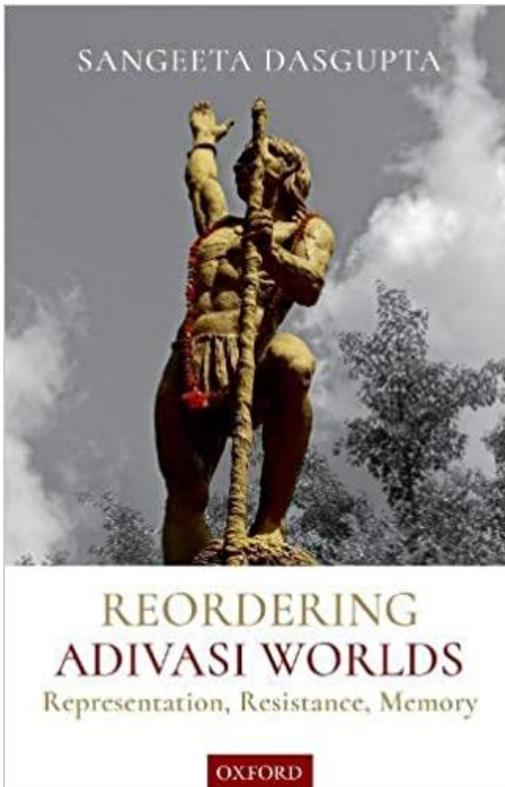


BOOK REVIEW

The Making and Re-making of Adivasi Worlds

Nishaant Choksi*

Sangeeta Dasgupta, *Reordering Adivasi Worlds: Representation, Resistance, Memory*, New Delhi: Oxford, 2022



Reordering Adivasi Worlds is the culmination of Sangeeta Dasgupta's decades-long research on the Oraon community of Chhota Nagpur, Central India, and, in particular, her equally intense scholarly engagements with the Tana Bhagat movement. For those who are familiar with her earlier writings, this is a much-anticipated synthesis of the different arguments and research presentations she has made over the years. For the unfamiliar, on the other hand, it bears mentioning that Dasgupta has been singular in urging researchers on the Adivasi groupings in India to be particularly attentive to how there has been a “continual

* IIT Gandhinagar, nishaant.choksi@iitgn.ac.in

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remaking of community boundaries” (Dasgupta 2022, 28).

The book is divided into two major sections. The first section discusses the “representation” of the Oraon community through early and late colonial, missionary, and ethnographic texts. The argument suggests that the yardstick of “authenticity” to which groups had to conform to determine their tribal status was primarily developed as a result of colonial interventions in Chhota Nagpur in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Early colonial accounts of the Oraon, in fact, did not classify the Oraons as “tribal”; rather, they saw them and the other Adivasi groups of Chhota Nagpur as a stratified agricultural society, albeit one that went beyond the “civilized” Aryan pale. Dasgupta traces the descriptive interplay in these accounts by analysing the terms used to describe them, such as *mleccha*, borrowed from Sanskrit, which sees Oraons as wild forest-dwellers, and *dhangar*, which signalled their poor economic condition, propensity for hard work, and position as precarious agricultural labour. With the rise of Orientalism, ethnography, and disciplinary anthropology in Britain, colonial administrators began to reinterpret the complex identity of the Oraon as a homogenous ethno-linguistic community or as a “tribe” with unique racial, linguistic, and cultural characteristics that represented both their nobility and their primitiveness. In this time—and through the works of colonial ethnographers such as Dalton, Campbell, and Risley—the Oraon and other Adivasi groups in Chhota Nagpur were projected through the Arcadian lens of the “noble savage”: as isolated, primitive people in communion with their ecology and, therefore, easily taken advantage of by the outside world. This move—to an ethnographic definition of the tribe—impacted the later representations of the community by missionaries and Indian anthropologists such as Sarat Chandra Roy.

The “noble savage” idea encouraged missionary activity, as missionaries believed that these heathen races were the least touched by Hindu influence. This led to an intense investigation and even appreciation of the “material and cultural world” of the Oraons and particularly their “village system” (Dasgupta 2022, 103). Missionaries also made a distinction between sections among the Oraon who adhered strictly to the system of nature and spirit-worship, and who therefore were considered “authentic”, and others who accepted their status as “inferior” Hindus (109). Like with other tribes, such as the Santals and Mundas, missionaries were also instrumental in documenting in detail the Kurukh language of the Oraon and their folktales, thereby textually establishing the distinct origin of the community. In seeking to convert the Oraon, these missionaries also ended up contributing to building up what was later seen, even by many Oraon themselves, as the foundation of an independent community identity.

Dasgupta then traces how these missionary and colonial representations shaped the discipline of anthropology in India through an exploration of the work of Sarat Chandra Roy, who wrote extensively on the Oraons. From his roots as a “scientific” anthropologist in the colonial mould, in his later work, Roy changed his stance from one of an observer and documenter of Oraon customs and traditions to an “avid ‘champion’ of the aboriginal cause”, along the same lines as others, such as Verrier Elwin, who worked at the same time. The Oraon, through Roy’s work, went on to become the subject of a national debate on how Adivasis could be integrated into the new postcolonial nation-state and on what terms.

While the first part of the book is informative and offers new insights in relation to the colonial history of the Oraons and the rise of anthropology as a discipline in colonial and postcolonial South Asia, I believe its true strength lies in the second section, which is a historical examination of the “many narratives of the Tana pasts”. It is in this section that Dasgupta makes a significant contribution that challenges the homogenous and fixed representation of the Oraons by anthropologists, historians, and colonial administrators by taking seriously how Oraons—in this case, those that form part of the small but influential spirituo-social movement known as Tana—understand their own history. In many ways, the Tana Bhagats (as Tana followers are known) seem to be outliers to dominant representations of the “tribe” or “Adivasi” constructed through the colonial archive and ethnographic texts. Their proscriptions against spirit worship, animal sacrifice, meat-eating, dancing, and singing seem very much to mirror a move toward Brahminical Hinduism or Christianity. Yet, the Tanas actively positioned themselves against both upper-caste Hindus and Christian missionaries. Consequently, they did not fit in any of the framings of the tribe as a “pure” aboriginal race following animistic ways or as inferior Hindus or Christian converts.

As a historian, Dasgupta locates the emergence of the Tana movement as a form of resistance not only as a part of a “tribe” against oppression by outsiders, but also as the struggle of Oraons who were positioned lower on the economic and cultural hierarchy within their own community. British colonial interventions, Dasgupta argues, exacerbated the divide between the Bhuinhar—the class of Oraon whom authorities believed were the guardians of customary law and traditional land—and the poorer Oraons who worked the land of the Bhuinhars or travelled to the plains as migrant labour. The Tana movement, made up mostly of the latter group, therefore, targeted the socio-spiritual authority of the Bhuinhars, who controlled access to both land and spirits. The demand to give up the plough because it hurts cattle, return to the forests, and prohibit ritual interaction with

spirits and animal sacrifice, Dasgupta suggests, should be seen in light of the struggle within Oraon society as well as against the colonial state structure.

Moreover, far from being an “isolated” group, the Tana actively incorporated ongoing national and international events into their struggle. As the movement coincided with the beginning of World War I in Europe, Tanas incorporated “German Baba” as one of their prophets and referred to “zeppelins, bombs, and cannons” (253) in their speeches. This meant they were aware that their existing situation was linked to the British Raj, and that there were external forces (in this case Germany) that could potentially undermine this status quo. Later, in the 1920s, as Dasgupta discusses extensively in Chapter 6, this awareness laid the groundwork for the Tana Bhagats’ active embrace of Gandhi (“Gandhi Baba”) and the nationalist movement. Along with the founding prophets, the “Raj” that Gandhi had presumably promised in Tana ideology would free them from oppressive agricultural hierarchies and allow them to live a life of *swaraj* (self-rule) according to their understanding of the term.

Throughout the book, Dasgupta writes as a historian engaging with colonial source material, but in the last chapter, she moves more to an ethnographic rather than a strictly historical modality when discussing how the Tana Bhagats sought to understand their own past. This involves analysing contemporary Tana performances, gatherings, and the textual material produced by the community in an attempt to grasp what aspects of their history remain relevant for them. For instance, in contemporary pamphlets and retellings at Tana functions, the Bhagats tend to stress their links with Gandhi and the national freedom movement while omitting the more militant aspects of their movement. This gesture to non-violence could be interpreted as efforts to leverage their participation in nationalist struggles, like the no-rent campaign to reclaim land rights. For the Tanas, the past is one that resonates with the situation they find themselves in within both post-colonial India and Chhota Nagpur, much of which now lies in the state of Jharkhand. Dasgupta does not dispute their interpretation, but rather uses this material to demonstrate how history survives among a people, interacting with the contemporary moment to produce different kinds of political struggles.

By challenging the homogenous representation of tribes and attempting to take seriously movements like the Tana, Dasgupta’s book advances studies on Adivasi communities, colonial India, and the nationalist movement. In addition, it shows a way forward by which historians can be attentive to the archive while also remaining sensitive to people’s own interpretations of their pasts. Thus, it can also be read as an excellent contribution to the

[143] *Nishaant Choksi*

historiographical method that has wide relevance for other social science disciplines as well.