

*Forthcoming with Current Anthropology*

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## **Why I Write?**

### **In a Climate Against Intellectual Dissidence**

#### **Abstract**

Why write? The spaces of intellectual dissidence once provided by universities – promoting disinterested enquiry, encouraging critical analysis, challenging conventional wisdoms – are increasingly controlled, if not squeezed out. A lethal mix of neoliberalism, authoritarianism and right-wing populism is unfolding in different combinations around the world and one of its key targets of attack is intellectual freedom. It is pressing for academics as writers to ask: What is our purpose? Who is our reader? How do we navigate the tension between the constraints of academic evaluation criteria versus the compulsions of writing for wider publics; scholarly fidelity versus activist commitments; writing as scholars versus producing journalism or fiction? This article reflects on these questions through the writing of the book *Nightmarch*, an anthropologist's account of the spread of the Naxalites, a Marx Lenin and Mao inspired guerrilla struggle, among indigenous people in the heart of India. The backdrop is the rise of neoliberal audit cultures in UK universities sapping writing of its vitality and Hindu nationalism in India clamping down fiercely on debate, deliberation and critique with human rights activists and intellectuals imprisoned as alleged Maoists or 'Urban Naxals'. The overall aim is to open the space for intellectual dissidence and ignite scholarly relevance beyond academia.

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## The Dissidence of Intellect

In many parts of the world, the spaces of intellectual dissidence once provided by universities – promoting disinterested enquiry, encouraging critical analysis, challenging conventional wisdoms – seem ever more controlled, if not squeezed out or shut down entirely. The pressures come in different forms in different places – from the neoliberal treatment of universities as corporations to more explicitly political assaults under authoritarian regimes promoting right wing populism. In this climate of attack on the dissidence of our intellect, it seems ever more important for scholars to ask the questions: Why do I write? What is our purpose? Who is our reader? How do we navigate the different tensions we face – the constraints of academic evaluation criteria versus the compulsions of writing for wider publics; scholarly fidelity versus activist commitments; writing as anthropologists versus producing journalism or fiction? These are all issues we don't talk about enough but are urgent for anthropology and its future. Emerging as fieldnotes and footnotes from the underground, I have one main agenda in this piece. It is to honour the dissidence of our intellect, create space for its development in our writing, and give power to its possibilities.

Over the last decade, there were a lot of difficult decisions to make. Many diverging roads. Some trails paved. Others grown over. Which one to take? Countless sleepless nights. Much deep thinking. On the brink of an abyss. No matter how far I looked before I walked and the intent in the steps I took, new obstacles were unveiled at every bend. Unforeseen dilemmas. Unresolved questions. *'Nightmarch: Among India's Revolutionary Guerrillas'* was drawn, remapped and eventually penned.

I remain doubtful about the paths I picked, haunted by the risks taken, and sometimes paralysed by the potential consequences. Acutely aware that what may appear as 'the end' is in fact only a 'new beginning'. My angst no doubt emerges from my specific

context having lived as an anthropologist amidst the spread of the Naxalites or Maoists, a fifty-year-old Marx Lenin and Mao-inspired armed revolutionary struggle, in the Adivasi tribal forests of eastern India at the peak of state-led counterinsurgency operations. Nevertheless, the making of *Nightmarch* raised some fundamental general issues about writing as an anthropologist in this moment in time.

I owe the title of this article to George Orwell's (1946) famous essay, 'Why I Write'. There, Orwell interrogated the various motivations for writing and set his agenda to make political writing into an art. Penned in the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War, against a backdrop of totalitarianism, Orwell explained that every line he had written since 1936 was against totalitarianism and for democratic socialism. In fact, he said, 'Everyone writes of them in one guise or another. It is simply a question of which side one takes and what approach one follows ... The more one is conscious of one's political bias, the more chance one has of acting politically without sacrificing one's aesthetic and intellectual activity' (Orwell 1946). My context/our context is in many ways quite different to that of Orwell. Yet, against the backdrop of the curtailment of academic freedoms which I explore in this essay, it seems more important than ever to ask ourselves Orwell's question, 'Why I Write?'

Let me begin by reflecting on the university context in which we write. Controlling knowledge production is crucial to the ever-expanding state-corporation nexus widening socio-economic inequalities. Universities, as centres of knowledge production, were always tools of the state and corporations. However, since the fifties, at least in Britain, there was also an ideal that the university was a public good. That it was, as Stefan Collini (2016) argued, 'a partly protected space in which the search for deeper and wider understanding takes precedence over all more immediate goals.' As centres of disinterested enquiry, pursuing questions removed from immediate or utilitarian concerns, promoting critical analysis, overturning conventional wisdoms, universities have protected and nurtured dissidence, been the home of intellectual dissidents.

In evoking dissidence, I am reminded of its Latin roots in *dissidēre*, to sit apart. The dissident intellectual thus being the critically minded scholar who is willing to sit apart from and, thereby, challenge the prevailing value systems, the structures of power and the political economy they justify, through careful research, writing and its dissemination. As my reflections will show, this sitting apart may be in opposition to a neoliberal managerialism filtering down to us, it may be against a rising authoritarianism, but it may also be sitting apart from the counter-propaganda efforts of leftist revolutionary guerrillas.

I start with the Gramscian position that for structural transformation towards a more equal and just society, alongside challenges to relations of production, ideological change is crucial. As the inequalities surrounding us are maintained not only through coercive domination but also by ideological control in what becomes accepted as 'common sense', forming what Gramsci called 'hegemony'. Countering this hegemony, advancing alternatives to the norm, is necessary. It must happen across society, with the development of 'organic intellectuals' (Gramsci 1971), but the autonomy of ideological thought in universities is vital. For, though all humans are potentially intellectuals – whether thumb impression or those who articulate with pen and ink – not all have that function in society. By the default of our position, within the university, academics have been given, chosen or taken the role of an intellectual. Most of the time university academics are under pressure to buttress the hegemony of dominant powers. Against these forces lies the role of the dissidence of our intellect.

The need to speak truth to power *because* of our privileged position in society was perhaps most clearly articulated by Noam Chomsky (1966) in his famous essay, 'The Responsibility of Intellectuals'. Chomsky (1966) argued that it is intellectuals in universities who have the leisure and time, the political liberty, the facilities, and training to explore hidden truths and express opinions about injustice without fear of

persecution. Five decades later, Neil Smith and Amahl Smith (2016) revisit Chomsky's essay to point out that his call remains as relevant as ever.<sup>i</sup>

The threat to academic freedom has evolved in different forms in different places. In the UK, the context in which I work, austerity narratives enabled cuts to core funding with disciplines promoting critical thinking (humanities and social sciences) suffering the most, increased dependency on student fees, and pervasive marketisation (Collini 2016).<sup>ii</sup> The ethos of business infiltrated across university governing boards, job contracts, and the ranking of institutions and individuals against each other to determine funding (c.f. Smith and Smith 2016). 'Audit cultures' (Strathern 2006) have expanded from finance and accounting, in a 'new managerialism' that is seeping into the heart of everyday practice so that we are forced to monitor each other and ourselves. Becoming a 'political technology of the self' (Shore and White 2006: 62), audit cultures contribute to the government's mode of social order, an arm of neoliberal governance imposed through the university in which 'challenging the terms of reference is not an option' (Shore and White 2006: 62). Moreover, made too busy, 'answering emails and filling out the latest online form demanded of us by our university', we are left with 'no time to fulfil our role as critic and conscience of society' (Shore 2018). Mind numbing is the overall effect, if not the intention.

This managerialism crushing academic freedom in the UK is elsewhere combined with an attack on intellectual dissidence that is more explicitly political. A lethal mix of neoliberalism, authoritarianism and right-wing populism<sup>iii</sup> is unfolding in different combinations, and for various reasons, around the world and one of its key targets of attack is intellectual freedom. There are plenty of examples. The expulsion of Central European University out of Budapest and the attack on the Hungarian Academy of Science by the right-wing is the tip of the iceberg of curtailment of academic freedoms in Hungary.<sup>iv</sup> In Turkey, in recent years' thousands of academics were fired, hundreds more persecuted and imprisoned, and multiple universities were closed (c.f. Özdemir & Özyürek 2019). In Brasil, Bolsanaro's planned cuts to universities, in particular sociology

and philosophy which are seen as undermining traditional moral and political values, have met fierce resistance. Then there is India, the searing context in which emerge my reflections on 'Why Write'. There, neoliberal reforms join hands with a right-wing populism from Hindu nationalists – Hindutva forces, as they are known – to clamp down fiercely on debate, deliberation and critique. Books have been pulped. Jobs lost. Intellectuals targeted in violent, sometimes fatal, attacks, often as alleged Maoists. Some say this persecution takes the US McCarthy witch hunts to a new level, and there are significant parallels with how Senator McCarthy silenced independent voices as Communists in 1950s US and the way in which India's human rights activists, intellectuals and public critiques are silenced as Maoists today. This direct repression of our colleagues elsewhere makes it ever more necessary to create the spaces for dissidence where we can. But often the pressures are to do exactly the opposite.

Reflecting how neoliberalism materializes itself, elite universities in the West are today encouraging the growth of regional centres – Centres of African Studies, Centres of Middle Eastern Studies and Centres of South Asian Studies – to attract endowments from wealthy private donors in a context where government funding is cut. They build on a shady global past when regional studies centres were encouraged by Cold War Considerations; the need for the US, in particular, to contain Third World revolutions and the spread of communism.<sup>v</sup> No doubt there are differences between countries and even within countries depending on the nature of funding ties pursued, but the repression of intellectual dissidence in far-away places can seep through the gaps beneath our doors because of these wider geopolitical interdependencies. Some regional centres are under some pressure to develop diplomatic ties, often with repressive governments, marrying neoliberalism with neo-conservatism. Then there is the need to pander the ego of potential funders, in the hope of swapping wealth for status by endowing a named university Centre or Chair, when in fact they may be source of the very inequalities and violence we ought to write against. All kinds of compromises to our dissidence are dangerously close.<sup>vi</sup> What questions will be raised, subjects highlighted, and what approaches and answers will be left out?<sup>vii</sup> Who will be our guests; who will be side-lined, ignored? Will we be there for our fellow intellectuals in those regions when their universities are being destroyed, their homes raided and

themselves incarcerated?

For anthropology, the managerial expansion and professionalization of academic life is potentially crippling. Notwithstanding certain blips in our history – let’s not forget our role in colonialism, as a handmaid of empire, or in assisting army efforts in Vietnam or Afghanistan (Asad 1973; Price 1998) – anthropology, that is socio-cultural anthropology, is politically progressive and has the potential to be quite radical. The long duration and holism of participant observation involved in ethnography is a potentially revolutionary praxis (Shah 2018), for it forces us to question our theoretical presuppositions about the world, produce knowledge that is new, was confined to the margins, or silenced (Shah 2018). Part of this radical understanding comes from ethnography’s inherently democratic approach; we not only centre people and worlds that are otherwise hidden from dominant analyses, but we also explore the interdependency of all domains of life – kinship, politics, economics, religion – as holistically as we can, and how they change (or not) over time. In taking seriously the lives of others, exploring different spheres of life together, ethnography enables us to understand the relationship between history, ideology, and action in ways that we could not have foreseen, and is therefore crucial to understanding both why things remain the same and in thinking about how dominant powers and authority can be challenged (Shah 2018). Of course, not many of us take up such a challenge, but intellectual dissidence is part of the architecture of anthropology.

In the sixties and seventies, with widespread insurrections against colonial regimes, Gavin Smith (2014a and b) argued that, in anthropology and history, dissident intellectuals not only shaped entire disciplines, but also made intellectual contributions to popular struggles in direct ways. Think Eric Wolf, Peter Worsley, Sidney Mintz, Eric Hobsbawm. Indeed, Kathleen Gough (1968) called for ‘New Proposals for Anthropology’ that studied Western imperialism, asked new comparative questions with a direct impact on addressing inequality and resistance against it.<sup>viii</sup> Targeted in the sixties by the FBI for her support of Cuba and her work against the Vietnam War, Gough’s flag has been carried on within the discipline, even if by a minority. But in our current era of

neoliberal reforms, the spaces of dissidence universities provide are ever more squeezed out. This makes it all the more necessary for us to fight back.

I focus here on writing, writing where we seek to be heard and that appears as books on shelves, as one of our most crucial weapons in the battle for dissidence. Writing as opposed to research, not because we can separate the two but, because it is in writing that our investigations get translated into a language and form that others can access and use. In writing we both work out our analyses and communicate our findings; our research gains significance for others. By no means undermining the importance of teaching, or research itself, writing is arguably one of the most important aspects of what we do as academics, and hence one of the most significant spaces of the dissidence of our intellect.

Yet, rarely do we teach about writing, consciously think about its consequences, nor are we encouraged to do so. Instead some crude evaluation criteria (as in the Research Evaluation Framework – REF – or promotions rankings, c.f. Borofsky and De Lauri 2019) is used to patrol our writing. In the UK, in our work allocations, writing is subsumed into the ‘research’ part of the trio, ‘teaching, admin and research’, and funding bodies like the UK Economic and Social Research Council no longer fund the writing process. A kind of scholarly enclosure has advanced as academics are encouraged to write for each other and not the general reader, address whatever conversation seems to be in vogue in a particular moment, and that becomes further validated through the inwardly looking practices we perpetuate of recognition, citation and promotion. Our writing is often sapped off its vitality, a vigour that is critical in upholding anthropology’s unique analytical capacity, its potential relevance beyond the discipline, and beyond the academy.

Indeed, anthropologists today are rarely public intellectuals, the spaces of which are claimed mainly by people outside of the academy (Fassin 2017). Of course, there are



many factors to consider such as the fact that certain national traditions may have more room for university based public intellectuals than others (eg France over England). Or that there simply isn't a public that wants to know about the world beyond their doorstep (a common complaint from editors about the US 'public'). Notwithstanding these differences, the more general contemporary direction of introversion in our writing is a great loss in the very moment when repressive politics are flourishing across a range of national contexts. As I will show at the end, anthropologists are fighting back, geared to reopening the spaces for intellectual dissidence. It is time to join hands to ask ourselves some burning questions.

### **Why I Write**

Why Write? What is at stake? Are we aware of it? Who is our audience? What makes us tear up our pages and rebuild? Why, if at all, does it matter that we are writing as scholars? What are the consequences?

There is no blueprint, no model, no prefigured ideal. If I am to talk in the language of the Naxalites with whom I lived, there is no 'strategy and tactics.' Moreover, my purpose is not to provide answers but to raise the question, draw attention to its importance, signal the need for us to ask it of ourselves. No doubt we will answer it in our own ways. But perhaps some general issues may arise if I share some of my own twists and turns in writing. For *Nightmarch* taught me that it is time to reclaim the radical insights offered by our ethnographic research, their potential in creating knowledge to challenge hegemony, and think carefully about why write.

No matter how clear our intent, how carefully thought out our plans, much of what we do is serendipitous. Though my scholarship has always been driven by thinking about

various forms of inequality and the struggles against it, my routes were shaped by chance.

In 2002, when towards the end of my doctoral anthropology fieldwork I stumbled upon the Marx-Lenin and Mao inspired Naxalite insurgents spreading in rural India like what I thought then was the Sicilian mafia, I could never have predicted that they would absorb me for the next two decades. Never have thought that I would live for a year and a half in their guerrilla strongholds in the exact aftermath of the Maoists being declared by the then Prime Minister as 'India's greatest internal security threat', at the peak of counterinsurgency operations to flush them out of the very forests where I was based. Not have predicted that my research would be forced underground as journalists, human rights activists and academics were thrown out of the areas where I lived. Nor in my wildest dreams imagined that I would march for seven nights with a guerilla platoon, precariously balancing on rice bunds without the light of a torch, walking across dusty forest trails, crossing 250 kilometres from Bihar to Jharkhand, a journey that would frame my book *'Nightmarch'* published eight years later.



*The Maoist Women's Liberation Front in Jharkhand posing for a photo by author in 2010, which became the cover image of *Nightmarch*.*

Accidental, as most of my encounters were, the folks I met along the way challenged, influenced and changed me forever. So, let me introduce you to the people who became the central characters of *Nightmarch*, who, as I will show, helped me challenge conventional wisdoms about insurgent action as I wrote.

Prashant, less than thirty years old, who first emerged before me from the forests as a dark, sharp and cold silhouette with an AK 47. He had learned to read and write in the guerrilla armies and was one of the few youths groomed to be a future leader, a fighter who could take forward the military struggle. But I remember him for his open charming smile framed by floppy brown hair, for mixing salt, sugar and water to ease my travel sickness, and have flashes of him lying under the shade of a tent, surrounded by books – the romantic poetry of Tagore, 'Basic Medicine', and Gulzar's 'Green Poems'.

Gyanji, the softly spoken, slightly balding, guerrilla leader. A high-caste intellectual with an agile mind, who had cut off ties with his family to be underground for almost thirty years. But no matter how much he 'decasted' and 'declassified', his privileged upbringing remained inscribed on the tender soles of his light-skinned feet. Gyanji's deep immersion in those jungles meant that he could swiftly move from citing Marx, Shelly or Shaw one minute, to giving orders in rustic gruff Bhojpuri dialect the next. But we argued over his vision of life underground. Were the Adivasis in any case doomed by development, or should their lifestyles be valued? Was the Naxalite violence necessary or did it reproduce that of the States'? Were their gender policies progressive or did they treat women as the 'Second Sex'? Gyanji accused me of being mechanical and utopian. I fought back and called him anachronistic. We never ended our quarrels, finished our conversations.

Kohli, the gentle, sensitive sixteen-year-old Adivasi youth with radiant dark skin and a coy smile, whose rifle was nearly as tall as himself, and who insisted on carrying my bags when he was my bodyguard. He had run away to live with the guerrillas after a trivial fight with his father about a glass of spilt milk while working in his teashop. The Naxalite zonal commander, Parasji, refused at first to accept him, knowing that Kohli was needed at home. Parasji had become a family friend, Kohli's father once explained. He said, the Naxalites had driven away oppressive forest officers by bombing their rest houses, but it was the small things that counted the most; how the Naxalites spoke to villagers; removed footwear before entering their houses; washed cups and plates after use. They showed humility and respect to those normally treated as savage and barbaric by outsiders. Over time the Naxalites built kinship relations into the villages and so Kohli moved, as Adivasi youths so often did, in and out of the guerrilla armies as though he was visiting an uncle or aunt.

Vikas, the Adivasi Platoon Commander, who I first met when I delivered a plate of dinner to his platoon when one night they turned up in the hamlet where I lived.

Noticing I was not local, he roughly interrogated me, told me about the outsiders who had disappeared in those forests, killed as spies and police informers. And though he later tried to charm me, I was left with the bitter taste of our first meeting. Like Kohli, Vikas had also once run away from home to live with the guerrillas but by the time I met him, Gyanji thought he was with the Naxalites because he was ‘earning’, pocketing away money for the common needs of the movement for private consumption, and called him a ‘frankenstein’s monster’.

Somwari, the Adivasi woman who I lived with, who cared for and joked with me daily, who I called my sister. She taught me not only to appreciate the egalitarian gender relations among Adivasis through her own self-confidence, grace and autonomy but also how to carry firewood on my head, make leaf cups, and distil wine from the *mahua* flower and brew *hadia* rice beer to enjoy with friends and family. She was fiercely critical of the Naxalites, especially after her *mahua* wine and *hadia* rice beer pots were smashed by the Maoist Women’s Liberation Front in a top-down attempt to liberate Adivasi women from what was assumed to be the women’s oppression by their men. Nevertheless, she accompanied me to the rebel celebration of International Women’s Day in the forests. Though Somwari was afraid of the possibility of her own children joining the Naxalites, she turned to them to prevent her husband’s ex-wife from filing cases against her family. On my final journey, out of those guerrilla stronghold, it was Somwari who helped me wrap my sari, dressed me as a local to ward off attention from the security forces who would stop the public jeep I boarded, and with whom I shared tears as I left for England.

### ***Slow writing***

On my return to London, I wanted to write a book as fast as possible. The shadow of terror darkened as the government tightened its noose. The military might of the Indian state marched its way right into the forests to occupy the guerrilla strongholds.<sup>ix</sup> Human rights activists said that behind the state’s desire to destroy the Naxalites and ‘civilise’

the Adivasis, was the aim of clearing the ground, a slow purging of the people to access the mineral wealth beneath the land. 'Terror Untold', was the book's provisional title. Its purpose, given the horrors of state repression in the forests, was to humanise the Naxalites; show their fight was legitimate. It would have been the kind of 'militant anthropology' (Scheper-Hughes 1995) that some have advocated for. But deep within me I knew I was being driven by a counter-propaganda agenda that would produce quick-fix representations of the people I had met.

In fact, the rapidly emerging writings on the Naxalites were falling one way into those who radically opposed them, and the other, to those who tried to counter that position, creating polarising views. As commonly happens to such movements in other parts of the world, Adivasis were shown to be joining the rebels because they were forced to, because they were gaining utilitarian benefits, or because the insurgents addressed their grievance. The reality, I knew, was more complex. A hastily written book would only have added to the binaries of condemnation or romanticising. It would have curtailed my ability to reach a deeper critical analysis of the experiences, visions and actions of the people whose lives I had shared, to show the nuances and the contradictions beyond the models of insurgent action available. I had to maintain a democratic commitment to the truth in a holistic sense, as exposed by the academic rigour of the research (Shah 2017), a commitment which I knew may challenge even those I morally felt I should explicitly form alliances with (Shah 2017).

Moreover, slow writing was important. For I was haunted by questions to which I did not have immediate answers but which in the end were central to the analyses revealed in *Nightmarch*. Did it matter that Gyanji's first quest for equality and freedom was meditating for Nirvana on the Ganges banks? That he could not step on a line of ants without chanting mantras before he took up arms? That youth like Prashanth were rare? That the year before Kohli joined the Naxal armies, he ran away from home to work in faraway brick factories for a few months? Did it matter that Vikas was getting fat and looked more like the well-to-do higher caste men than tribal youths like Kohli?

Would Kohli become like Vikas? Did Somwari need the Russian revolutionary Clara Zetkin to liberate her?

I buried my head to work out the answers. Tried to make sense of what I had observed and experienced. Churned out one academic analyses after another. 'Religion and the Secular Left'. 'Agrarian Questions in a Maoist Guerrilla Zone'. 'The Intimacy of Insurgency'. 'Class Struggle and the Indigenous Question'. 'The Muck of the Past'. I was left with more questions than answers.

Slowly more news of them trickled in. One day in 2013, Prashant appeared before me as a photograph on the web. One of several half-dressed mutilated guerrilla uniformed bodies thrown into a trailer. He had been killed with ten other Maoists in a forest encounter along the same route which I had walked with the guerrilla platoon three years before. Gyanji also came as a news flash on my screen. His eyes blindfolded by a black bandana, arms held by policemen, wrists handcuffed, and a small pistol laid before him. 'Dreaded Terrorist Caught'. I learned that Vikas had indeed turned on the Naxalites, taking with him seven young men and eight of the best rifles to create a gang out to kill Gyanji before he was himself killed by the guerrillas. Kohli returned to the village, but only to disappear again. Somwari spent three months in prison with her three-year old daughter and converted to a fast-spreading Hindu religious sect.

Even as they were killed, incarcerated, or disappeared, they followed me everywhere. Cycling along Essex Road, down Rosebery Avenue and into High Holborn, I found Kohli calling out, Gyanji questioning me, Prashant chattering away and Somwari joking. Over the years, they helped me analyse, argue and reveal what I had experienced. That to explain why people joined the revolutionaries, the theories of greed, grievance or coercion were all limiting. Far more important was the emotional intimacy nurtured between the guerrillas and the Adivasis, based on the egalitarian aspirations of the Naxalites because of which they treated others with respect and dignity. That the

resulting kinship relations produced between the guerrilla armies and the Adivasi villages, were both the strength of such movements but also their Achilles heel, as the same battles and tensions within families cropped up in the guerrilla armies. That despite the differences between the renouncer and the revolutionary – the former seeks personal emancipation; the latter works for communal freedom – there were significant continuities between communist revolutionaries and a long history of renunciation and sacrifice for liberation in India. That the Naxalites held on to an outdated economic analysis of the country – as semi-feudal and semi-colonial – as though it were a religious text, a dogma. That this analysis disabled them from fully addressing major issues stemming from the wide reach of capitalism across the country, including within their guerrilla armies, corrupting them from within. That it also disabled them from taking seriously the egalitarian values – for instance gender equality – which already existed among the Adivasis, leading to a decline of those values. Or that when one takes up arms to fight for social change, it is easy to reproduce the violence of the oppressor.

As the state repression increased, the more I realised that I could not let the stories of the people I met, and these unexpected insights that I discovered through them, be confined to the ivory towers of the university.<sup>x</sup> I had to touch the hearts of people who read the book – as many as possible – in the way that the people I had met had touched mine. I knew I had to try to reach as wide an audience as I could, but without simplifying the analyses or dumbing down this scholarship.

This meant writing a very different kind of book to the dry academic text that I had been trained to produce and that was being valued by the institutional context of anthropology around me. I foolishly talked about the forthcoming book as creative and experimental in my yearly review back at my university. I was warned against it. A straightforward academic monograph was the best for me. Any deviation from the prevailing norms was risky; the Institution would not know what to do with such a book in promotions and REF panels. Creating, experimenting, had somehow become ‘anti-intellectual.’ I stopped talking about the book.



## ***Curtailement of intellectual freedom in India***

Our writing though, should not just be shaped by the university environment in which we work, but also the wider historical and political context in which we live. For me, the increasing curtailment of intellectual freedom in India itself became very important. Let me tell you about some of what happened as the direction these infringements were taking affected my writing process.

The attack on intellectual freedom had begun while I was still on fieldwork. At first were targeted those people entering the guerrilla strongholds to cover the atrocities that were taking place there – journalists, scholars and human rights activists. They were prevented from going into the forests unless they had the ‘protection’ of the police forces, were chased out by state sponsored vigilante groups, or had cases filed against them as a way of warning them to lay off. This curtailment rapidly turned into a wider attack on critical intellectuals, journalists and higher education in general.

Some of my colleagues were arrested.<sup>xi</sup> The crime which allegedly united them all was that they were ‘anti-national’, more specifically had Maoist links, were ‘Urban Naxals’. This labelling enabled filing legal charges of sedition and terrorism against them,<sup>xii</sup> allowing for pre-charge sheet detention of up to six months, conditions under which bail was near impossible, and trials lasting years with years of incarceration, even if finally, there was acquittal. Human Rights Watch (2016) declared that in India the legal process *is* the punishment. The charges were a way of striking terror in anyone who dared to speak out for social justice; a means to silence dissent.<sup>xiii</sup>

Hundreds of people were affected but I’d like to mention just a few. G N Saibaba, Assistant Professor English, Delhi University – who I last saw in 2012 at Goldsmiths, University of

London, being carried out of his wheelchair into a car after giving a seminar on English literary culture in India – incarcerated in 2014. June 2018: Shoma Sen, head of Nagpur University’s English department – who I met three years before on her way to a conference on Dalit Literature at the University of East Anglia – arrested alongside poet Sudhir Dhawale, advocate Surendra Gadling, forest rights activist Mahesh Raut and activist Rona Wilson. Two months later several intellectuals and activists were targeted simultaneously across the country in Hyderabad, Mumbai, Delhi and Ranchi. Five were arrested. There was Gautam Navlakha, secretary of Peoples Union for Democratic Rights and scholar, who was last in the UK in 2010 for a conference I organized on emancipatory politics. And Sudha Bhardwaj, who taught law at Jindal University but for decades was also an advocate, union activist and human rights worker in Chhattisgarh, and who in 2016 regretfully declined to deliver the Keynote Lecture at our forthcoming conference ‘Ground Down by Growth’, indicating there would be problems in getting a passport. And there was also Varvara Rao the poet and human rights activists, Arun Ferreira and Vernon Gonsalvez. All, except for Navlakha, were thrown into Pune prison in August 2018. Others had their houses raided and work seized by the police – Professor K Satyanarayan, English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad and Professor Anand Teltumbde at Goa Institute of Management, who were both last in the UK in 2017 as speakers at our ‘Ground Down by Growth’ conference. Teltumbde and Navlakha (who had been briefly freed after house arrest in 2018) were sent to prison in April 2020. The arrests of these eleven intellectuals and human rights activists since 2018 became known as the Bhima Koregaon case as they were accused of involvement in Dalit violence against Hindutva forces (after the latter had attacked Dalits) in January 2018 on the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of a Dalit army (in collaboration with British forces) defeating an upper caste regime of the Maratha Empire in the Maharashtrian village of Bhima Koregaon. In a complex twist of events, the Hindutva instigator of violence who was initially arrested for inciting the January 2018 violence was freed on bail, but these eleven intellectuals and human rights activists were charged instead, on flimsy evidence, under draconian anti-terror laws under which bail is near impossible, for inciting the violence and even plotting to assassinate the Prime Minister. It was said they had Maoist links, were ‘Urban Naxals’.<sup>xiv</sup>



*The intellectuals and human rights activists arrested in India from 2018 - 2020 in the Bhima Koregaon case as alleged Maoists or 'Urban Naxals'.*

*Left to Right at the Top: Mahesh Raut, Surendra Gadling, Sudhir Dhawale and Gautam Navlakha, Left to Right at the Bottom: Arun Ferreira, Shoma Sen, Rona Wislon, Vernon Gonsalves, Sudha Bhardwaj, Varvara Rao and Anand Teltumbde.*

*Image credit: anonymous.*

This callous attack on individual intellectuals came hand-in-hand with one on the ideal of the public university itself. Once imagined as independent India's 'organs of civilization,' 'sanctuaries of the inner life of the nation,' where everything would be 'brought to the test of reason, venerable theologies, ancient political institutions, time-honoured social arrangements, a thousand things that a generation ago looked as fixed as the hills' (Government of India 1950: 30).<sup>xv</sup> Now, the public university became the site of surveillance, control and repression.

This anti-intellectual stance was perhaps most evident at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), one of the country's premier higher learning institutions, renowned for its rich environment of debate and discussion and where I had enjoyed the privilege of holding two Visiting Fellowships and two research partnerships. JNU was painted by the ruling party, the police and much of the mainstream media as the hotbed of Maoism, where students were indoctrinated into 'anti-national' activities. In 2016, army tanks were

requested on campus to 'instil' nationalism among the students.<sup>xvi</sup> New regimes of surveillance erupted: daily attendance registers extended to faculty, enforced through disbursement of salary. Leave granted only at the whims of the Vice Chancellor spearheading these changes.<sup>xvii</sup> More subtle attacks on the staff body ensued – promotion of only those who will not challenge the administrations diktats, punishment for those who will (by denying housing or leave), control of Selection Committees to determine appointments.

All of this escalated so that by the end of 2019 the police itself either led or were complicit in violence unleashed against dissenting students and staff. A Citizenship Amendment Act had just been passed which, against the spirit of India's Constitution, enshrined religious discrimination into law, specifically targeting Muslims. At Jamia Millia Islamia University in Delhi, the police went on a rampage on the university campus, beating students with batons including attacking those sitting quietly in the library, blinding others with tear gas. Reports claim about 40 were detained and more than twice as many injured.<sup>xviii</sup> At JNU, a few weeks later a masked mob armed with iron rods, sledge hammers, sticks and bricks, attacked students and staff having a meeting to organize against the raising of student fees. They chanted slogans, calling the staff and students 'anti-national' and 'Naxalites', injuring about 40 people. Eyewitnesses accused the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parisad (ABVP), the student wing of the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS) that is the paramilitary voluntary organization of Hindutva forces, for leading the attacks, and said the police were intentionally inactive and complicit.<sup>xix</sup>



*Photos of protesting students and police complicity taken at JNU on 5 January 2020 by Shahid Tantray for Caravan.*

The intensifying attacks on JNU represent the epitome of wider changes in higher education, noticed only because of a battle.<sup>xx</sup> Other transformations silently but steadily and stealthily swept across the country.<sup>xxi</sup> Diversion of funding for social sciences (the heart of intellectual dissidence) to technical and managerial disciplines (which produce technocrats and those who serve established powers), the growth of private sector university education provision, undermining the idea of higher education as a public good. Proposals for Central Universities to follow a common admissions procedure and content, which critiques say will diminish creativity, centralize authority and push for a 'saffronisation' of the syllabus, upholding a vision of society as found in mythology and religious texts. Appointments of RSS and its affiliate bodies were made to lead a range of key institutions from the Indian Council of Historical Research to Indian Council for Social Science Research. <sup>xxii</sup>

The overall trajectory was a crushing of the spaces of intellectual freedom in India. Anyone who fought back, spoke out against the repression, was increasingly at risk of being targeted, labelled a Maoist and put in jail. Meanwhile, what was happening in the guerrilla strongholds had already been silenced for the world outside. Many of my friends – those who lived in the jungles and those in the cities who could have brought light to their stories – were incarcerated if not killed. This put into perspective the insignificance of the institutional closure I felt back in the UK with the professionalization of academia and heightened my awareness of my privileged position being outside of India. The responsibility of the uniqueness and significance of the stories I carried weighed ever more heavily. I continued to work clandestinely on the book I felt I ought to write.

## **How I Write**

How to do it? My inspiration came from Orwell (1946), for whom the initial motivation

for writing was to get a hearing because there were lies to expose, facts to draw attention to, but also make that process into an aesthetic experience. I wanted to disclose the best of what anthropology and participant observation had to offer; its democratic potential in showing unexpected insights, telling stories you would not hear otherwise, exposing hidden processes and the relationship between seemingly disconnected aspects of life. For instance, that the emotional intimacies developed between the guerrilla armies and the Adivasis, were more important than theories of greed, coercion or grievance in explaining insurgent mobilisation. Or that there were continuities between religious renouncers and communist revolutionaries. Or that the revolutionary economic analysis had become like a religious text which, though may have helped a small elite stay together for years on end underground, also explained why guerrilla activities were undermined daily.

And I wanted to reveal the beauty of the research by turning its intellectual insights into an art, a form of writing that could be read by any interested person. I thought more and more about my potential reader. As Sartre (1948: 43) said in his reflections, 'Why Write', 'There is no art, except for and by others'; writing thus implies reading as its dialectical correlative, for the world which is revealed in writing is the joint effort of the author and the reader. I felt, what he expressed, that to write was to disclose the world – an unjust world – in order to transcend it and to bring the reader to create in imagination what was being disclosed and thus also be responsible for it, in an imaginary engagement in the action (Sartre 1948: 60-61).

And that's how a meandering 250 kilometre '*Nightmarch*' emerged to unfold across the book. Apart from helping the reader keep the pages turning while giving a flavour of life underground in the subcontinent, *Nightmarch* was framed to be a metaphor for the Naxalite movement itself, my analysis of its spread among the Adivasis, and the limitations and contradictions of its imaginations and actions. It enabled me to introduce the archetypal characters – Prashanth, Gyanji, Kohli, Vikas, Somwari – who had come together to take up arms to fight for a more equal and just world, but who

also fell apart. *Nightmarch* thus represented the hopes and tragedies of the resistance, signaling its different facets, its past, present and future, highlighting the conflict, contradictions and tensions of the fight against inequality, oppression and injustice at the heart of contemporary India.



*On the Nightmarch from Bihar to Jharkhand in 2010, photo by author.*

I had to rework much that I had learned, the habits I was trained into, the traps of mystification common in academic writing. New concerns filled my imagination. Character, dialogue, journey, cliff hangers, audience and how to show and not always tell. I learned from writers of fiction – Zola’s *Germinal*, Mistry’s *A Fine Balance* or Renu’s *Kalankamukti*. Not that I was under any illusion that I had the skills of a literary artist. Nor did I want to turn what I wrote into *The Lives of Others* or *A State of Freedom*, as much as I admire Neel Mukherjee. But the boundaries are blurred.

Literature is ‘often understood to be one of anthropology’s most recurrent and provocative companions in thought’ (Brandel 2019). Indeed, Edmund Leach (1989), once said that ethnographers as authors are not concerned with factual truth, that an



ethnographic monograph has more in common with a historical novel than with any kind of scientific treatise. Leach's implication, some have said, was that we are all failed novelists. Speaking about development studies others claim that fiction can not only be 'better' than academic or policy research in representing central issues but also reaches a wider audience, and is 'therefore more influential' (Lewis, Rodgers and Woolcock 2008: 198). It is certainly true, as Lewis Coser once said, 'that the creative imagination of the literary artist often has achieved insights into social processes which have remained unexplored in social science' (Coser in Lewis et al 2008: 202).

The line between fact and fiction *is* a fine one. There are many authors who base their novels on deep research and factual events and many social scientists who use made up contexts to exemplify their arguments, illustrate their thesis. Equally, anthropologists writing novels begins with the discipline's history. Think of Zora Neale Hurston (1937) or Laura Bohannan/Eleanor Bowen Smith (1954), for instance. Today the *Journal for Anthropology and Humanism* sponsors a fiction competition and we have a genre of ethnographic novels. But, as Kirin Narayan (1999) has put it, though the boundary is productive, has the potential to enhance anthropology's relevance, to do away with a border would be a loss for both fiction and ethnography.

Ultimately, in thinking about *Nightmarch*, the difference between a novel and writing ethnography stood out. Discussing the book based on his Anthropology PhD in relation to his novels, Amitav Ghosh said, 'nothing in *Antique Land* is invented'. Ethnographies are always partial, and though we've historically strived to 'reach the native's point of view' (Geertz quoted in Narayan 1992: 140), we don't just go inside the heads of our informants and make things up, nor do we invent events or scenarios. 'Fiction is shameless,' said Kirin Narayan (1992: 140-41), 'writers have no qualms speaking from within the subjective worlds, thought processes and emotions of their characters.' Fiction writers are driven by another set of rules, namely, to tell a convincing story (Wolf 1992). But as anthropologists we owe it to our readers to represent social reality as we find it, however flawed our perspective, and if we divert from that rule, we

indicate so. As put by Didier Fassin (2014: 55), ‘if the fictional imagination lies in the power to invent a world with its characters, the ethnographic imagination implies the power to make sense of the world that subjects create by relating it to wider structures and events.’ *Nightmarch* made me realise that the fact that we don’t just invent, that our point is to make generalisations and link to larger processes, is powerful, especially politically.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Then there is also the difference between writing as an anthropologist and journalism. I was forced to think about this early on partly because of my compulsion to reach a wider audience, to bring attention to the issues taking place in eastern India because of the international silence around them. My first public output from fieldwork happened only a month after return to London. It was the presentation of a BBC Radio 4 *Crossing Continents*, 30-minute radio documentary called ‘*India’s Red Belt*’, produced from recordings I had taken in the field. Though it fulfilled my desire to bring light to the issues in the international media, it had none of the sophistication of the analysis at the heart of *Nightmarch*, none of the complexity and nuances that are at stake. It is not just that the BBC would not have waited eight years for me to work it all out, it is also that there was a limit to the contradictions I could present in such a form.

Long form investigative journalism, though, has much to share with critical public anthropology. The best of it is, at the very least, on par with the best of anthropology. And, as Emma Tarlo (2013) says, we can all learn much about the craft of story-telling from such journalism.<sup>xxiv</sup> But, thinking about *Nightmarch* in relation to the accounts of journalists who tried to cover the Naxalites in book form – I am reminded of Subranshu Chowdhry’s (2012) ‘*Lets Call Him Vasu*’ or Rahul Pandita’s (2011) ‘*Hello Bastar*’, for instance – there are, on the whole, also important differences. They stem from the different temporalities we work under (see Boyer 2010) but also our differing approaches, the ethical obligations that we develop towards those we lived with, and the freedom we have in our writing. We, as anthropologists, can usually spend more time than journalists in doing the research. Our immersion in the lives of those we study, is often deeper, compelling us to act in their favour where we can. Our approach

is comprehensively more holistic – covering religion, economics, politics, kinship – aspects of life we could never have imagined would become significant when we began. We are also less target or story oriented in how we conduct our research; in fact, we usually take pride in the fact that we are not driven by a story but only work out what the story/stories are afterwards. Moreover, after conducting research, it is not often that long form journalists have the luxury to think things through, work out the contradictions and nuances; the circuits of journalism are much faster than those we are faced with. And perhaps, in the pressures that journalists face in making a sharp tight-knit story that fits the needs of contemporary new cycles, there is also less space for thinking about the products of our writing as artefacts which snake through our material, documenting the details, nuances and complexities of life. I continued my meanderings.

The more I wrote, rewrote and edited, the more it was clear that I was writing against the grain of expectations.<sup>xxv</sup> The pressures start with the birth of a new academic. Jason De Leon (2019) shares, ‘So before I had tenure you know I very much had to crank out a series of journal articles that will put you to sleep even though they’re probably about interesting topics ... nobody ever said to me ... when you write be kind to your reader.’ ... And when I started working, when I had to write a book for promotion, I was like ... I got to do this thing I’ve been doing in article form and now I’ve got to do it for like a hundred thousand words? That sounds very soul crushing.’<sup>xxvi</sup> Alma Gottlieb’s (2017) solution to similar frustrations was to write a popular account of her fieldwork clandestinely with her partner, keeping this ‘Parallel Worlds,’ it was called, entirely separate from her university world. Talented writers among anthropologists have often chosen to keep their writerly writing separate from their scholarly endeavour. As one such writer said to me on the publication of her second book on which depended her promotion to Professor, ‘You’ll be disappointed Alpa, I’ve had to squeeze out all the ethnography.’

### **Opening up the spaces of dissidence**

Yet, at the same time, anthropology is changing. It is true that we do need Gramsci's, 'pessimism of the intellect; optimism of the will'. But there are reasons to be hopeful. In recent times, Ruth Behar (2016), has made the case that ethnography at its best is just another form of creative non-fiction, called for believing in anthropology as literature. Attention to ethnography as theoretical story-telling, is the position Carole McGranaham (2015) claimed for anthropology. Increased attention is being given to thinking about the anthropologist as writer (Wulff 2016; McGranaham 2020), and calling for experimenting in writing as essential to anthropology's role in the contemporary world (Pandian and McLean 2017).

Change is enabled partly through continuity. Despite the overwhelming insularity of so much of anthropological writing, there have always been those who bucked the trend, tried to reach beyond to a wider audience, and who are the main reason why anthropology is known beyond the discipline and its close relatives. As scholars are reminding us today, whether Malinowski, Mead or Mauss, anthropologists once wrote things that mattered beyond the academy (Eriksen 2006; Borofsky and De Lauri 2019). Moreover, writerly writing goes back to the history of the discipline. Zora Neale Hurston's (1990) *Of Mules and Men*, Levi Strauss's (1992) *Triste Tropique* are a case in point. And throughout anthropology's history there have been those who have continued to experiment, either clandestinely, or taking risks at the expense of their careers. This legacy has kept alive a rich writing history that we can now openly recuperate and celebrate.

Change is also enabled by the fact that serious conversations about writing itself were kept alive in anthropology. James Clifford and George Marcus (1986) 'Writing Culture' was seminal in doing that. Even if concerns about representations took over in its aftermath, side-lining the focus on the major issues of the time (for instance the question of power, imperialism or inequality), it nevertheless promoted a recognition of what Danilyn Rutherford (2012) called our 'kinky empiricism.' That is, not only the situated nature of our writings but that our methods create obligations that compel us

to put ourselves on the line by making truth claims that we know will intervene in the settings and among the people we describe (Rutherford 2012: 1548).<sup>xxvii</sup> Philippe Bourgois (2002) explicitly called for an ethnography that engages theory with politics in a way that is relevant to the people being studied but has remained marginal to the discipline, opening by example a path that others can make their own in writing (see in particular, Bourgois and Schonberg 2009). And others such as Renato Rosaldo (1989) dismantled the dry scientific norms of academic anthropology writing, promoting an approach that centred narrativity and subjectivity.

And then there are contradictions in the way the pressures from above work that can be utilized as a force for change. Top university presses are feeling the financial crunch; books need to sell. Editors at these presses are encouraging us to move beyond academic prose in favour of compelling, clear writing (see also Gottlieb 2016). 'Scholars must think of themselves as writers and hold themselves to that standard,' says Priya Nelson (2017: 364), Editor at University of Chicago Press.

Of course, we must be astute to such contradictions, that the current economic-political climate itself may be urging us to 'tell a story', 'touch hearts', as part of the affective politics of neoliberalism. Or that seeking wider audiences involves pitching books to commercial presses who, if at all interested in our writing, may require us to comply to the demands of what they think will sell, which may not be what emerges from our research. We must think critically about the conditions under which the particular genres we are pursuing are being developed, promoted and adopted for it will shape what kind of a story we tell and how we tell it.

But there are other positive initiatives that perhaps help us move beyond such market demands. In the late nineties, the University of California Press explicitly launched a series in 'Public Anthropology', headed by Robert Borofsky, with a book prize to encourage anthropologists to engage with key contemporary issues, snap out of insular

incomprehensible debates that were irrelevant to the lives and struggles of most people, and engage broad publics in their writing. Several years on this initiative has created a broader space for 'Public Anthropology'; a journal in its name which explicitly solicits debates on how anthropology can concretely contribute to social and political change (Borofsky and De Lauri 2019), centres and institutions of public anthropology, masters degrees and university courses in public anthropology sprouting up.

Mathijs Pelkmans (2013) rightly remind us to be wary of the fact that some kinds of public anthropology are better than others, and in those questionable circumstances, we would be better off if those anthropologists had no impact at all, had no publicly audible voice. There are of course anthropologists who have had a murky history as public intellectuals, a history we would rather now forget.<sup>xxviii</sup> With these caveats, the opening up of a space for a public anthropology seems a positive development.

Moreover, those who took the risks to write jargon free books engaging broad publics are being rewarded. Jason De Leon's (2015) *The Land of Open Graves* won several prestigious book prizes including the 2016 Margaret Mead Award and the 2018 J. I. Staley Book Prize. Alma Gottlieb and Philip Graham (1993) won the Victor Turner Prize for *Parallel World*. And though I disregarded the writing advice I was given at my institution; it is gratifying to know that *Nightmarch* is being recognised by others.<sup>xxix</sup>

But above all change is coming from 'below'. Undoubtedly what is happening in the wider world of publishing is beginning to affect the shape of academic writing. Perhaps it is the very pressure of decades of professionalism, the knowledge that years of tenure criteria and academic ranking have dumbed potential brilliance into mediocrity in writing, that we feel the need to push back. Perhaps it is because in this era of rising inequality and authoritarianism, we feel Orwell's sense of political and artistic purpose in writing more than ever to keep alive the spaces of democracy, hope of justice, and demands for a more equal world. Perhaps we are empowered by the success of scholars

like David Graeber or Jason De Leon to have a real impact beyond the academy and to begin reclaiming a more public dissident space for anthropology. What is particularly encouraging is that it is not only those who have the job security to experiment but also younger scholars who are beginning to burst the seams of the academic straitjackets.

And finally, the American Association of Anthropologists, acknowledging the deficiencies of the current promotions and tenure review, has put out new guidelines, urging departments and universities to acknowledge public forms of writing and scholarship.<sup>xxx</sup>

This collective will, across generations, I hope will be a force for overall change towards giving more room for writing that matters and matters beyond the academy. The point is not simply to 'humanise' our interlocutors or to celebrate an aesthetics of narrative arcs, characters and plots in our writing. But to reclaim in our writing the political, even revolutionary, potential of our experiences in producing knowledge that is new, confined to margins, silenced, and that can grind against the common-sense perspectives that prop up systems of coercive domination.

## **Afterlife**

Let me make some final reflections. It remains to be seen what – if anything – happens to the stories of Gyanji, Kohli, Vikas, Prashanth, Somwari and others.<sup>xxxi</sup> Didier Fassin (2015) rightly urges us to be astute to the public afterlife of ethnography. But giving birth, as I am learning, is also about letting go. As Noam Chomsky (1996: 88) said, separating the role of the writer from those who can do something about the issues they write about, 'The responsibility of a writer as a moral agent is to try to bring the truth about matters of human significance to an audience that can do something about them.'

Though the Indian government has strangled the Naxalite movement in the forests in recent years, we have also seen social media resistant upsurges with people self-claiming #MeToUrbanNaxal as a way of protesting against the ever-expanding number of scholars and activists attacked as Naxalites to silence them. It is perhaps somewhat ironic that in India, the country that some call the world's largest democracy, extreme state repression has inadvertently led to the idea of Naxalism or Maoism keeping alive the idea of democracy itself. 'Dissent is the safety valve of democracy', a Supreme Court Bench declared trying to (unsuccessfully) intervene in preventing Pune Police from sending Gautam, Sudha, Varvara Rao, Arun and Vernon to prison. I would refine that to, 'dissent is constitutive of democracy'. Our role as intellectual dissidents is more important than ever.

We will all have our own approaches to channeling our dissidence. Writing is not the only form. Writing for wider publics is certainly not for everyone nor for every instance of our writing. There is also teaching, hosting seminars, participating in discussion groups, signing petitions, marching in rallies, changing the field of scholarship, challenging public policy, using social media, contributing to radio and TV programmes, turning our research into another form of art; curating exhibitions, public displays, making documentaries.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Some of us may do several of these things at the same time.

I have focused here on our monographs as the most powerful translator of our research. We are inheritors of a unique form of knowledge production with the potential to throw important light on issues of significance to the public good that can challenge conventional wisdoms, reclaim the margins, expand our horizons and actions. Let's not get fooled into channeling the energies of our dissidence towards the orthodoxy of our discipline, motivated only by journal rankings, criterias of promotion and REF, driven by professionalism. Let's direct our energies, where we can, in challenging hegemony with our scholarship. Times of repression, oppression and control can also turn into moments of spectacular resistant creativity. We're still a privileged minority. We're in a



moment now where there is actually a call for good writing that matters for humanity as a whole in Anthropology. Let's seize the moment and reshape the future. Our writing can be our weapon.

## **Acknowledgements**

How long  
Can prison walls  
And iron bars  
Cage the free spirit?

From behind the prison walls penned Varvara Rao (2010: 102), imprisoned again in 2018 alongside the other intellectuals and human rights activists of the Bhima Koregaon case as alleged Maoists. As this article went to press in early 2020, Anand Teltumbde and Gautam Navklakha, whose courage and scholarship gave me strength to continue writing *Nightmarch*, were also sent to prison. I dedicate this piece to them and all the other friends, colleagues and students who are in jail in India, battling serious charges struck against them to cripple their activities, but nevertheless still fearlessly fighting for the protection of intellectual freedom.

Had the *Nightmarch* with the Naxalite guerrillas that I recount in the book walked 250 kilometres the other way – north through the agricultural plains and not south into the forests – I could have ended up where Eric Blair was born in Motihari, Bihar India. In hindsight, my debt to George Orwell, reflected in the title of this essay, is writ large across *Nightmarch*. If Orwell believed in the deep immersion of his own body directly into the experiences that he was writing about to break stereotypes, *Nightmarch* emerged from years of living as a participant observer with indigenous communities and Naxalite revolutionaries to challenge received wisdoms about terrorism and romanticized rebels, greed and grievance, poverty and economic growth. If Orwell's purpose was to break through middle class oblivion, writing *Nightmarch* as an aesthetic

experience and not the dry academic text that is valued in academia, came from the need to similarly shake up international and middle class apathy towards these seemingly distant others; people in whose lives we are all deeply implicated whether we recognize it or not. And if Orwell's searing critique of institutionalized forms of socialism and communism emerged from his fundamental belief in the ideals of a more equal world that socialism represented, *Nightmarch* holds deep sympathies for the revolutionary cause despite its damning heightening criticisms of revolutionary action.

I thank the Greg Rawlings and the Programme of Anthropology at the University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand which gave me a summer home as a 'Writer in Residence' for two British winter spells. It is during the first of these terms that I wrote this piece and in the second that I shared it with my colleagues there. I wrote it initially because of the invitation of the British Association of South Asian Studies to deliver the Keynote Lecture at their annual conference in March 2019 in Durham, U.K. The Association had just set good example by issuing a statement as an institution against the raids of the houses of Professor Satyanarayan and Professor Teltumbde (before he was imprisoned) and I wanted to salute their show of solidarity to our colleagues who were facing the brunt of repression in South Asia. It was notable because although many statements signed by individuals were being floated, institutional statements carry greater weight yet very few institutional directors and committees were willing to take such risks. I am grateful to my then PhD students Sandhya Fuchs, Thomas Herzmark, Megnaa Mehtta and Itay Noy, and to Amarirosa, for making that Durham meeting so meaningful and memorable. The piece was adapted a month later for a Keynote Lecture at a UCL Anthropology of Revolution conference and then again for the Annual Gold Lecture in Anthropology, delivered in October 2019. I thank the audiences at these events as well as Maurice Bloch, Rob Higham, Jonathan Parry, Mathijs Pelkmans and Gavin Smith, who were kind enough to read draft versions of this piece. A panel at the AAA on this theme was convened by Priya Nelson and myself and I learnt a great deal from my fellow panelists Philip Bourgois, Alex Fattal, Carole McGranaham and Laurence Ralph whose own work has been inspirational. At Current Anthropology, it was Laurence Ralph and Lisa McKamy who saw this piece to publication and I am extremely grateful to the excellent constructive comments I received from the reviewers there. Serious readers

may note with some irony that the ESRC funded the research that led to *Nightmarch* and that the time to write it (and this article) was carved out because of an ERC grant. This though, is an aberration, not the norm.

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<sup>i</sup> Though the number of people employed in universities has grown, certainly in the UK, only a minority engage in critical analysis that challenges the establishment; most serve external power (Smith and Smith 2016).

<sup>ii</sup> Stefan Collini (2016) says that if 'prosperity' has become the overriding value of market democracies, universities are being repurposed as 'engines of growth', with buyers and sellers. Students, once considered by right-wing governments as 'disrupters of society', 'sponging of it', are now positioned as 'customers and consumers', seeking 'value for money'. Academics are to become mere producers or providers who, if not kept under check, will threaten 'consumer interest'. Now ironically demonized in the role formerly assigned to students as professional-class spongers (Collini 2016), academics are under constant assessment and target control. In the UK, REF (Research Evaluation Framework) is being married to TEF (Teaching Evaluation Framework).

<sup>iii</sup> This is of course not to say that left-wing populism isn't as dangerous; history has shown only too well how the intentions of communism can end up looking like fascism.

<sup>iv</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/amid-illiberal-revolution-in-hungary-a-university-with-us-roots-fights-to-stay/2018/09/03/7061771c-a547-11e8-a656-943eefab5daf\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/amid-illiberal-revolution-in-hungary-a-university-with-us-roots-fights-to-stay/2018/09/03/7061771c-a547-11e8-a656-943eefab5daf_story.html)

<sup>v</sup> No doubt the histories of Centres of South Asia Studies is varied between places and affects the different pressures they face. Here, I provide only a broad brushed direction of change that emerges mainly from the UK context. I believe it has wider relevance, including in the US. Though Dirks (2012) has a less acerbic reading of the transformation of South Asia Studies in the US. It is true that one can use the contradictions of geopolitical interests to pursue work that is progressive. I am reminded of the economist Daniel Thorner, who was hired by

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William Norman Brown (founder of the University of Pennsylvania's Department of South Asian Regional Studies) during the Cold War expansion to giving South Asian expertise for military and strategic purposes (Dirks 2015), but did some fascinating work engaging debates in Marxism on the agrarian transition, agricultural corporative and land and labour in India. He was, though, later fired from Penn as part of the McCarthy era's red scare (Dirks 2015).

<sup>vi</sup> What has been called the LSE Gaddafi scandal, over which the then LSE Director Howard Davies resigned, is a case in point. The upper echelons of the School was accused of accepting several million pounds from the Gaddafi regime to train civil servants and professionals which was seen as a part of deal to sanitise Gaddafi's reputation in the West, and all this after the School had awarded Gaddafi's son a PhD which was later said to have been plagiarised. This compromise hit the public limelight; many others don't.

<sup>vii</sup> To say nothing is as much a significant act as to say something, Gerald Berreman put it well (1968: 392).

<sup>viii</sup> When the president-elect of the American Association of Anthropologists tried to unsuccessfully challenge David Aberle and Kathleen Gough's proposal that the AAA should condemn the US role in the war in Vietnam, saying that it did not 'advance the science of anthropology,' Berreman, wrote in Gough's defense. He said, 'The dogma that public issues are beyond the interests or competence of those who study and teach about man is myopic and sterile professionalism and a fear of commitment which is both irresponsible and irrelevant' (Berreman 1968: 391). More recently the AAA has not hesitated to put out institutional condemnations for instance in relation to the use of Anthropologists in the US Military's Human Terrain System project.

<sup>ix</sup> When I had lived in those hills, the security forces only climbed up every three weeks or so. A long line of battleships would be followed by at least five hundred armed men who came on foot to avoid being blown up by the manually triggered landmines laid by the Naxalites. They rarely dared to stay more than a day or two. But by the time *Nightmarch* was published, the children went to school against the high fences of a permanent barracks and its machine gun outposts.

<sup>x</sup> One estimate has it that an average paper in a peer-reviewed journal is read completely by no more than 10 people. <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/prof-no-one-is-reading-you>.

<sup>xi</sup> Others were killed. MM Kalburgi, a scholar of Vachan literature, once Vice Chancellor of Hampi's Kannada University, killed in 2015. Followed by Gauri Lankesh, editor of a Kannada weekly, a journalist turned activist, shot in 2017. Both murdered by Hindu goons in a state where in July last year (2018) a Member of Legislative Assembly (from the ruling Hindu right-wing Bharatya Janata Party) felt he could say in public that if he was home minister, he would order the police 'to shoot intellectuals'.

<sup>xii</sup> Under Section 124A of the Indian Penal Code, a sedition law introduced in the colonial era and used against those fighting for Indian independence, including Gandhi. Also used was the dreaded Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act.

<sup>xiii</sup> To be sure allegations of being 'anti-national' are as old as the independent Indian state. The Naxalite label also has a long history, going back to the late sixties. Its resurgence – as 'Maoist' – for suppressing those who have been human rights workers predates the present government. In 2010, for instance, Binayak Sen, the Vice-President of the People's Union of Civil Liberties, also a pediatrician and public health specialist, and Ajay T. G, long term research assistant/collaborator to anthropologist Professor

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Jonathan Parry and a film maker, were targeted for helping Maoists and for sedition. Both were jailed and though they are now out on bail (largely because of a major campaign nationally and internationally – one was signed by 22 Nobel laureates), the cases are ongoing. See Parry (2015) for the a sensitive, thoughtful and revealing piece on incarceration and its aftermath which covers in detail Ajay’s story but also that of Binayak Sen, with an analysis of regional class politics, and against the backdrop of the tricky boundaries between anthropology and activism, participation and observation.

<sup>xiv</sup> Many have been campaigning against these arrests. See for instance, the Amnesty petition:

<https://www.amnesty.org.uk/actions/bhima-koregaon-BK11-india>.

<sup>xv</sup> This is the Radhakrishnan Report, the first report on Higher Education in independent India.

<sup>xvi</sup> Control of the student body involved dramatically reducing the MPhil/PhD intake and entirely undermining the various systems of reservations for marginalized sections of society Both the state-sanctioned reservations and JNU’s own system of enrollment weightage which ensured places for students from rural underprivileged backgrounds.

<sup>xvii</sup> As evident when the Dean of the School of Arts and Aesthetics won the Infosys prize for Humanities (an Indian annual award of Rs65 lakh – about Pounds 70,000 - to honor outstanding scholarly achievement in India) but was not allowed to attend the prize receiving ceremony.

<https://indianexpress.com/article/education/things-at-jnu-bad-professors-whose-leaves-were-rejected-5525052/>

<sup>xviii</sup> <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/delhi/jamia-library-police-attack-students-recall-6271624/>; <https://thewire.in/government/jamia-police-attack-report>

<sup>xix</sup> <https://caravanmagazine.in/education/jnu-abvp-attack-5-january>

<sup>xx</sup> Many fought back, despite the fear of losing jobs and places (Pathak 2018) and being imprisoned, with hunger strikes, rallies, teach-outs, petitions, opinion pieces in the media. Members of Parliament voiced their concerns, challenging the ‘attack on intellect.’ At stake in the battle for JNU was not just its own heritage, or achievements (Nair 2018), it was the idea of the university itself, said Avijit Pathak (2018). Attacked, Jayati Ghosh said (2018), was ‘higher education in general, in so far as it produces informed and questioning citizens.’ As such, ‘the struggle for the soul of this university, is part of the larger struggle for the soul of the country’ (Ghosh 2018).

<sup>xxi</sup> To be sure, years of underinvestment had already turned many smaller regional universities – like Ranchi University in Jharkhand, where I had my first research affiliation – into centres where classes rarely took place, degrees were bought, and embezzlement of money was rife. But recent years have seen changes of a different order.

<sup>xxii</sup> Also impacted were the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, the Indian Institutes of Technology, the Central Universities, the National Council of Educational Research and Teaching, the State Council of Educational Research and Training. Reflecting on the 2017 ICSSR Chairman, Ramchandra Guha, India’s most noted historian, said the appointment provides confirmation that the government has ‘contempt for thinkers and scholars (as distinct from loyalists and ideologues).’

<sup>xxiii</sup> Of course, all of these freedoms we have in academia are under threat as Dominic Boyer (2010) points out – with funding cuts, many of us can’t do long term field research especially after the initial doctoral stint, multi-sited fieldwork has come with strengths but also losses as it has promoted shorter fieldwork

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in more places rather than longer term immersion in one community, and there are rising pressures to publish fast produced by job markets and institutional cultures.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Comparing Katherine Boo (2012) and Aman Sethi (2011), the latter of which she characterizes as more anthropological, Tarlo (2013) says that though anthropology can learn more about the craft of story-telling from journalists, it also has important lessons to offer about the nature of evidence, ethnographic authority, knowledge co-production, ethics and representation.

<sup>xxv</sup> Algorithms that map incidence of rainfall onto incidences of Maoist violence to reveal reasons for conflict, are increasingly getting the golden stamp over anything the stories of Kohli, Gyanji or Vikas could reveal, especially in political science.

<sup>xxvi</sup> In a conversation with Arielle Milkman on Anthropod from Cultural Anthropology.

<https://culanth.org/fieldsights/1629-w-rap-on-immigration>

<sup>xxvii</sup> Philip Bourgois critiqued the effect of 'Writing Culture' aptly, 'With suspicious predictability, contemporary ethnographers have become more excited when they write about the meaning-of-meaning-of-what-was-meant, than when they write about confronting power relations in flesh and blood' (Bourgois 2002: 419). He said we often failed to write against the blood, sweat and tears of everyday life we encounter on the ground. See also Polier and Roseberry (1989); Starn (2012) has a more appreciative take.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Pelkmans usefully makes explicit that he 'can only be *enthusiastic* about anthropological public voices when they 1) interrogate dominant power and give voice to the marginalised, 2) argue against fundamentalist and essentialist positions, and 3) highlight complexity and are thereby either relativist or anti-anti-relativist.' (Pelkmans 2013: 398).

<sup>xxix</sup> *Nightmarch* was shortlisted for the 2019 Orwell Prize, the New India Book Foundation Prize, longlisted for the Tata Literature Live Award and appeared on several 2018 Book of the Year Lists from the New Statesman in the UK to Scroll India.

<sup>xxx</sup> <http://s3.amazonaws.com/rdcms->

[aaa/files/production/public/AAA%20Guidelines%20TP%20Communicating%20Forms%20of%20Public%20Anthropology.pdf](http://s3.amazonaws.com/rdcms-aaa/files/production/public/AAA%20Guidelines%20TP%20Communicating%20Forms%20of%20Public%20Anthropology.pdf)

<sup>xxxi</sup> All I know right now is they are circulating beyond the realms I thought I could reach. Turning up in bookshops in Turin and airports in Delhi and Mumbai to hidden away pavement stores on the *ghats* of Benares, being translated into other languages.

<sup>xxxii</sup> See the comprehensive review of 'Engaged Anthropology' by Low and Engle Merry 2010.