

Books

TRIBALS AND DALITS IN ORISSA: Towards a Social History of Exclusion, c. 1800-1950 by Biswamoy Pati. Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2019.

SOCIAL historians seek to uncover and describe the cultural worlds of ordinary people, people who are at once far removed from and yet deeply affected by the traditional concerns of the discipline of history, i.e. states and statesmen, revolutions and rulers. Where historians focus upon 'big' events, transformative episodes like colonialism and imperialism and important actors of the past, social historians turn their attention to the minutiae of work, family and everyday lives of paupers and peasants. Writing this 'history from below' requires the appreciation of newer historical sources like folklore, myths, oral narratives and newer ways of interpreting textual archives. Biswamoy Pati (1956-2017) was one of the finest social historians of modern India, whose prolific career of teaching and researching history at the University of Delhi was cut short by his untimely death.

Tribals and Dalits in Orissa: Towards a Social History of Exclusion, c. 1800-1950, published posthumously, is a fine example of his vast oeuvre and provokes the reader to see the 'Age of Capital' and the 'Age of Empire' through the lenses of people who were at the margins of capital and empire. The book introduces us to the diverse and interconnected lives of pilgrims and leprosy patients who thronged Puri, tribals of Kalahandi accused of *meriah* (human sacrifice), low-caste healers who specialized in small pox inoculations and treating snakebites, peasants who revolted against feudal lords and moneylenders, communist leaders and Christian Munda rebels. Pati skilfully reads the colonial archive against the grain to enter the life-worlds of individuals at the margins, inmates of lunatic asylums,

men who murdered an estate manager and women who were accused of witchcraft. The author shows how people's lives, cultures and traditions were shaped by colonialism and capitalism in 19th and 20th centuries and how these world-historical processes were articulated in the towns, fields and forests of Orissa.

The five chapters of the book (apart from the introduction) are spread across geographical locations, sites and time periods, and build upon Pati's extensive scholarship on the social histories of health, medicine, religious movements, colonial domination and resistance in Orissa. Chapter 2 examines the impact of colonial capitalism in Puri, and the fate of tribals and peasants in the princely states of Kalahandi and Mayurbhanj. Chapter 3 argues that the 'socially excluded' practiced multiple strategies to negotiate the loss of dignity, land and commons; from taking up shifting cultivation in the hills, adopting new caste and religious identities, to outright rebellion against social and economic structures. Chapter 4 takes up the indigenous health and healing systems of tribals and outcastes and discusses how local elites and the colonial medical gaze appropriated and transformed the experience, treatment and beliefs around small pox, leprosy, mental illness, syphilis and snakebites. The focus of Chapter 5 is on rituals and traditions that contributed to the legitimacy of kings, Brahmins and royal *darbar* (courts), as well as counter-hegemonic practices that periodically challenged or subverted the social structures of power. Pati describes how local elites ritualized the treatment of leprosy and the worship of Jagannatha, and how marginalized communities engaged with the Mahima Dharma, Gandhian politics and Christianity.

The final chapter of the book (Chapter 6) describes the tensions and contradictions of the Indian national movement with peasant rebellions and the

well known Praja Mandal movement in the princely state of Nilgiri in northern Orissa. In the final decade before Independence, the Congress, the communists (Communist Party of India) and the *darbar* were forced to respond to the pressures generated by tribals and peasants, even as the excluded groups found their own issues sidelined in the dominant 'national' dynamics against colonialism and imperialism.

Biswamoy Pati's book is an important intervention in the debate between the nationalist historians, whose focus on the freedom movement and Oriya nationalism denied space or agency to tribals and outcastes, and the subaltern historians who argue for an autochthonous realm of peasant consciousness and agency manifested in the form of tribal rebels and rebellions. Pati shows how caste identities were fluid in 19th century Orissa, and social relations within and between communities were molded by the economic impacts of feudal and colonial rule. The book challenges the popular perception of tribals as forest-dwelling communities who practiced 'primitive' livelihoods since ancient times and remained outside the fold of caste society and Hinduism. Instead, it shows that elite sections within tribal society often claimed caste status and ritual position within Brahminical Hinduism, even as tribal peasants dispossessed by land revenue/settlement policies and anti-*meriah* military campaigns were forced to migrate to the hills and take up forest-based livelihoods and diets.

Rather than eschewing 'modern' forms of politics and religion, the Gonds, Mundas, Oraons and the Khonds negotiated a complex social space and engaged with Christianity, Gandhian and communist politics, royal courts and new religious movements. This holds valuable lessons for contemporary civil society and social movements that seek to mobilize *Adivasi* communities on the lines of primordial identities and timeless associations with forest landscapes.

Tribals and Dalits in Orissa also builds exclusion as a rich social and empirical category, a refreshing departure from much of the policy literature that sees exclusion as a result of (past) state interventions and liable to be remedied by inclusive state policies in the future. Pati demonstrates that exclusion is a process that plays out in everyday lives and popular politics, and coalesces in the form of 'marginal' identities by experiences of dispossession, indignity and ritualization of cultural life. The story of the Bhamaramari plant and the folk treatment for leprosy in Chapter 4 is one of the many examples of identities formed at the intersections of religion, sovereignty and ecology.

Social identities are complex outcomes of long-term processes of economic transformation, adverse incorporation into land and labour markets, and (re)configurations within the realm of ideas and popular culture. Over time, socially excluded individuals and groups negotiate a shifting terrain of power and hegemony as they make claims upon culture, resources and political authority. Therefore, despite the debilitating outcomes with regard to economic, social and political status, exclusion is neither complete nor uncontested in any society. It takes a historian of the caliber of Biswamoy Pati to articulate this idea; and the field of social history in India will be poorer without his intellectual presence in the future.

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AGAINST STATE, AGAINST HISTORY: Freedom, Resistance and Statelessness in Upland Northeast India by Jangkhomang Guite. Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2019.

THIS volume on the Northeast of India, in the words of its author, aims to 'defocus and decentre the history of this upland region from the dominant civilizational discourse on the hill tribe.' This he seeks to do through a 'counter-perspective' that he explains in the introduction to the book, also revisiting its several aspects in the nine chapters that follow. This is a history not simply from or at the margins but also one spanning the time between the immemorial and the coming of the colonial state. This is also a history guided by the ethnographic principle of self-understanding and in that sense a history 'by' rather than 'of' the people as objects in focus. Although highly rewarding as more pages get turned, the book begins by violating and unhinging our usual sense of history through a bracketing of the customary shibboleths – the state, civilizational frameworks, documentary or written evidences and very often the archaeological chassis around which we flesh out our barest historical narratives.

Readers familiar with the works of Ajay Skaria, Willem van Schendel and James Scott are likely to land somewhat gently over the basic propositions argued by the book. But others will have to face a historical narrative of people neither left behind by history or bypassed by it in a passive sense but ones actively recoiling from the known civilizational pathways and resisting their overt dominance as well as pernicious