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Book Review:

Contextualising Manbhum in the Perspective of Anthropocene

Nirmal Kumar Mahato, 2020. *Sorrow Songs Woods: Adivasi- Nature Relationship in the Anthropocene in Manbhum*. New Delhi: Primus Books. xiii +229 pp. Maps, Tables, Figures, Plates, Notes, Appendices, Glossary, Bibliography and Index. Rs. 995/- (hardback)

The writings on the tribal history, at a certain point of time, had been almost totally engrossed with the resistance movements. There the mahajan-zamindar exploitation with the nexus of the colonial government had become the prime focus. Without denying this context of history, the other side of the tribal pattern of existence, to some extent, remained unexplored. Revolt was an occasional episode in the general drama of their life which witnessed deforestation, famine, rituals, values, indigenous knowledge system, everyday struggles, negotiations, humiliations, victories and defeats. With the passage of time these criteria had to confront many vicissitudes which again went to form their identity.

The book under review may be regarded as an encyclopedic work within the space of ‘local’ or ‘small history’ (the term ‘small history’ has been coined from Walter Benjamin’s *Small History of Photography*, 1972). The small history is to be understood through the combination of long and local history.

The book, including introduction, has six chapters and all are closely related with each other and the main thrust being Adivasi-Nature Relationship in the Anthropocene in Manbhum. It is needless to say that this is a subject which has been discussed by different scholars from different views. Considering the anthropological as well as cultural traits of the tribes the choice of Manbhum is an ideal place making. The author, Nirmal Mahato, in his introduction has made it aptly clear that his purpose is to unearth the rich and complex stories of close relationship between the Adivasi and the nature on the background of a Bengal district Manbhum and in doing so he left no stone unturned to make it great success.

In chapter one three distinct features deserve special attention, i.e., Ecological setting, Forest ecology in Pre-colonial Manbhum and Administrative Geography and ‘Tribal place

making'. Taking clue from Lefebvrian concept his argument goes on comp, in historical perspective, space under capitalism and tribal space making. This category of books needs a detail discussion on the co-existence between nature and adivasi and here the author has placed the important tribes like the Santals, Mundas, Kurmis, Kherias and Bhumij, Oraons etc. socio-political conditions in proper environmental setup(p39-45). Through some sample of murals and scroll painting the aesthetic sense of the tribes has been depicted.

Among the indigenous knowledge system of the tribes the most striking, it seems to me, is the water management of the adivasis which virtually made them survived during the time of drought as Manbhum itself is drought prone district. It reminds us Anupam Misra's famous book '*aj vi kharehaintalab.*' The importance of water ethics has been reflected through the *Tusu* songs, collected by the author. It would not be out of place to mention here, in this connection, that the author himself belongs to Manbhum and himself a semi-tribe. His approach is something different from the so called elite historians and his 'participant observation' is sure to be unique. It is a story 'from within'.

Next he deals with the colonial intervention and consequent changes including landscape, forest, culture and finally identity. Different crises arose out of it like famines, diseases and the colonial along with indigenous moneylender and Zamindari exploitation led to a number of adivasi movements. All the movements have been brilliantly dealt with in a brief but excellent way.

History writing is not only about looking at the past. The future crisis of climate change, which at present is also showing its dangerous face, may find its genesis from this book and herein lies the novelty of the book. One can hear 'both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor' from this book.

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