
Lata Singh and Biswamoy Pati, eds., *Colonial and Contemporary Bihar and Jharkhand* (Delhi: Primus Books, 2014), 256 pp., ISBN: 978-93-80607-92-4

Reviewed by **Mario Prayer**

The book is presented by the editors as a tribute to Papiya Ghosh in recognition of her pioneering study of colonial and post-colonial Bihar. The great variety of issues and areas covered by her works is aptly reflected in the different lines of enquiry, theories and methodologies which have inspired the authors of these twelve essays. The editors are themselves well-known scholars who have long engaged in the study of this ancient area located between the Himalayas and the Chotanagpur Plateau. With its unique geo-morphology and civilizational variety, Bihar makes a very attractive field of study, not least because of its marked political dynamism resulting, among other things, in the 'tribal' state of Jharkhand being carved out of its territory in 2000.

The opening chapters deal with the history of tribal societies in the region. Biswamoy Pati challenges the validity of certain received assumptions in historiography, particularly Ranajit Guha's idea of territoriality and David Arnold's hill-people/plains-people dichotomy. As illustrated through a long series of incidents, tribals of colonial Chotanagpur actually participated in several joint movements transgressing geographical and social barriers, e.g. the 1857 Mutiny, Munda's popular movements in the 1880s and 1890s, and the turmoil in the princely state of Gangpur in 1938-39. Moreover, issues affecting the entire region, such as land dispossession, famines and 'colonial Christianity' also provided a context where distinct communities found a common ground for mobilization.

At the other end of the spectrum, as it were, P.K. Shukla focuses on the colonial construct of 'village community' as a single, coherent unit and shows that in tribal Chotanagpur, the village was a mere 'creature of theory, a thing in the air' promoted by the colonial rulers in their self-projection as protectors of tribal villages against the onslaught of *dikus*, the alien intruders. Behind this stereotype there existed various forms of differentiation within tribal communities. Some of these forms were a constituent part of tribal society, whereas others were induced by the socio-economic upheavals caused by colonial expansion in the region.

Sanjukta Das Gupta's paper provides a comprehensive study of the tribals' attitude towards the *dikus* in colonial times. One of the interesting points raised in her study concerns the transformation of this relationship over time. While *dikus* did embody the notion of cultural and social otherness, at the initial stage of British expansion into Chotanagpur they lived within tribal communities as service groups in a symbiotic, complementary relationship. Later, however, cultural mistrust

turned into pronounced hostility after colonialism had fundamentally altered the local economy and the very nature of tribal institutions, and outsiders in greater numbers began to acquire tribal lands and exploit tribals in various ways. Hinduised groups like Tantis, originally weavers, thus came to represent the disruption of a tribal world hard hit by colonial intervention.

Vinita Damodaran traces the specific impact of globalization and colonial capitalism on the environmental history of Chotanagpur in the 19th century. Particular stress is laid on the strategies adopted by tribal communities in response to the evil effects of colonial intervention – forest reservation, privatization of land, change in crop patterns, demographic imbalances. An innovative aspect of the study concerns the cultural and aesthetic dimension of the tribal interaction with the forest and with nature in general. This is a pertinent reminder that culture and economy should form closely interlinked domains in environmental history.

Shashank S. Sinha's study seeks to place recent cases of witch hunting in Jharkhand in a historical perspective. In pre-colonial times, tribal communities attributed serious illnesses and deaths to witchcraft. Contrary to *bongas* or the spirits, witches could not be propitiated because of their inborn nature, and had to be killed. Under colonial rule, when witch killing was outlawed, and witchcraft began to be seen as a ritually acquired art, the imposition of fines and ostracism came to prevail over assassination. Things began to change once again after independence, when land dispossession and impoverishment in tribal regions led to a resurgence in witch killings. Witch hunting became a cover for motives such as the appropriation of resources, political intimidation, or the control of women.

Literary sources are prominent in Mrityunjay Prabhakar's and Imtiaz Ahmad's narrative of wider social phenomena in times of crisis. Prabhakar illustrates the '*bidesia* culture' created by the 19th-century migration of indentured labourers to far-off lands, which involved about two million people from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Poems and songs are seen as expressing the collective memory of an emotional loss. Ahmad ponders over the absence of a literature of diaspora among Urdu-speaking Bihari Muslims over a long period of time, from India's Partition to the emergence of Bangladesh, and on to the recent migration to the Middle East, and points to the Patna poet Kalim Ajiz as one notable exception.

Two chapters by Dev N. Pathak and Sandali P. Sharma bring culture and society of Mithila to the fore. Pathak argues that the epistemological nexus currently found in anthropology and sociology between folklore and *purdah* has led to a misunderstanding of woman's position in family and society. He then goes on to analyse the texts of songs sung by Maithili speaking 'veiled women' in rural Bihar and finds in them an alternative system of knowledge combining 'resistance, redefinition and reconciliation', where the notions of *dharmā*, *karma* and *moksha* are at the same time contested, re-elaborated and emotionally presented as shared cultural values. Sandali Sharma's ethnographic fieldwork on Madhubani art shows that the prevalent bias in academic and 'national' circles in favour of élitist styles

like *bharni* and *kachhni* has resulted in the marginalization of Dalit *gobar* and *godan* painters, along with their themes based on the stories of Raja Salhesa, Rahu and Ketu. As Sharma points out, while recent forms of market-driven hybridation by upper caste artists still retain an element of social and cultural discrimination, the *godan* style has become part of a process of resistance to Brahman and Kayasth dominance by Dusadh and other Dalit castes.

Lata Singh's essay explores the participation of subaltern and non-Congress groups in the Non-cooperation campaign of 1921-22, and disavows any clear demarcation between subaltern consciousness and mainstream nationalism. The assimilation and adaptation of nationalist ideology by the lower strata of society, in fact, points to a dialectical linkage between Gandhian nationalists and 'the masses with their problems'. An instructive case in point is the agitation within the subordinate ranks of the police, caught between their forced allegiance to an oppressive state and the counter-hegemonic struggle of non-cooperators.

The concluding chapters focus on electoral politics. Kamal Nayan Choubey analyses political representation from Bihar to the Lok Sabha and the Legislative Assembly from the early 1990s to 2005 and concludes that despite the post-Mandal emergence of a section of backward castes, lower groups remain marginalized and under-represented. Amit Prakash presents a study of the Jharkhand movement and traces the changing nature of autonomy and identity demands. Despite the presence of Jharkhandi contestants at the four general elections held during the 1990s, it was the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) who benefited from a clear promise of separate statehood along with the prospects of forming a government at the union level. In the following decade, BJP and Congress dominated the scene in turns, while regional parties suffered from internal division and the lack of a development agenda. Prakash concludes that the idea of Jharkhand in itself has so far been unable to contest the dominance of the Indian national state. This should prompt Jharkhandi formations to 'reinvent their relevance'.

All the papers in this volume do not meet the same standard and the quality of editing is at times unsatisfactory. Nevertheless, the range and relevance of the themes and the many insightful observations offered by the authors make this book a valuable contribution to our understanding of colonial and post-colonial Bihar and Jharkhand.