

While the editor must be lauded for taking upon herself a task that is the first of its kind, and while the reviewer concedes to the exclusion of ideas not directly pertaining to art criticism, two criticisms of K.B. Goel's commentary on art must not be overlooked – first, there is a decisive lack of intense philosophical, aesthetic or literary reflection, causing the reviews to be lightweight and subject to popular ignorance. Even the best of journalistic criticism is often well-written than well-argued; second, the epigrammatic nature that his writing takes refuge in functions as a bane in absence of true authenticity, missing the nail and lacking any very deep impact from without. Nevertheless, the volume will serve as an inspiration for art critics in the future.

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THE DEATH SCRIPT: DREAMS AND DELUSIONS IN NAXAL COUNTRY. By Ashutosh Bhardwaj. New Delhi: Fourth Estate India/Harper Collins, 2020. 269 pp.

Already and rightly reviewed by others as a 'genre-bender' (Aditya Mani Jha, Hindu Business Line) Ashutosh Bhardwaj's *The Death Script: Dreams and Delusions in Naxal Country* is undoubtedly a striking work of non-fiction, from the pages of which, however, a fiction-writer keeps rearing his head, till the attuned-reader is left searching for the artist within his art (perhaps much to the chagrin of T S Eliot!). Yes, celebrated journalist of several years, the author, perhaps, at last, consciously seeks to break free from the inevitable trammels imposed by the reticence required of journalistic writing, to consciously cross over to the luxuries of emotional repose and stability offered by the craft of the novelist. Is it a weary bid to escape the 'corpses pinned to the tip of his fountain pen' (*DS* 240) or perhaps a final 'death script' to bury the death reporter within him, forever? Is *The Death Script* then mere reportage of Maoist-Police skirmishes, or rather the checkered journey of awakening, an internal *rites de passage* – of crossing the threshold of comforting, and comfortable, lifelong-certainties into stark realities painfully acquired? For one, *The Death Script* is a gripping narrative, with all the potential of a *künstlerroman*, ready to sprout whenever the optimum conditions prevail, and, if one may say so, even a brilliant swan song, for the purely journalistic self of the author, all blended into one.

A book in its physical, tangible avatar, even in the age of Kindle-Readers and e-books, still carries a lot of currency and meaning – as is the case with the hardcover edition of *The Death Script*. The strategically placed black pages, which separate the different sections, act as fitting palls for the legions of deaths and dead bodies that this author has been witness to, in the years of reporting from the conflict-zone in Bastar – alternately labelled India's 'Red Corridor'. One is instantly taken back to the artistry of the novel *Tristram Shandy*, the eighteenth century English masterpiece by Laurence Sterne, which threw intellectual challenges, in its own time, to its readers at critical junctures in the narrative by inserting blank or black pages, and if not thoroughly *performative* like *Tristram Shandy*,

The Death Script is, along similar lines, a veiled meditation on multiple subjects including the art of narration or story-telling! The mixing of genres, which the book effortlessly combines – from the confessional mode of diary-writing to the remembered- reticence of journalism, reminiscent almost of H.E. Bates, to the nascent saplings of novelistic prose and finally the polyphony of voices – works wonders for readers from multiple walks of life with divergent tastes and academic or professional training. Incessant churning out of literary fiction, non-fiction, and bestseller-lists (as if from Vulcan’s own smithy!) in recent times, prompted by the fiercely competitive publishing industry, often leaves readers bedazzled. But it is still possible for the keen and sensitive reader to smell out a book worth their investment in time and emotional involvement, from amidst the glitz of advertising gimmicks and propaganda. *The Death Script* is one such good investment, which will not often disappoint a reader.

Though several informative and insightful books¹ have been published in the past on the Maoist insurgency in general, and specifically in Bastar, the depth, sincerity and empathy of this latest addition far surpasses that of its predecessors, marked by more distanced analyses. And for many who have been hitherto unaware of such in-depth and first-hand account of the struggles and bloodbath in the forests of Bastar, between Maoists and the Police, the book is undoubtedly going to be an eye-opener, and yet never for once force one to take sides or be judgmental. One of the earliest reviewers of this book dwells on this quicksand quality of the work – of its uncanny ability to suck the readers into its ‘exorcism’, almost unawares, thereby making them realize, as if with a jolt, how deeply ‘implicit’ they too are in this bloodbath, sold in instalments as news (Supriya Nair, Mumbai Mirror).

Divided into seven sections, preceded by a ‘Pre-Text’, the seven sections are in turn arranged around the pattern of abstractions and felt-realities (*dream, delusion, death script, displacement*, but not always in that order!). The book records with accuracy the four years (2011-15) of the naxalite upheavals, when Bhardwaj was posted in Bastar precisely for such reportage. The journalist-author’s, life among naxals in the remotest areas of Abujhmad forest, his daily encounters with the deprivations and the idealism which drove the revolutionaries and his sense of complicity in the State’s apathy to towards the marginalization of the adivasis, is woven in a fabric of facts, undistorted, though filtered through the perceptions of a city-bred man who at every point grapples with the challenges of giving voice to the dead, the voiceless and the subaltern. But, what perhaps appeals most to a literary reading in this work, are moments of subtle and unpretentious confessions (‘Minutes after he (Joga) was murdered, a man deep inside me, who loves, who yearns for love, a part of that man was also murdered’ 16), critiques of the limitations of the journalists’ trade, the unconscious marks of fatigue that come from emotional reticence demanded of a journalist: ‘A novelist may admit to it, but can a journalist ever address the reader and say, “I was always in search of sorrow. My words sought a home in the grief of others?” ’ (95), and also those which fire the assumption that there is already a transition in process, perhaps imperceptibly, from the dispassionateness demanded of journalism to the involvement expected of the novelist!

The book, if one is ready to pay close enough attention, beyond its depiction of bare facts, is actually a site of remarkable composting – of the author’s extensive reading on the one hand of European writers, classics and imbibing of diverse global/cultural artifacts, and on the other of his deep attachment to Hindi litterateurs as Krishna Baldev, Nirmal Verma, and others who go to make a strong bilingual writer. Each of these influences has

inextricably, and effortlessly, woven themselves into the thoughts and prose of the book organically. The influences of Calvino, Kundera, to name a few are evident at places, while the forests of Abujhmad, where '[r]eturn becomes impossible' (100) shall instantly remind one of the mysterious Hotel California where 'you can check out any time you like, but you can never leave!'

Between those folds of carefully arranged sub-sections hovering between dreams, displacements, deaths and the scripting of the deaths, the factual reports of state oppression and bloody Maoist retaliations, what stands out and remains etched as one closes the pages of this fascinating book are the silhouettes of some unforgettable characters. The sixty-two inches tall inconspicuous lady police officer 'whose voice carries the fragility of dewdrops' (53), the young working mother exiled in Varanasi whose words find momentary refuge in the audience of the author, a stark stranger (26), the unexpressed loneliness that fills the narrative at the strange disappearance of 'Tutuji' the Frog, the daughter of naxal parents, whose email id is unexpectedly and incongruously romantic ('*jaabili* ... full moon in Telugu' 227), the absolute stranger whose ritual feast the author is compelled to partake of ('feasted in the memory of a dead man' 253), Joga and his dreams of life with Varalakshmi 'in a distant city' (13). These are characters that might resurface from the depths of the author's memory, to haunt the reader for a long time afterwards, and also, perhaps, become protagonists in future tales he chooses to weave.

The Death Script is a quiet implosion, an empathetic portrayal of poverty, death, and even a paean to dangerous beauty of the uncharted forests of Abujhmad it certainly is; but above all else it is, perhaps, the manifesto of the struggles of this author to find an equipoise from the often-contentious dualities present within himself as a Journalist and a writer of fiction, of straddling two almost opposed worlds. It is also a quiet means to escape the almost morbid compulsion of finding 'sources' and 'news' in people he meets, or perhaps to hit the pause button to the incessant clatter of the death script typing itself out within him. As a proficient bilingual writer's first book in English, *The Death Script* raises the bar for contemporary Indian non-fiction, as it also challenges the accepted moulds of fiction. By all means, it is a must read for all who value courage and conscience in journalism and also for those who look for poetry in the midst of the prosaic and mundane!

Notes

¹ Other significant books on maoist insurgency, in several parts of India including Bastar that have riveted readers before this are, Anuradha Chenoy and Kamal Mitra Chenoy's *Maoist and Other Armed Conflicts*, India: Penguin, 2010; Nandini Sundar's *The Burning Forest: India's War in Bastar*, India: Juggernaut, 2016; Alpa Shah's, *Nightmarch: Among India's Revolutionary Guerillas*, London: Hurst, Chicago: University of Chicago Press; New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2019.

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