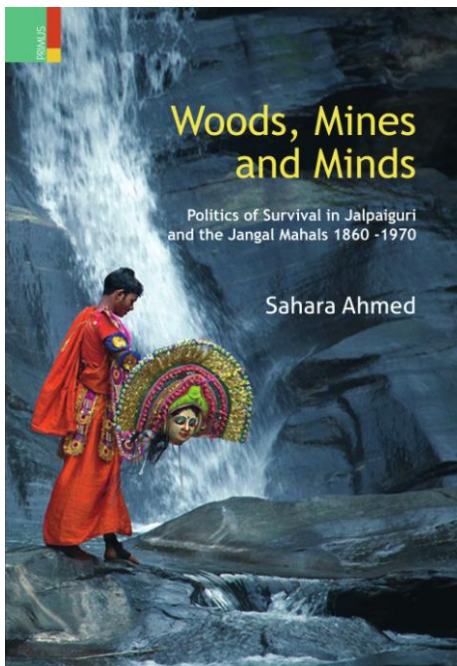


BOOK REVIEW

Reordering Nature: An Assessment of Colonial and Post-Colonial Forest Policy in Jalpaiguri and the Jungle Mahals

Anju O.M. Toppo *

Sahara Ahmed. 2019. *Woods, Mines and Minds: Politics of Survival in Jalpaiguri and the Jungle Mahals (1860–1970)*. New Delhi: Primus Books. xix + 300.



Over the years, several studies have documented how state-led development in South Asia has caused marginal communities to be displaced and lose access to traditional resources. Sahara Ahmed's monograph, *Woods, Mines and Minds*, furthers such scholarship by scrutinizing the impacts of state initiatives on conservation and extraction in both colonial and postcolonial India. *Woods, Mines and Minds* explores the complex and layered impacts of “scientific forestry” and “scientific mining” as they played out in two distinct ecological zones in Jalpaiguri and the Jungle Mahals (modern-day West Bengal), across the colonial and postcolonial periods in India.

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The monograph comprises six chapters, which are impressively supported by archival material, government reports, and a wide array of critical literature. Chapter 1 describes the distinct physical and climatic features of Jalpaiguri and the Jungle Mahals by comparing maps from James Rennell's surveys—carried out between 1767 and 1774—and district maps based on the Revenue Survey of 1875. Added to this thick geographical and topographical discussion is the documentation in government records of the traditional inhabitants: Santals, Bhumij, Bauris, Paharias, Bhuiyas, Totos, and Rabhas. In particular, the narrative highlights the reliance of these varied communities on their forests and their alternative survival strategies during natural calamities such as droughts and unseasonal weather changes. At the heart of the book, however, is Ahmed's effort to reveal the colonial government's balancing act of managing its commercial interests and its increasing awareness of ecological degradation.

Chapter 2 explores the varied social and ecological implications that followed the steady consolidation of colonial power during the 1860s in the region and especially over land and forest management regimes. The rise of colonial power prompted the decline of the Raikat rulers of the Baikunthpur Raj, who found themselves relegated from holding royal status to becoming mere zamindars confined to Jalpaiguri Palace. This chapter delineates the advent of conservation efforts and the implementation of scientific forestry with a commercial orientation.

Chapter 3 presents a detailed account of the shift in the colonial focus from forests to mining ventures. Given the absence of mines in Jalpaiguri district, except for dolomite ones, the focus turned to the Jungle Mahals. The chapter maps out in considerable detail the range of ecological impacts—such as land degradation, water pollution, and the fouling of air—that resulted from the expansion of mining. Chapter 4 traces the transformation of local inhabitants, from communities having access to a vast array of forest resources, to becoming a landless people whose subsistence livelihoods were increasingly defined by colonial rules and laws. Chapter 5 provides a thoughtful reflection on the continuity and changes in forest policy, with the parallel development of coal mining between 1940 and 1970. This chapter, in particular, focuses on how certain laws in both the colonial and postcolonial phases set the stage for several popular struggles.

The final chapter probes the various discourses surrounding development in the postcolonial era, frequently characterized as a western model of growth. It explores the evolution of participatory forest management as a compromise and examines the impacts of forestry and mining activities on tribal populations throughout the twentieth century.

Ahmed offers a perceptive account of how specific state-led initiatives in forest conservation and extractive mining in colonial and postcolonial India have disproportionately imposed costs on marginalized communities and invariably ended up vesting control over resources with the powerful and the state. Ahmed covers the strategies of officials at considerable length. However, there is a noticeable gap in the narrative concerning the perspectives of Indigenous people. The assertion that Indigenous groups sought affiliation with the nationalist movement due to the emergence of a messianic leadership (242) is an easy generalization that warrants more in-depth analysis. In other words, by exploring the complex motivations, contextual influences, and individual agency within these communities, a more compelling account of their involvement in the nationalist struggle could have been fleshed out.

This book will be a useful resource for academics who want a descriptive study of colonial policies on forestry and mining in Jalpaiguri and the Jungle Mahals. The monograph may also appeal to environmental activists, governmental officials, industrialists, NGOs, and advocacy groups. Government officials responsible for formulating policies can benefit from the insights provided in the book while making informed decisions and formulating sustainable policies. It is hard to disagree with Ahmed that there is a need for greater democratization in resource management if sustainable solutions to the challenges faced in these regions are to be found.

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