Sangeeta Dasgupta. *Reordering Adivasi Worlds: Representation, Resistance, Memory*

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This book is exemplary in many ways. It deals with the Tana Bhagat, or “devotees of Tana,” an Adivasi reform movement that began in 1914 within the Oraon tribe, in present-day Jharkhand and, in the 1920s, knew a brief celebrity among Congress local activists, due to the similarities of some of the Bhagat tenets and symbols to Gandhian ones, before losing its momentum. This movement had been considered as a fully religious movement, then as a millenarian and pre-national liberation movement by Kumar Suresh Singh, the famous biographer of Birsa Munda (Singh 1983), and later as a simple indigenous or Adivasi resistance against the outsiders of the group by subalternist historiography.

Distancing herself from these previous historiographies, the author, Sangeeta Dasgupta, an historian of colonial India at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, shows that this movement responds more to local economic and political issues than to general religious or nationalist ones, by situating it in a longer and richer colonial history and among a more complex regional and Adivasi society than that often supposed. In her theoretical introduction, the author pleads for new “Adivasi Studies,” distinct from the older ethnographically-centered “tribal studies,” and fed by subalternist and post-colonial critiques of colonial categories as well as by current works on “belonging” (Dasgupta and Rycroft 2011). For this reason, I would call this historiographic movement Critical Adivasi Studies (vs uncritical activism).

More precisely, the author starts from the particular case of the Oraons in Chota Nagpur, an Adivasi group speaking the Dravidian Kurukh language, by following the construction of descriptive categories, including that of “tribe,” first by colonial administrators-ethnologists and then by missionaries in the years preceding Independence. The book thus raises the question of the articulation between colonial history and the history of the present time, between historical criticism and community memories. On this issue, the author relies on Dipesh Chakrabarty’s notion of “minority histories” (Chakrabarty 2000).

The core of the book is the doctoral thesis of the author on the colonial beginnings of the Tana Bhagat. This central part is complemented by an initial, more historiographical one, devoted to better grasping the pre-colonial situation of the Oraons and its transformation in relation to colonial categorizations. In short, the first textual references refer to different regional terms centered on the notion of foresters (dhangar, on this term, see Skaria 1999), but living in multicastrate villages (p. 207), before colonial administrators and early ethnologists such as Edward Tuite Dalton and especially Herbert Hope Risley reformulated these relations in terms of primitive tribes vs conquering Aryan castes. In a parallel evolution, missionaries evoked “idolatrous”, even
demonolatrous, pagans, before adopting Edward Burnett Tylor’s evolutionary terminology of “animist” tribes (applied to the Indian population by Herbert Risley). The author shows the ambivalence of these paternalistic judgments, which nonetheless never put in doubt, the mission itself, i.e., the possibility of peoples’ conversion. In this respect, Dasgupta evokes the role of catechisms and prayer books in the Kurukh language, sources which have never been studied (p. 114).

One of these historiographic chapters is devoted to a very much understudied figure: Sarat Chandra Roy (1871–1942), a Bengali teacher and lawyer in Ranchi, who was styled the “father of Indian anthropology” by the colonial officer and ethnographer John Henry Hutton. Sangeeta Dasgupta offers us the missing study on this key figure, by exploring two bodies of sources never exploited before: some of his correspondence—notably with another pioneer of ethnology: Alfred Cort Haddon—, and his newspaper articles in Bengali, inscribed in the political debates of the time. Roy’s first work is influenced both by the history of law and Indian literature and by evolutionary ethnology, before taking inspiration from Malinowski, writing in the twenties. This background appears in his ambiguous stance between a defense of the Oraons regarding their cultural values and political emancipation, a reformist or even prudish high caste position in moral and behavior matters, and loyalty to the colonial regime (p. 166–69). A complex figure, but interesting for this very reason, and for the descriptive richness of his work.

The analysis of all these colonial perceptions explains their bias in trying to understand the Tana Bhagat as both a “tribal” and “reformist” movement. In short, the founder, Jatra Oraon (1888–1916) originally introduced the following reforms among the Oraons: the refusal to pay taxes and to continue farming, the abandonment of blood sacrifices, meat, alcohol, mixed teenage dormitories, and the adoption of purificatory practices, such as white clothing echoing khadi homespun promotion, and exorcism of “spirits”. These features reveal Hindu and Christian ascetic influences on the founder, who also refocused the cult around the Oraon main god Dharmes, and called for the return of a tribal Golden Age, showing similarities with both older Kurukh narratives of origins and Christian messianism. Such influences help in understanding certain features of the movement but do not, however, explain the adherence to it.

In examining the socio-economic composition of the movement, Dasgupta shows that the principles defended by its promoters also responded to internal tensions within Oraon society between dominant founding clans, owners of the land (Bhuinari), and landless clans (p. 232), tensions that were exacerbated by colonial land tenure changes and fiscal pressure. This internal fracture explains much better than previous historiography has done the abandonment of collective sacrifices and with them the rejection of village ritual authorities (pahan priests, etc.), who belonged precisely to dominant clans. In their place, the Tana Bhagat imposed prophets, preachers and healers from Tana’s subgroup, as well as procedures tending to ward off forces deemed harmful—spirits called bonga, bhut—, but also witch-hunting, rather than negotiating with them through sacrifices as previously prescribed by the priests (p. 249).

Originating from very subaltern fractions of the population, the movement was opposed by both colonial and village authorities, but it witnessed an unexpected revival with the Gandhian non-cooperation movement in the early 1920s. The author shows that this dynamic was based on a form of mutual misunderstanding, or reciprocal appropriation, between Gandhian Congress activists and the Tana Bhagat, based on the partial similarity.
of their principles and ideas: social and moral reform, rumors about Gandhi’s powers, participation in certain anti-colonial mobilizations.

9 To this study centered on colonial time, the author eventually adds a shorter enquiry on the oral memories and historical claims of the present descendants of the Tana Bhagats. She shows in particular that the misunderstandings with the Gandhians and Congress nationalists have been erased from these memories, which assert that the original Bhagats were “freedom fighters” unjustly abandoned by the nation. Sangeeta Dasgupta also frames her study by reminders of recent legal cases and decrees (notably the Religious Freedom Bill passed by the Jharkhand Legislative Assembly in 2017) that demonstrate the contemporary stakes involved in this colonial history, in particular the tensions between Christian Adivasi and non-converts, some of which tensions are being instrumentalized today by Hindu nationalists.

10 In conclusion, this book explores the case of the Tana Bhagat in great detail, offering a luminous analysis, while revealing previously ignored complexities resituated in a colonial history fed by the epistemology of categories. Without in any way detracting from the quality of this analysis I personally, as an ethnographer, regret that the very precision of this case study limits the space for conclusive comparison with other Adivasi reform movements, which the author discusses theoretically, among many other such movements, in her introduction: David Hardiman on Bhils, Ajay Skaria on Dhang, Marine Carrin and Harald Tambs-Lyche on Santal and their relations with missionaries, etc. But in any case, such exchanges can now take place, thanks to this new and innovative work.

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