cyber forensics, which showed how the evidence used to prosecute the BK-16 had been planted on their computers.

GJ: What are the main intellectual concerns that connect your previous works - *In the Shadows of the State* and *Nightmarch* - to this latest one?

AS: One is the relationship between the state and capital. All of these BK activists who were fighting for various rights in different ways, whether it was through their writing, or the legal cases they took on in the courts, or the movements that they were supporting on the ground, were confronting the nexus between the state and capital. Related to this is the relationship between the state, capital and race, and how this impacts India's most marginalised and racially discriminated populations. That is an abiding concern of all of my work. This emerged from when I started writing *In the Shadows of the State*, and how indigenous people run from the state, as well as capital – the timber or coal mining industries, for example – in order to keep alive different cultural values and traditions in the hills and forests of central and eastern India.

With *Nightmarch* I was interested in the class struggle which saw indigenous people fighting against

mining corporations, and I wanted to know what led them to take up arms in one of the world's longest running armed insurgencies. I never imagined I would actually meet a guerrilla; I just wanted to know how this revolutionary struggle was impacting indigenous people's lives. And the book is also a critique of this movement, especially on the issues of gender, caste/tribe and its analysis of the Indian economy. I think some of these same themes are present in *The Incarcerations*.

GJ: Unlike Indira Gandhi's Emergency of 1975-77, which was constitutionally declared, the existing regime has, you argue, silently taken over state institutions, the media, and instigated a form of vigilante policing without needing to declare extraordinary circumstances to enforce any of it. What were the conditions that allowed it to do this in silence?

AS: The most common analysis focuses on the power of Narendra Modi and his charisma and how he has become a strongman figure. This is a limited approach to understanding what's going on in India today. What's crucial to recognise is the scale of Sangh Parivar, the collection of Hindutva organisations of which the BJP is the political wing and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh is the more military wing. There's a whole array of Hindutva organisations, including students' and farmers' movements, trade unions, diaspora operations, and so on, which began forming 100 years ago. They have been working slowly, steadily, silently pervasively, not just in India, but all over the world. You cannot underestimate the power of these organisations and the ways in which they grew over time.

Take an example from my own life. I was born in Nairobi, and across the road from my aunt's house was a school, which looked very nice. But as I got older, I came to realise that it was actually a Shakha school established by the RSS. These schools exist all over the world, and what goes on in them is the slow inculcation of a whole way of seeing the world and an exclusive way of defining Hinduism. Children are disciplined to see Indian history in an extremely patriotic manner, in which Mughal rule, for example, is presented as the evil enemy. This has produced a whole generation of people born into this system who don't know anything else. There's also been the slow takeover of universities, where vice-chancellors are handpicked, while the last bastions of independence which I focus on in *The Incarcerations*, the judiciary and the media, are now falling the same way.

GJ: What is the foundation of the hegemonic takeover by the Sangh Parivar and its various satellites and tributaries - one which, I presume, is able to rally and unite different constituencies across the country behind the project to transform India into Hindu Nation?

AS: One thing is clear and that is the creation of the Muslim Other, and the idea of a nation that needs to be protected from this "evil enemy". Pakistan plays a role internationally, of course. But the creation of an internal enemy - the Muslim Other - is used to unite Hindus across the country. It is also a way to incorporate persecuted minorities such as Adivasis and Dalits, whose inclusion into India is contingent upon them also becoming "proper Hindus" and siding against Muslims, of which there are over 200 million living in India. This is why the legacy of the intellectual and social reformer BR Ambedkar, one of the founders of modern India who championed the rights of Dalits, is so significant and why the BJP are moving to appropriate him as one of its heroes. The idea of a malevolent Other is why Modi refers to [his country] as "Mother India", that is, something vulnerable that is under attack from within and needs protecting. The cow has also become an important symbol and has been a source of vigilante action by young Hindu men lynching Dalits or Muslims for eating beef or trading cattle.

Then there are different narratives that change over time. The BJP used to be quite an elite party, that is, the party of the upper and merchant castes, but at some point decided to pursue a strategy

of going to the more plebeian classes and organising amongst them. Modi himself uses his own rags-to-status story – from the son of a *chaiwallah* to chief minister of Gujarat to prime minister – as part of this move.

When Modi came to power in 2014, the economic story was all about the good days to come. This hasn't happened, but it was a way of uniting both the billionaires and, because wealth was going to "trickle down", the masses. Indeed, one of the features that is so incredible about Modi's rise is the relationship the BJP has forged with capital. Crony capitalism has kind of always existed in India, but Modi has really cultivated that, first in Gujarat where he was chief minister, and then he has spread that across the nation as prime minister.

GJ: To what degree do you think Modi is in control of the Hindu extremists in his party? Is there a danger that he can't control the rabid anti-Muslim politics he's helped to unleash in a country that has more than 200 million Muslims living in it?

AS: This is what is so frightening about the situation – there are entire new generations of youth who are taking action into their own hands. I'm not even talking about Hindu hard-line leaders such as Yogi Adityanath, but just ordinary people on the streets. India is not a safe place anymore.

GJ: Congress went from a developmentalist economic programme to a neoliberal one around the 1990s. Did Congress and the BJP's neoliberal consensus helped to create space for the BJP's ascendance? Could this regime have flourished without the reign of Congress that came before it?

AS: The Congress laid the foundations of the current regime, which has allowed the state's relationship with capital to deepen so that now it can go almost completely unchecked. Many of the Congress policies have been exacerbated. For example, in 2017, the BJP introduced electoral bonds which enabled it to amass huge wealth from corporate donors. People could donate money to any party anonymously and without limit. But the BJP knows where all the money is coming from, because it flows through the State Bank of India, and the ruling party controls the SBI. Although this has just now been declared unconstitutional, over the years huge corporate donations came disproportionately to the BJP, and then favours were doled out in return. This kind of financing would not have been possible had Congress not laid the foundations for an intimate relationship between state and capital.

GJ: To what extent has the political success of Modi and the BJP been based on the development of a newly prosperous Indian middle class?

AS: It's crucial. The new Indian middle class is prosperous but also quite precarious, in that it could lose its wealth. The BJP has been very effective at giving the middle classes a sense of purpose beyond their own material enrichment. There is also the relationship between the BJP and a kind of rising Hindu patriarchy within the middle classes, which is part of this. New ideas of what it means to be a good Hindu man and virtuous woman are taking hold.

GJ: Is the project of an "Indian century" being carried out from a position of strength or vulnerability, given that the country faces deep economic, international and ecological crises?

AS: It's definitely the latter. Things have improved over many years – life expectancy, for example – but there are these deep problems you mention behind these headline numbers. But this isn't a story that the West wants to hear, because it needs India, which is not China, for the trade deals and the arms deals. Tourists can travel to Gujarat and experience shopping malls with AC [air-conditioning]

and not see a single poor person because they've all been shipped out of sight.

GJ: When did state cyberwar on democracy activists begin?

AS: I don't know specifically when it started. But what I did discover when doing research for the book, such as interviewing cyber forensic experts in the US who have mined the metadata of the BK case, was that it did begin well before the Modi regime. For example, the prisoners' rights activist Rona Wilson, who is one of the BK-16 and on whose computer various of the incriminating letters were found, including the letter which claimed that the BK-16 were trying to assassinate Modi... his computer was hacked from 2012, two years before the BJP came to power. But having the technological capacity to surveil activists is one thing, utilising it in order to plant incriminating evidence to prosecute them is another. We also don't know for sure which agency within the Indian state is really responsible for this, whether it's the [city of] Pune police or the National Investigation Agency... it could be multiple agencies trying to get the same people.

Remember, though, that the activists in the book were fighting for Dalit rights or Adivasi rights no matter who was in power. The issues remain the same. It was the Congress government that introduced the big multinational corporations into Adivasi lands under which the counter-insurgency operations began, which led to the destruction of Adivasi villages – all of those things happened under the Congress regimes. So these activists were obviously a target for the state.

GJ: You write how the “custodians of democracy are difficult to silence, for they are an amorphous force”. Do the characteristics that make it hard to silence these activists also weaken them against the power of the state?

AS: What I mean by “amorphous” is that, compared to NGOs or media organisations, which have physical institutions, sources of finance and infrastructures, activists like the BK-16 are connected to social movements on the ground. It's not that they have no base, in fact that's why they are so dangerous because they're not standalone figures; they have influenced an alternative way of seeing the country, fighting for an idea of India which is in such contrast to the regime in power. They can bring people together and they can disperse them. They're not independent and siloed, it's the opposite. They have their own time and labour and fund their own missions and reports, and have their networks in social movements as well as the ability to connect to powerful voices. How do you silence that? The state can't just kill them, like they do the indigenous peoples in the forests, and it can't send in the tax authorities to raid offices and disrupt and close down operations, because these activists don't have that. So what do you do? You claim they're “Urban Naxals” and incarcerate them.

GJ: What role does the Indian diaspora play in sustaining the democracy movement back home?

AS: I wish I could be more positive. There are organisations, such as Hindus for Human Rights, South Asian solidarity forums, and academic freedom networks, who are trying to fight for a different kind of India. But the RSS has become very powerful in the diaspora, which is now very patriotic and defensive about any criticisms of the country. That is due to the organisational work of the RSS in the diaspora over decades.

GJ: As Snigdha Poonam has written in her book *Dreamers*, young people in India are hitting adulthood with the cultural values and social conservatism of their grandparents but the ambitions of teenagers in the US: money and celebrity. They are the most globally minded young Indians ever, but with the narrowest ideas of what it means to be Indian. What grounds are there for hoping that India's youthful generation might provide some

kind of counter to Hindu supremacism, BJP hegemony and an economy ensnared by oligarchs?

AS: Again, I wish I could provide a more hopeful answer. Even amongst the indigenous people in remote forests areas where I worked, among those who had a different imagination of what it means to be human to the rest of Indian society, you see such a narrowing of ideas of status, or power, and hierarchy. What's really frightening about all of this is that the BJP realise how important the youth are, which explains why the party has targeted institutions such as Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), as well as pop music, Bollywood films and other cultural spaces, because they know that they have to capture the minds and hearts of young people. JNU, for example, is such an important university because it has always been a place of debate and progressive organisations, and has been a space for liberal and radical views. From the vice-chancellor to controlling academic appointments, to ousting professors and imprisoning students – the BJP has really gone for it.

GJ: Where do you think the main sources of democratic renewal will emerge in India?

AS: From elite institutions such as the LSE to the prisons of Mumbai, there are all of these pockets of alternative visions of India, which will be kept alive and will have the time to flourish again. I take a lot of inspiration from the brilliant lawyers that have been fighting the cases of human rights defenders like the ones at the centre of my book, the judges that have occasionally paid heed to their arguments, from the many independent journalists and researchers on the ground who carry on doggedly reporting their brave stories, and the social movements for justice that take to the streets, despite the repression they face. I think international pressure is particularly important at this time. The UK and the US have huge influence on people's imaginations and aspirations in India. Even Modi cares about what the US and UK thinks, so these governments must refuse to kowtow to his regime, and raise issues and ask difficult questions, so people can know what is really happening in India today. Hierarchy works in strange ways.

Gavin Jacobson

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