

Book Review

Sangeeta Dasgupta, 2022, *Reordering Adivasi Worlds: Representation, Resistance, Memory*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, xvii + 345 pp. Bibliography, About the author. Name Index, Subject Index, Rs.1695 (hardback), ISBN -13 (print edition): 978-0-19-012791-6, DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780190127916.001.0001

A historian's job is to keep exploring new areas, examine a problem from many angles and critically look at varied reflections and ideas in the archives and the field. Sangeeta Dasgupta, who has extensively worked on the themes of Adivasis and colonial ethnography and has studied archives- government, Christian missionaries, and private in India and Germany, is open to these debates, clichés, and narratives in the contemporary academic world. Written at a relatively mature juncture in her career, *Reordering Adivasi Worlds: Representation, Resistance, Memory* is the outcome of research carried out for over a decade on a topic that is dear to the author's heart. An anthology of published and unpublished essays, the book is a fine specimen of well-researched, referenced, and logically argued ideas. Focussing on the Tana Bhagats, a branch of the Oraon Adivasi community residing in the Gumla, Latehar, and Simdega districts of Jharkhand, the book has unfolded the world of the Adivasi community in India to the readers.

In the colonial period, ethnography and anthropology were emerging disciplines that shaped the ideas that guided the description of Adivasi in colonial records. Colonial records imposed the idea of Adivasis being 'ethnographic constructs'. Missionary records also reinforced the same ethnocentric angle where the Adivasis were seen from the angle of 'authenticity'. The book opens up with important arguments that are central to many issues in contemporary politics. Furthermore, colonialists and the missionaries' representations of Adivasi-inhabited areas as unchartered territory entailed the logic of exclusion of these communities from the mainstream. Gradually, they moved from the point of unfamiliarity to claiming authority on the description of the Adivasi. The dilemma, the problems, and differences in the depiction of the Oraons have been logically argued and dealt with within the first chapter, which also looks upon the classification of Adivasis and how it has changed with emerging trends and intellectual shifts. Some rare pictures and illustrations of the

Adivasis add more to the book's value. The book's strength is the richness of the sources collected from the colonial archives to missionary records in Germany. However, the narratives from the countryside, despite the deployment of the pamphlets, written and oral, are not as rich as the archival material.

The second chapter is a revised version of her article published in the *Modern Asian Studies* journal in 2015. The chapter takes the readers to the efforts made by missionaries to approach natives. In explaining this, the author extends many arguments and opens up to many ideas that shaped the missionaries' minds about the natives. The arguments are cautiously explained to present an unbiased picture and discuss the facts that offer a new lens to see Adivasi life. An interesting section in the chapter is the work of missionaries towards native languages, which throws substantial light on the Adivasi languages as a carrier of Adivasi identity and history and the efforts of missionaries to learn and reveal to the world the secrets coded in them. This, however, does not dissuade Dasgupta from critiquing the efforts of missionaries, especially when they tried forcefully to develop an idea of exploitation of Adivasis by ruling communities. Dasgupta's work draws heavily on missionary accounts and gives fewer spaces to the written and oral stories of the unconverted Adivasis, who were numerically greater.

The book's strength is the way the author illuminates the life and work of anthropologist-lawyer Sarat Chandra Roy in the third chapter. An author whose accounts cannot be dismissed and who forms an essential base of most of the works done on Indian Adivasis, Roy had never been understood and explored as Sangeeta Dasgupta has. It is not merely a deeply researched and analysed account of the life and works of S.C Roy; it also unravels the notions of sociology and anthropology in the west and India. The rare pictures in the chapter make it more interesting for the reader. Furthermore, a critical commentator of changing behaviours, Dasgupta does not miss the shifting stances of S.C Roy over his lifetime on how Adivasis should be studied and historicised.

The tale of the Tana Bhagats appears only in the second section of the book after one has read one hundred and seventy-two pages in a book which has three hundred and forty-five pages, out of which forty-two pages are for bibliography and references. This way, the book travels to other worlds before entering the Tana world, thereby creating a flavour of reading many stories simultaneously, which perhaps loses the centrality of the main plot and distracts a reader from the book's core idea. Chapters 4,5, 6 and 7, the book's staple, make an in-depth and brilliant expose of the Tana Bhagats, a small community of the Oraons so far popularised as the adherents of Gandhian ideology in the history of modern India. The absorbing part for

the readers is that they understand the Adivasi community, not for the role it has played in the freedom struggle but also for their pasts, the ideas that had been guiding and shaping their identities. This section will no doubt go a long way in enriching Adivasi studies.

Dasgupta understands the subject well, and her writing skills are so sophisticated that a reader smoothly travels to all the destinations and ideas discussed in the book. From forest dwellers to agrarian communities to believers of the Gandhian ideology, Tanas have fascinated the readers of history, and Sangeeta Dasgupta has succeeded in busting the myths created by the nationalist ideology. She, at the same time, has tried to look at their growth trajectory before and beyond the nationalist struggles. The book also provides a new look at the Tanas from the subaltern perspective by providing rich information on the history, beliefs and practices of the Oraons, the benighted community of Jharkhand. However, in attempting to do so, the author narrates stories already known in the region, leaving out other oral narratives that await scholarly attention. The author is mindful of the flaws of colonial historiography and its biases, so a reader desires that counter-narratives would also have been a part of the discussion.

The footnotes and references are the breakpoints that remind a reader of the amount of hard work put in by the author. At the same time, heavy and repeated referencing creates obstructions and affects readability. As a researcher, one appreciates the understanding developed by the author of a short-lived movement that forms a chapter in the history of Adivasi resistance in India. The author's detailed study of the community provides it with a space in the academic world that it could not have received otherwise.

The book is written without a conclusion, perhaps purposely to keep the debate open-ended. There are gaps and spaces in the narratives, especially where oral narratives and the understanding of the community about its own identity is concerned. The perspective of the non-converted Adivasis, who are in the majority in the region and who have not been mentioned in missionary records properly, is an area that can be further researched, particularly when the author admits that the nature of the archives is changing, and so is its quint essentiality in writing Adivasi histories. This suggests that an alternative and nascent understanding of the Adivasi world is an area that can still be addressed by being inclusive of sources that resonate with Adivasi voices.

Notwithstanding some small areas of dissonance, Sangeeta Dasgupta's work is invaluable to Adivasi studies. As a researcher, one has to appreciate the craft of a short-lived movement used as an entry point to the history of the Oraon community. I am sure she would continue

reordering the Adivasi narratives of which she is capable. I wish this rich and influential book a happy journey ahead.

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