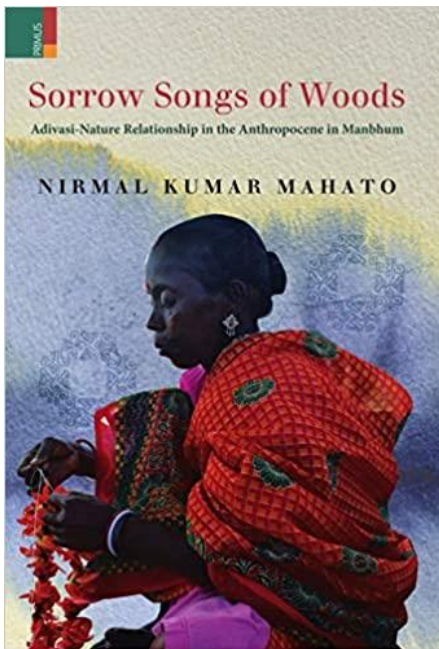


BOOK REVIEW

Nature And Indigeneity: Towards An Environmental History of Adivasi Society

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Nirmal Kumar Mahato, *Sorrow Songs of Woods: Adivasi Nature Relationships in the Anthropocene in Manbhum*, Primus Books: New Delhi, 2020, ISBN 13: 9789390022472



Nirmal Kumar Mahato's *Sorrow Songs of Woods* is a richly textured ethnographic and historical account of the Adivasi or indigenous people of Manbhum. Territorially speaking, Manbhum was a single district in British India, but it currently sprawls across the states of Bihar and West Bengal. Essentially, Mahato provides an environmental history of the Adivasi people by setting up a dialogue of sorts between the official archive and a range of indigenous sources, including myths, oral accounts, and lived experiences. The author is keen to emphasize that his study is a critique of the outsider, upper-caste, and elitist gaze, by stating that he is no stranger to Manbhum and that he speaks for his community. *Sorrow Songs of Woods*,

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hence, seeks to directly challenge former writings that characterize Adivasi people as being economically inferior, underdeveloped, culturally simple, and sometimes even criminal. However, the monograph is careful not to take on a patronizing tone nor romanticize the social and ecological worlds that shape Adivasi people.

The first chapter deals with the development of the Adivasi sense of place. While the book provides ample descriptions of the natural features of Manbhum through the frames of geology, geomorphology, and climate, Mahato is keen to avoid the charge of environmental determinism. Instead, he describes the indigenous worldview as being based on a careful weaving of physical settings such as forests and climate and a range of livelihood and subsistence activities. That is, according to Mahato, the Adivasi people construct a type of social nature rather than passively adapting to their environmental endowments. Mahato also describes how the Adivasi people organized themselves into a distinct political community within densely forested tracts in the pre-colonial period. Notably, the community featured a complex network of chieftainships, with a pre-eminent raja, whose capital was located at Patkum, linked to 17 semi-autonomous chiefs. During the Mughal dispensation (1526–1764) in the region, there was very little actual control exercised over the forests and the Adivasis. However, the arrival of British colonialism in the late eighteenth century dramatically altered the situation for the worse, as they sought to settle the forests as zones for cultivation and instituted an oppressive and severe land tax. Consequently, between 1769 and 1833, the Adivasis organized five major revolts, compelling the British administration to reorganize Manbhum under the South Western Frontier Agency (SWFA) in the hope of regulating the “wild, imperfectly civilized” Adivasi people (p. 29).

The second chapter explores the internal, occupation-based social hierarchy within Adivasi communities. Two predominant divisions, in particular, are identified: the first being the Kherias and Birhors, who are forest dwellers who practise shifting cultivation and who were previously hunters–gatherers. The second are the Santhals, Mundas, Oraons, Bhumijis, Koras, and Kurmis. Interestingly, these groups practise a form of endogamy or prohibition of marriage with inferior Adivasi communities (p. 35). For Mahato, these discriminatory belief systems raise several questions; primarily, he speculates whether this form of casteism was drawn from surrounding Hindu societies or was it brought on by occupational and productional relations.

The author contends that from the fourth century CE onwards, various Hindu beliefs and rituals began to find social traction in Manbhum. The chieftains, in particular, began identifying themselves as Rajputs or

Kshatriyas and often engaged in matrimonial ties only within their ranks, actively seeking to distance themselves from the rest of the community. These rajas even went on to ensure the settlement of Brahmins on their lands to draw upon their ritual legitimacy. On the other hand, despite adopting several non-tribal beliefs and values, the Adivasi people retained notions about sacred geographies. From the selection of village site to the maintenance of sacred groves and water bodies, indigenous knowledge systems were rooted in philosophies strongly centred on conservation.

There were other levels of differences as well. The Adivasi people had distinct aesthetics with regard to floor painting, scrolls, murals, and tattoos. They also established their own medicinal practice named horopathy or medico-ethnobotany, which relied on the available flora to manage diseases.

The third chapter discusses the varied social and economic impacts of British colonial rule. It primarily examines how company rule completely transformed the indigenous economy. Economic organization centering on collective endowment and communitarian ideas of production and consumption were replaced with private ownership. Consequentially, Adivasi people who had previously inhabited roles on a spectrum ranging from hunter-gatherers to subsistence cultivators were now forced to become settled agriculturalists and even attempt commercial farming.

The succeeding chapter provides a more comprehensive account of the social and ecological transformation brought on by the British. Feudal practices such as debt bondage were normalized; increased cultivation led to a rapid change in the soil cycle, causing a nutrient imbalance in the region resulting in less productivity, and, eventually, famine; the exploitation of water bodies reduced irrigational possibilities through natural percolation; and extreme deforestation led to the rapid drying up and silting of ponds. The impact of deforestation, however, was not limited to desertification, drought, and temperature rise alone. According to Mahato, there was a striking reduction in indigenous knowledge handed down generations as well. The lush forests are significant sources of biodiversity that enable a vast range of community-based medicinal practices that are at risk of being permanently lost.

The last chapter deals with political mobilization in the Manbhum region, beginning in the late eighteenth century to the present day. The early nineteenth century saw rebellions around land, liquor, and, consequently, forest rights. The rural reconstruction project proposed by Gandhiji gave Adivasis a chance to remobilize during the freedom movement. Gandhi's advocacy for a self-reliant, self-controlled village society, where power is decentralized, was an ideal imagining of Adivasi "community life". The

promise of dignity through autonomy energized mass participation by these communities. While they participated in the Non-cooperation Movement with great rigor, their voices were not given due importance by the upper-caste Hindu leaders in Congress. The dislocation of the Adivasi landscape (p. 178) led to economic, social, and political marginalization, which was followed by the establishing of a hegemony in the region by the upper castes of Bengal, Bihar, and Odisha. The cultural silencing of the Adivasi middle classes, who desperately wanted to integrate into the “national” imagination, created pathways for further Sanskritisation. However, the Mahatos eventually “de-scheduled” themselves after the Mahato Kurmi Mahasabha Movement (1983), and the Santhals organized a *Saphor* or a Revitalization Movement to assert their indigenous culture.

This is an exceptional monograph that traces a series of socio-ecological and political shifts in Manbhum. While many previous writings see forests as only a resource, Mahato emphasizes that for the Adivasi, it is their home. The only critical remark, however, is that there could have been more discussion on the notion of the Anthropocene. Nonetheless, *Sorrow Songs of Woods* should definitely be considered a valuable addition to the growing literature on the conversation surrounding Adivasi people in India.