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Colonial Representations of Adivasi Pasts of Jharkhand, India: the Archives and Beyond

Représentations coloniales des passés des *Adivasi* du Jarkhand, Inde : les archives et au-delà

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Abstract

English Français

Adivasis are the indigenous people of eastern and central India who were identified as "tribes" under British colonial rule and who today have a constitutional status as "Scheduled Tribese. The notion of tribe, despite its evolutionist character, has been internalized to a large extent by the indigenous people themselves and has had a considerable role in shaping community identities. Colonial studies, moreover, were the first systematic investigations into these marginalized and subordinated communities and form an important primary source in historical research on Adivasis. It would be worthwhile, therefore, to identify the main currents of thought that informed and which in turn were reflected in such works. In conclusion, we may argue that rather than a monolithic view, colonial writing encompassed various genres that, despite apparent commonalities, reveal wide divergences over time and space in the manner in which India's Adivasis were conceptualized and represented.

Index terms

Mots clés :

Asie du Sud, Inde, Jharkhand, XIXe-XXe siècles, Adivasi, colonialisme britannique, Scheduled Tribe

Keywords :

South Asia, India, 19th-20th centuries, Jharkhand, Adivasi, Bengal, British colonialism, Scheduled Tribe

Full text

Introduction

1The term “Adivasi” refers to the indigenous people of eastern and central India who are recognized as “Scheduled Tribes” by the Indian Constitution. The notion of “tribe” – introduced in India during colonial times – with its implication of backwardness, geographical isolation, simple technology and racial connotations is problematic, and in recent years it is increasingly replaced, both in academic and popular usage, by adivasi. Coined in the 1940s, it indicates in its current usage a particular historical development of subjection of a wide variety of indigenous communities during the nineteenth century who, before the colonial period, had remained relatively free from outside control. It is important to note, however, that the word *adivasi* could also lend itself to misrepresentation since its literal translation implies an “original settler” and is therefore unacceptable in certain parts of the subcontinent. In India’s northeast, for instance, indigenous groups prefer to identify themselves as tribe, rather than as adivasi, to distinguish themselves from indigenous migrants from central India who settled in the northeast during the colonial period. In eastern and central India, however, adivasi is widely used to refer to a politically assertive category of the indigenous people of the region.

2Carved out from the former Indian federal state of Bihar in 2000, the state of Jharkhand is the home of a number of adivasi communities, predominant among whom are the Santals, the Mundas, the Hos, the Oraons, the Bhumijes and the Kharias. Under British colonial rule the region constituted the westernmost district of the Bengal Presidency till 1911, when it was placed under the administrative division of Bihar and Orissa. Under British rule, and particularly since the nineteenth century, we find in the colonial archives copious records pertaining to various “tribes” whom the British encountered in the course of the extension of their power into the interior. Colonial attitudes towards the tribes, however, were not monolithic nor fixed and tended to differ significantly both in space and over time. Such perceptions not only informed tribal policies framed and implemented by the State, but also came to be internalized by the people themselves and profoundly influenced the self-perception of these communities. Significantly, colonial writing, both within and outside the archives, were the first systematic investigations into these marginalized and subordinated communities and form an important primary source in historical research on *Adivasis*. It would be worthwhile, therefore, to identify the main current of thought that informed and which in turn were reflected in such writing.

Initial Encounters and Perceptions: Early Nineteenth Century

3In the colonial archive records relating to “tribes” tend to proliferate at certain moments of disjunction. Among the earliest reports on tribes in Jharkhand were those of the nineteenth century British civil and military officers whose attention was drawn to these societies by the recurring rebellions and unrest in these regions. In this initial encounter the “tribal world” figured in official perceptions as the backdrop for the counter-insurgency measures of the

colonial state. The disruptions caused by the Maratha and British incursions, together with local feuds of warring regional kingdoms resulted in political turmoil in the greater part of Jharkhand during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Political instability affected the livelihood of the tribal people who frequently rebelled against their indigenous rulers. Not only did they attempt to repudiate their ever-increasing obligations to the ruling classes but, goaded by economic insecurity, they raided the neighbouring settled peasant tracts. Although such unrest did not directly threaten the British colonial possessions in the Bengal Presidency, it was viewed as a law and order problem and as an improper defiance of the State's legitimate authority.

- 1 DAS GUPTA, 2011, p. 93.
- 2 STOCKING, 1987, p. 142.

4During the early phase of contact, colonial knowledge and understanding of the tribal population was largely based on the prevailing notions popular among the local Hinduized power groups of the region. For instance, the words "Kol", used to designate a large section of Adivasis of Chotanagpur, and "Chuar" ("wild, thieving and ill-mannered"), which was in vogue in the western part of Midnapur district in Bengal, were popular epithets of abuse used by the dominant Hinduized groups. W. K. Firminger's celebrated *Fifth Report of the House of Commons* (1811) described the inhabitants of Chotanagpur as a "savage race, differing extremely in appearance, religion, language and manners, from the Hindu lowlanders of Hindustan". In a similar manner, a British magistrate of Ramgarh district described the Ho people as "dreadful pests" and as "the lowest kinds of Hindoos" who, in their manners and customs, were "little removed from savages"[1]. As George Stocking points out, the idea of the savage as the "other" of "civilization" had dominated eighteenth-century European writing and had informed colonial policies as well[2]. The difference lay in the fact that while in the eighteenth-century savages were assumed to share the same psychic nature as Europeans, this essential unity had come to be eroded by the notion of a hereditary racialism in the following century. The central assumption of the colonial administration in India during the first half of the nineteenth century was therefore the idea of tribal societies as isolates and the people as savages, wreaking terror in the countryside.

The Scholar Administrators

5Since the mid-nineteenth century we find a shift in the official attitudes to tribes. Enquiries into the rebellions, particularly the Kol uprising of 1831-32 and the Santal *hul* of 1855, had led to a new conviction about the distinctiveness of these regions and the vulnerability of the indigenous people to exploitation of powerful adversaries which necessitated protection of the government. In the changed circumstances, the tribals came to be regarded not as predatory raiders and savages prone to violence, but rather as a community wronged by non-tribals. During this phase, such zones were marked off and separated from their earlier jurisdictions through experiments in social engineering and the British claimed for themselves the role of liberators of the "tribes" from the oppression and exactions of indigenous rulers. The former "savage" tribals were thus elevated to the status of "noble savage" living a life of Arcadian simplicity, who were to be "civilized" into useful subjects of the colonial empire under the 'benevolent' rule of paternalist British officers.

6The shift in official attitudes since the mid-nineteenth century was reflected in the works of bureaucrats like E. G. Man, the Assistant Commissioner of the Santal Parganas district and W. W. Hunter, the Scottish historian and compiler of official gazetteers. Drawing upon their personal experiences, they dealt with different aspects of Santal life. Unlike the bureaucrats of the earlier period, they were not motivated by any immediate political considerations. Indeed, with the suppression of the Santal of 1855, both Man and Hunter assumed that the state had succeeded in resolving the tribal problem. In his *Sonthalia and the Santals* (1867), Man portrayed the Santals as a distinct community with a strong sense of cultural identity despite being dispersed over a vast geographical area.

7In the mid-nineteenth century, the new discipline of ethnology or the "Science of Human Races" was taking shape in Europe. Specifically concerned with the study the "dark-skinned savages", it aimed to trace back the history of the races of men to a common origin in the remote past, to demonstrate the unity of the human species and to account for the observed differences between the races and their present distribution. British colonial writing in India during this phase emphasized the cultural uniqueness of the tribal people whose way of life differed both from that of Europeans and also of the inhabitants of the plains of Bengal. Ethnological studies explained this contrast in terms of differential development among races, while linking the tribal *present* with Europe's *past*: i.e. the former were trapped in a primitive stage of development which Europe had passed through a long time ago. Confirmations of such assumptions were sought in reconstructions of tribal histories, for instance, Hunter's *Annals of Rural Bengal* (1868). Writing about the Santal people, Hunter categorically asserted that the Santals had no "history" and that "the present generation of Santals have no definite idea of where their forefathers came from". The task of reconstructing the Santal past was therefore to be taken up by officers of the colonial government since the Santals' apparent lack of any "organized perception" of their past rendered them unfit to do so. Indeed, to Hunter, the right to represent Santal history to the 'civilized world' could only belong to those who were "civilized" themselves.

Ethnology, Anthropology and Tribal Studies

- 3 CHAUDHURI, 2012, p. 51

8Britain ethnology of the mid-nineteenth century was, in fact, primarily associated with the works of the British physician J. C. Prichard, a monogenist who believed firmly in the "unity of mankind", i.e. a belief based on the biblical view of creation in which God created all men equal and revealed the "one true religion" to all of them. Prichard aimed to trace the affinities between different societies on the basis of physiological, cultural and linguistic similarities. His approach influenced a number of other scholars, notably Robert Gordon Latham whose works – *The Natural History of the Varieties of Man* (1850), *The Ethnology of British Colonies and Dependencies*, London (1851), and *Descriptive Ethnology* (1859) – contained extensive references to India. Prichardian methodology of observation and study of "primitive" people deeply influenced the "anthropologically-inclined"[3], British Indian administrators of the time, notable among whom was E. T. Dalton who attempted to categorize tribal people on the basis of a classification of their languages.

9Dalton's comparative study of the "ethnic peculiarities" of different tribes of the Bengal Presidency was a conscious anthropological exercise. His magnum opus, *The Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal* (1872), was commissioned by the Government of Bengal in collaboration with the Asiatic Society of Bengal. Dalton was assigned the task of compiling an account of different tribes of Bengal in view of his long service in Assam and Chotanagpur, which offered him more opportunities of observing various "races and tribes" than other officers in the service. His classification of "tribes" was based on two principles, namely, language and the influence of Hinduism. Though intended as an ethnographic handbook, his work was distinctive because of his study of the inner world of the tribes, their social organizations, material concerns, magico-religious beliefs, customs and superstitions. However, Dalton primarily emphasized tribal culture and tended to ignore the evolving rural power relationships, which vitally affected the tribal world of the time. He believed that the endemic rebellions of the tribals of Chotanagpur could be partly explained in terms of the enforcement by the government of its laws and regulations, which had not taken into account the historical specificities of the local tribal society. He thus stood apart from the governmental "craving for homogeneity" and argued that it was important to keep in mind the "heterogenous character" of the people of India.

10Certain events of the mid-nineteenth century had further consequences for British official attitudes towards "primitive" people. The publication in 1859 of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* irreversibly altered the terms of the on-going anthropological debate regarding the position of tribes in human civilization, while the experience of the Great Indian Revolt of 1857 served to harden racial attitudes among the British in India. This altered perception is well reflected in the works of H. H. Risley who was assigned the responsibility of organizing the first large-scale ethnographic survey in Bengal. Published in two volumes as the *Tribes and Castes of Bengal* (1891), the project had a two-fold objective: the first was a scientific motive related to the interest of European ethnologists in the "barbarous or semi-barbarous customs" that still survived in India. The second was to gather knowledge of indigenous societies in order to facilitate administration and legislation. Armed with vigorous anthropological training and tools, Risley sought to apply the methods of contemporary European anthropology, particularly anthropometric methods, in the classification of the "races" of Bengal. He thus turned away from earlier attempts to establish racial affinity by studying language and customs, an approach which he considered unreliable. Tribes were now seen as a different race. While earlier writers believed that tribes could be "civilized" by proper guidance. Risley, saw them as an inferior race, a conclusion which he sought to prove scientifically through anthropometric measurements.

11Risley's major contribution was his highlighting of the cultural change experienced in the tribal world through the slow emulation of Hindu cultural norms and practices. Much of his research was informed by the data from the Census operations, recently instituted in 1871. Census reports, which provided data on questions of religion, ethnicity, the nature of demographic movements – the growth and decline in population, emigration and immigration – were utilized extensively both by Risley and by J. H. Hutton, a bureaucrat in the Indian Civil Service under the Raj and Superintendent of the Census operations of 1931. Like Risley, Hutton was a trained anthropologist. His monographs, *The Angami Nagas* (1921), *The Sema Nagas* (1921), propounded similar views on the dynamics of culture change within tribal societies and their distinctive nature. Such writing served to bolster the colonial government's contention of the essentially segmentary nature of Indian society.

The Search for Tradition

12The second half of the nineteenth century was a period of intense agrarian agitations against impositions of moneylenders, landlord control, illegal rent increases and imposition of forced labour throughout Chotanagpur and the Santal Parganas districts of Bengal Presidency. The Santal rebellion in 1855 was followed by the prolonged Kherwar movement and Sardari *larai* (1858-1890s) and Birsa Munda's *ulgulan* of 1890s. Between 1869 to 1908, the government conducted various experiments in tenancy legislations in order to resolve the agrarian question. This involved detailed investigations and studies into the customs and usages of the different tribal communities, examples of which include, T. S. Macpherson's *Final Report on the Operations for the Preparation of Record-of-Rights in Pargana Porahat in District Singhbhum* (1908) and M. C. McAlpin's *Report on the Condition of the Sonthals in the Districts of Birbhum, Bankura, Midnapore and North Balasore* (1909). This search for "tradition", as a matter of fact, resulted in the homogenization of the practices of different regions and communities and the reification of custom into a vastly simplified model of tribal social structure and property regimes. The outcome of such investigations were the different tenancy legislations which continue to inform the tribal land question to this day. The colonial reading of custom thus came to redefine social relationships which, in turn, were internalized to a large extent by the tribal communities themselves.

Reminiscences and Memoirs

13Another genre of colonial writing is represented by the semi-official accounts: the private reminiscences, memoirs, and local histories. In these private recollections British officers were more at liberty to express their ideas which sometimes corroborated and sometimes controverted official debates. Moreover, reminiscences, when published, are meant for the consumption of the general public, and not merely the bureaucracy. Such writing thus provides the mental, emotional and cultural background which created the context of the public debates, and, furthermore, established a content-oriented dialogue with the public as also with policy-makers. From their position as administrative officers, they garnered information and also edited it to feed into the knowledge structure of the Empire. The colonial bureaucrats, the military officers, the surveyors, geologists and others were all involved in 'discovering' various facets of the region in course of the nineteenth century and in their role as paternalistic heads of the district administration, established a sympathetic bond with the people. Their writings, very often published in *Asiatick Researches* and in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* reveal how British officialdom responded to an unfamiliar landscape, perceived the colonized populations and reacted to racial and cultural differences. Among a host of such writings we may mention S. R. Tickell's "Memoir on the Hodisum" (1840) W. S. Sherwill's "Notes upon a Tour Through the Rajmahal Hills" (1851), both published in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal.*

14Most of these texts stressed on the necessity of describing the "real" India of the villages, the "unknown" India, the "little" world with which imperial policies were not concerned, yet upon which they would have a major impact. Thus Valentine Ball, a geologist associated with the Geological Survey of India, stated in *Jungle Life in India; or the Journeys and Journals of an*

Indian Geologist (1880) that his intention was to present before the readers not "Imperial India", nor "India of the Great Cities, Great Rajas and Princes", but to provide them with "pictures of the lives of men, wild beasts and plants, in regions many of which have been seldom visited or described before". F. B. Bradley-Birt likewise critiqued the lack of interest of the average Englishman in India and Indian affairs and attempted in his local histories, *Chotanagpore: a Little-Known Province of the Empire* (1903) and *The Story of an Indian Upland* (1905) to present only such information concerning a "little-known part of the Empire" to the general reader to whom official reports would have no appeal. Richard Carstairs, a retired civil servant who had served in the British colonial administration for 29 years, similarly penned his memoirs *The Little World of an Indian District Officer* in the early years of the twentieth century with the wish to find a way of "blending the will of the British Nation, the great paramount power, with the will of the people" among whom he worked. At once insiders and outsiders, their recollections and memoirs provide us with an intimate picture of the inner world of district officers and their tribal subjects.

Christian Missionary Accounts

15A parallel genre of literature relating to tribal studies developed during the colonial period, namely missionary accounts. Initially missionaries were attracted to the study of tribes by prospects of evangelization, believing as they did that they lacked any form of organized religion. Later, their studies came to be motivated by a genuine scholarly interest in tribal societies and the agrarian issues confronting them. The Jesuit missionary Father Hoffmann's sixteen-volume *Encyclopaedia Mundarica* (1930-37), for instance, reveals the richness of Munda culture and dispels many stereotypes regarding the supposedly irrational rituals of tribal religion and the moral profligacy and licentiousness of such communities.

- 4 HODNE, 1982, p. 24.

16Missionaries laid stress on working as far as possible in compliance with the manners and customs of the people, so long as these did not go against Christian principles. The Norwegian missionary, L. O. Skrefsrud thus stated, "We came to the Santals to bring them Christianity, and not to take away their nationality"[4]. Two notable studies, P. O. Bodding's *Traditions and Institutions of the Santals* (1887) and W. J. Culshaw's *The Tribal Heritage: A Study of the Santals* (1949), both concerned with Santal society may be mentioned in this context. Among Bodding's major work was included an English translation of Skrefsrud's book *Horkoren Mare Hapramko Reak Katha*, based on the Santal guru Kolean's narrative on Santal tradition. A prolific scholar, Bodding dealt with various aspects of Santal life, their society and culture. In the years he spent in the Santal Parganas between 1890 and 1934, he published more than twenty-five works on the Santals, including two grammars and a dictionary. Bodding was proficient in the Santali language and took active help of Santali informants and interlocutors (including one identified as Sagram Murmu) in collecting data. These documents (written in Santali in the Roman script) are today housed in the Oslo University Library. Some of these records, collated and published by Peter Anderson, Marin Carrin and Santosh K Soren in their *From Fire Rain to Rebellion: Reasserting Ethnic Identity Through Narrative* (2011), reveal how Santals recast their traditions as knowledge.

17Like Bodding, Culshaw's major work was based on his experiences of Santal life during his residence in the village of Sarenga in Bankura district between 1932 and 1943. His detailed study of the beliefs, customs and traditions of the Santals shows a deep sympathy for the Santal way of life. He believed in the necessity of preserving tribal communities in the India of the future. His work highlighted the Santals as a community whose culture displayed uniformity over a vast area and found expression in myths, language customs and in ties of loyalty, which remained the same despite cultural borrowings. Culshaw believed in the philanthropic aspect of missionary activities and argued that it was the missionaries who first highlighted the exploitation of the Santals and presented the facts before the colonial authorities. It was essential, in his opinion, to bring about the moral and spiritual regeneration of the Santals and Christian education alone could provide for it. Culshaw was convinced that once Santals became aware of the superiority of the Christian faith, they would readily accept it.

Locating Adivasi Voice in the Archives

- 5 CEDERLÖF, 2008, P. 17.
- 6 PORTELLI, 1991, P. 49.

18These ideas reveal the wide divergences, despite apparent commonalities, that existed in British colonial perceptions of India's Adivasis. The question then arises as to where we can locate the voice of the Adivasis in these colonial narratives. Official accounts and archival documentation have on occasions been dismissed as being colonially biased and therefore unfit for reconstructing *adivasi* pasts, and indeed for recording the historical experience of all subordinated people. For this oral testimonies and memory are deemed to be a more suitable source. However, as Gunnel Cederlöf reminds us, memory also penetrated the official records, reports and correspondence which were based the empirical observations of informants and individual authors5. Oral testimonies were zealously collected and written down, and genealogies constructed by colonial officers in an attempt to arrive at an 'authentic' history. Reading against the grain of imperial biases indeed provides an insight into adivasi world views. As oral evidence was transcribed into written testimony, the boundaries between individual interests of the people and their group concerns became blurred, so that in certain cases, as Alessandro Portelli put it, "personal truth [came to] coincide with shared imagination"6. These local memories are reclaimed today by Adivasis in framing their community identities and in this manner the colonial archives play a role in reconstituting past memory as contemporary knowledge.

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Notes

1 DAS GUPTA, 2011, p. 93.

2 STOCKING, 1987, p. 142.

3 CHAUDHURI, 2012, p. 51

4 HODNE, 1982, p. 24.

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6 PORTELLI, 1991, P. 49.

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