

Situating Social History Orissa

Review >
South Asia

Orissa as a state remains on the periphery of popular discourse, though catastrophes, cyclones, and famines ensure that the region receives intermittent media coverage. While some regions like Bengal and Maharashtra have occupied centre stage in writings on the social history of South Asia, regions like Orissa remain in obscurity. *Situating Social History Orissa (1800–1997)* is a much-needed collection of essays that may help to change this. Drawing upon a variety of sources, ranging from archival records to tribal folklore and songs, literary works, popular memory, and interviews, Biswamoy Pati covers themes as diverse as the social history of medicine, the creation of an Oriya identity, and peasant movements in Orissa, questioning the whole process of colonial and post-colonial under-development through Kalahandi, a tract that ‘has virtually emerged as a metaphor for famine’ (p. ix).

By Namrata Ganneri

The six essays and field notes (some of which have previously been published) are not linked by any overarching theme. This is already evident from the preface in which Pati traces no common thread. However, what runs through this work is the author’s sustained interest in exploring different facets of the social history of Orissa and the tribal world, so as to write a ‘history from below’. The opening essay examines hitherto marginalized aspects of the health and medicine of indigenous tribes and demonstrates that colonial health practices and belief systems met with an oscillation between acceptance and opposition. Even the Oriya middle classes, which were deeply influenced by Western scientific discourse, opted for a system based on compromise between their own indigenous methods and those introduced from the West. Thus, colonial influence on health practice can be assessed in terms of close, constant interaction and affinity between the tribal, non-tribal, and Western systems.

The influence of the colonial period had far-reaching ramifications, from the alteration of the agrarian structure to the very crystallization of an Oriya identity by means of public debates. In fact, as the author argues, any attempt to construct Oriya history begins after its conquest: the story of Orissa typically reads as that of the successive Hindu, Muslim, Maratha, and British conquests. The British did not want to upset the apple cart in terms of social structure, and therefore continued to enforce upper-caste class domination. Hence, in this volume, the question of exploitation and domination is investigated, particularly in relation to British nineteenth-century colonialism.

One of the most fascinating essays, ‘The Murder of Banamali’, returns to themes that invariably crop up in all the essays: the nexus between feudal and colonial agrarian systems, the social and cultural practices adopted by the people, peasant protests, the question of popular memory, and so on. Employing typical ‘people’s history’ methods, Pati’s in-depth micro-level investigation takes us into the world of Balanga, a district in Orissa imaginatively employing court testimonies given in relation to the gruesome murder of an exploitative tyrant Banamali. It reveals Banamali’s iron grip, and how this *naib* (estate manager) extended his ruthless control over the entire rural society through his entrenchment in practically



all the village activities and his abuse of caste and class privileges. Interestingly, the testimonies only gradually shift focus from the hitherto much-maligned absentee Bengali landlord to his representative, Banamali, who was really the key figure. As is shown clearly and quite contrary to popular perception, which usually identifies evil with the outsider – for the tribe in the coastal area of Orissa, this would be the Bengali landlord – the real exploiter was a ‘local’. The murder itself is perpetuated in popular memory as it transgressed all codes of peasant protest: the enduring images are of the murderers hacking Banamali into pieces, garlanding themselves with his intestines, and thus celebrating an end to their exploitation. Though the perpetrators were all oppressed by Banamali, the *naib* being a universally hated figure, the author’s teleological perception of the murder as an act of peasant protest appears problematic. Sometimes, testimonies tell us more about the act than the act itself: and maybe more can be understood of the dynamics of a time through a more rigorous reading of the sources. The fate of Banamali is echoed in the story of the feudal lord Mangaraj.

Perhaps it is not a mere coincidence that they, and other sto-

ries like them, are associated in popular memory with how oppressors meet their doom. Encouraged by the British example, traditional syncretic elements in stories from Oriyan popular memory were replaced with the stereotypical Muslim fanatic, enemy of Hinduism and destroyer of idols. In view of such a development, and as hinted at above, the historical context in which such selective memories are created should itself be investigated by social historians, as it may well reveal the ambivalences inherent in the process of creating popular memory.

An area that could have been delved deeper into is the ‘Hinduisation of tribals’. Arguably, the debate began with G. S. Ghurye’s classification of tribals as ‘backward Hindus’.* If anything, this issue became even more complicated and delicate with the aggressive posturing of today’s government in India over conversions. To my mind, the theme ‘Hinduisation’ itself requires some explanation. For instance, does ‘Hinduisation’ always involve ‘high’ Hinduism? In addition, this term is also used in reference to the rise of the Brahmanical order in the fifth century AD and with regard to the current curriculum in schools using Hindu prayers. Using this term sloppily for processes vastly separated by time and context tends to obscure its real meaning. Pati himself justly observes, ‘After all, it is impossible to locate the original Hindu pantheon’ (p. 14).

The most impressive aspect of this work is Pati’s desire to understand, amongst other things, the ways in which people remember and relate to the past. There are many instances in which the author narrates how popular memory has retained or obliterated certain events. The historians’ task is not only to create history, but also to document the processes involved in its construction: Pati’s work is a valuable contribution to an understanding of this construction process. This is what makes history in general and this work in particular important outside the ranks of historians and imparts an enduring value to the work. ◀

- Biswamoy Pati, *Situating Social History Orissa (1800–1997)*, Hyderabad: Orient Longman (2001), pp. xiv + 182, ISBN 81 250 2007 1.

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* Ghurye, G.S., *Vedic India*, Bombay: Popular Prakashan (1979).