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Nishant Gokhale
nishant.gokhale@gmail.com

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BOOK REVIEW

REORDERING ADIVASI WORLDS: REPRESENTATION, RESISTANCE, MEMORY

Nishant Gokhale*

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Sangeeta Dasgupta, *Reordering Adivasi Worlds: Representation, Resistance, Memory* (Oxford University Press, 2022)

Sangeeta Dasgupta's bold new book blends a range of disciplines and methodologies to provide a compelling and nuanced account of the dynamics of the past and present of adivasi communities. In presenting a new way of considering old problems, the book is a reminder that the framing of issues requires constant questioning.

The book emerges from archival and oral history fieldwork and has been a long time coming since Professor Dasgupta embarked on this project. The passage of time, rather than making the ideas stale, however, appears to have fermented them into something more enduring. While they were timely and relevant when first conceptualised, today the issues that the book raises have become imperative as adivasis variously, but increasingly, interact with, challenge, and re-shape legal and bureaucratic structures. This reveals the need to regard adivasi relationships—both *inter se* other adivasi identities and with the state—as dynamic rather than static.

Spanning the 19th and 20th centuries, this book takes the reader through the colonial and post-colonial histories of 'adivasi' eastern India.¹ Dasgupta chooses to focus on the Tana Bhagat movement as a point of convergence of various temporalities, disciplines and narrative genres. This movement emerged amongst the Oraon adivasi community in the early 20th century in what is present-day Jharkhand. It continues as a socio-religious movement and reveals social hierarchies and fissures within adivasi memory and politics of the present and the past.

While the multiplicity of methodologies deployed by the author may at first seem confusing, Dasgupta skilfully marshals a diverse range of materials

* PhD candidate, University of Cambridge, Faculty of Law.

1 Dasgupta discusses the use of terminology in the book at 24-28, 254.

about the Oraons and Tana Bhagats. In weaving them into a compelling narrative of adivasi agency, the book not only makes a significant contribution to history but, equally, requires close reading by law students, legal academics, and legal decision-makers alike for the various, albeit complicated, legal questions that it raises.

At a fundamental level, the book's extensive and creative use of legal materials like court cases, legislation, reports by officials, petitions, and pamphlets claiming legitimacy and legal rights, demonstrates that we are firmly within the throes of a legal turn in 'adivasi studies'.² While other social scientists seem to have embraced this field, it would be disingenuous for those in the field of law to claim ignorance of the important issues raised by an increasing number of scholarly studies which examine a wide array of issues concerning peoples, whether or not officially classified as 'Scheduled Tribes'.³

This book serves as a primer on historiographies of—and more recently by—adivasi academics in India. Until not very long ago, this gap was one which even the best-stocked law libraries would struggle to fill. In recent years, there has been a proliferation of books that can be described as 'leading' texts about the subject. These may bewilder a newcomer on account of the diversity of perspectives, peoples and disciplines covered. Further confounding a newcomer is how official policy of memorialising adivasi histories is often conflated with narratives of Indian independence. The result is that diverse regional adivasi movements are awkwardly made to fit into an overarching ideological framework.⁴

2 Sangeeta Dasgupta, 'Adivasi Studies from a Historian's Perspective', (2018) 16(10) History Compass 1.

3 Several groups who claim to be adivasi may not have recognition under the category of 'Scheduled Tribe', and may be considered members of other or no constitutionally protected categories in different states. See generally, Peter Robb (ed.) *The Concept of Race in South Asia* (OUP 1995). For practical implications of these classifications, see P. Sainath, *Everyone Loves a Good Drought* (Penguin Books 1996) 15.

4 An instance of what appears to be lazy tokenism of naming institutions appears when looking at the Commissionerate of Tribal Development for Gujarat, named the Birsa Munda Bhavan. Birsa Munda was associated with adivasi movements in present-day Jharkhand, and appears to have had no connection with Gujarat. It remains to be seen what form the ideas of memorialising adivasi and tribal leaders takes with the proposed National Freedom Fighters Museum located near the 'Statue of Unity' in Gujarat, and also several regional museums. See: Press Information Bureau, 'Two Day National Workshop to Speed Up Development of National Tribal Freedom Fighters Museum Organised At Bhopal' (10 April 2022) <<https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1815357>>, last accessed on 20 February 2023.

Dasgupta's lucid and richly illustrated book summarises key debates and represents a good entry point into this rapidly emerging field.⁵ These debates include the use of terminology, the scientific impulses which shaped the field, and the role of adivasi agency in both the past and the present. Throughout the book, Dasgupta underscores the perils of a one-size-fits-all history which threatens to snuff out the agency of an array of historical actors edged out by more powerful or popular narratives.

The book is in two parts, each with a punchy opening which the rest of the chapters in that section try to unpack. The first part begins with the judicial decision in *Kartik Oraon*.⁶ The petitioner there sought to disqualify a fellow Oraon electoral contender on the grounds of his rival being a Christian adivasi. Through this case, Dasgupta examines how colonial rule, science, and religion shaped—and indeed continues to shape—contemporary legal discourse affecting adivasi communities and individuals. Dasgupta's distinctive contribution to existing scholarship on the subject lies in her emphasis on how the broad-brush category of 'marginalised' is hierarchical and layered.

Dasgupta reveals how narratives of colonial officials, ethnologists, and missionaries persist in the official discourse pertaining to adivasis today. These narratives remain largely unquestioned and act as gatekeepers for constitutional and legal remedies available to adivasis in India.⁷ Pejorative ideas of 'primitiveness' underpin bureaucratised constructions of 'Scheduled Tribes', and ultimately undermine how the state views

5 A worthy companion piece to this book would be a special issue of *Modern Asian Studies*, Vinita Damodaran and Sangeeta Dasgupta (eds), 'Multiple Worlds of Adivasis', 56, Special Issue 5 (September 2022), *Modern Asian Studies*.

6 AIR 1964 Pat 201 Dasgupta 7 says that this issue was eventually settled by the Supreme Court in 1967, but no citation is provided for it.

7 Various cases cite the writings of colonial officials, early anthropologists and often bring into play their own perceptions and prejudices on adivasi communities. In the case of *Kailas v. State of Maharashtra* (AIR 2011 SC 598), even though the court highlighted the need to undo historic injustices to adivasi communities, the decision appears largely symbolic and based on harmful stereotypes.

adivasis.⁸ While those in the legal world need to be conscious of how the separation of the 'authentic' from the 'inauthentic' is based on questionable criteria, Dasgupta tackles important prior questions which often slip by unnoticed in legal discourse. She is concerned with how communities *became* adivasi rather than the consequences of *being* adivasi.⁹

In her critique of the writings of colonial officials, ethnologists, and missionaries, Dasgupta moves beyond the once-popular Subaltern Studies school of historiography. While successfully shifting the historical focus onto various hitherto ignored historical actors, the subalternists failed to break out of the colonial binary of 'adivasi' and 'non-adivasi'.¹⁰ Further, she writes that Subaltern Studies has failed to sufficiently recognise social hierarchies and pluralities of perspectives within adivasi societies. Focusing on the Tana Bhagats allows Dasgupta to further examine this aspect.

To bridge the gaps between colonial constructions of adivasi identity, anthropological discourse, and state-making narratives about the Tana Bhagats, Dasgupta studies the life history of Sarat Chandra Roy (b. 1871–d. 1942). Roy was an advocate and early anthropologist from colonial eastern India who, until now, remains largely under-researched.¹¹ Dasgupta examines Roy's publications in English and Bengali, material objects he sent to museums in Oxford and Cambridge, and slivers of his surviving correspondence with European anthropologists and colonial administrators. The book offers a candid assessment of an important and complex figure who was an educated member of elite society in eastern India. This gave him privileged access to both adivasi and colonial worlds. Dasgupta reads Roy's writings as moving from 'academic anthropology' to 'activist anthropology', as he walked a fine line of diverging from

8 Successive annual reports of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs identified the parameters for communities to be designated as a Scheduled Tribe as 'primitive traits, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, shyness of contact with the community at large and backwardness'. Justifying such pejorative criteria, the reports observe that though not spelt out in the Constitution, these criteria have become 'well established and accepted'. The latest available report can be found at Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Annual Report 2021-2022, <<https://tribal.nic.in/downloads/Statistics/AnnualReport/AREnglish2122.pdf>> last accessed 20.2.2023, 49.

9 Dasgupta, 28, cf Daniel Ryeacroft and Sangeeta Dasgupta (eds), *The Politics of Belonging in India: Becoming Adivasi* (Taylor & Francis 2011).

10 Ajay Skaria, 'Being Jangli: The Politics of Wildness' (1998) 14(2) *Studies in History* 193.

11 Dasgupta promises a biography of Roy which will be much awaited. Dasgupta, xv.

the Congress and still remaining focussed on Indian interests.¹² While understandably Dasgupta's engagement with his work has mostly been in relation to anthropology, reading Roy's work through the increasingly important framework of legal biography will be revealing in how we understand the present-day legal and constitutional arrangements that order adivasi and tribal communities in India today.¹³ The genre of legal biography, however, is not limited to legally trained elites; rather, it has much to learn from non-elite actors through their engagement with law. In her re-telling of the Tana Bhagat story, Dasgupta seeks to understand the lives of Tana Bhagat leaders such as Jatra Oraon and Sibhu by featuring them as co-stars in her book. This takes place in the book's beating heart which is its second part. It is here that Dasgupta's eloquent arguments on adivasi agency in late colonial India are transposed to the present day.

The second part of the book represents somewhat of a shift from the archive, into the 'field' through oral history interviews, which few historians of adivasi communities have managed to successfully do in India.¹⁴ Dasgupta candidly admits stumbling here, but gets back up and dusts herself off to provide a rich and illuminating account.¹⁵

An aspect that requires some comment is the question of positionality in scholarship about India. Dasgupta writes about having 'squirmed' when her interlocutor, Sunitaji, inadvertently introduced her to an informant as someone from a university in far away 'Dilli' doing interview-based fieldwork for a book about the Tana Bhagat movement. Dasgupta believes that this unequal power relationship is quickly balanced out (and perhaps inverted?) when her informant Suktara Tana Bhagat tells her that not only has he visited Delhi, but that he has also previously spoken to researchers and filmmakers.¹⁶ Given that this book does an admirable job of making a case for understanding adivasi identities on their own terms, a more robust scholarly engagement with the position of the researcher would

12 Dasgupta, 131, and more generally, chapter 3.

13 On promising directions in legal biography, see Victoria Barnes, Catharine MacMillan & Stefan Vogenauer, 'On Legal Biography' (2020) 41(2) *The Journal of Legal History* 115.

14 Some excellent accounts of specific communities include: Ajay Skaria, *Hybrid Histories: Forests, Frontiers and Wildness in Western India* (OUP 1999); and David Hardiman, *Coming of the Devi: Adivasi Assertion in Western India* (OUP 1987).

15 I refer to Dasgupta's opening lines in the Acknowledgements about how she had nearly finished her monograph when her interaction with members of the Tana Bhagat community in 2012 made her fundamentally re-evaluate her positions.

16 Dasgupta, 173.

have set a good precedent for those writing from within and outside adivasi communities.¹⁷

In general, however, the second part of the book not only adds many valuable insights to the field of adivasi studies, but is also crucial for those in the legal field. Law often involves engagement with tangles of competing facts, mythologies, and histories in articulating claims to rights in a manner that is coherent and comprehensible to judicial, legislative and policy bodies. These fora seldom have the requisite means to make sense of anything more than contests between binary relationships, which makes it particularly challenging to successfully articulate layered accounts of adivasi pasts and claims. A poignant example of this, cited by Dasgupta, is from a Tana Bhagat pamphlet seeking to convey their claims for justice to the ‘sarkar’ for numerous issues including for the privations they have suffered by their involvement in the Indian freedom movement.¹⁸ The pamphlet reads:

Trading East India Company, English Government in India, Senior Lord George Viceroy, Central and Provincial Assembly, Council Act, the State administrator, the Parliament, Supreme Court, Akbar Road, New Delhi has given its decision. The sixth George Viceroy Government India Act 1935 broke the Zamindari.¹⁹

This, to use Dasgupta’s words, is ‘bewildering’ but simultaneously an exciting area for more legal historical research. Rather than discard the elements that do not fit within a neat narrative viewed through the colonial lens of primitivism or a stark monochromatic depiction of nationalist history, it is in such incongruities that Dasgupta understands adivasi agency on its own terms. This emerges particularly in her detailed descriptions of the Tana Bhagat spiritual realm, which included various

17 Texts on this issue are increasingly important in the field of Indigenous Studies, and need to be incorporated within Indian academia. An example would be issues highlighted by: Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (Bloomsbury 2021 [1999]). While there is a risk of wholesale importation of ideas from settler colonial contexts, more conversations on methodology are needed between adivasi and non-adivasi scholars from various disciplines, as also dialogue between other Indigenous scholars and community members globally, to develop better research practises for South Asia.

18 Dasgupta, on 285-286, states that the articulations of who this sarkar is changes widely: the colonial state, the government in Delhi, the state government, or even individuals from the Congress party or governments to which they were submitted.

19 Dasgupta, 286.

figures such as ‘German Baba’ and ‘Gandhi Baba’.²⁰ While German Baba was once worshipped as the vanquisher of the British Raj, this entity now appears largely forgotten.²¹ The image and values of Gandhi Baba seem to persist into the present day.²² However, the mere appearance of Gandhi’s imagery does not imply that his teachings were always or fully followed.²³ The Tana Bhagat moral economy sometimes appears to have clashed with both anti-colonial and nationalist ideas. Tana Bhagat participation in the Indian freedom movement, however, is undeniable and appears to have been recognised by way of the Tana Bhagat Raiyats’ Agricultural Lands Restoration Act, 1947,²⁴ to restore lands the community lost by participating in ‘no rent’ campaigns.²⁵ Any understanding of Tana Bhagat claims without understanding how they were perceived within the community, would thus be incomplete. This example should remind those of us in the field of law to focus on not merely texts, but also contexts. Just as the adivasi spirit realms may sound unbelievable to outsiders, the printed and incorporeal legal world may appear equally inscrutable to those outside its rigid disciplinary bounds.

The dynamism of the Tana Bhagat pantheon is a reminder of the fact that they are active participants in the creation of their own histories. As with all exercises in remembering, embellishments and omissions—both deliberate and inadvertent—are inevitable. *Reordering Adivasi Worlds* serves as a reminder of the fragility and selectiveness of memory, identity and archival records. All of these are liable to be reinvented, reshaped or discarded, depending on a determination of worth based on pressures of time, political ideology and memory.

To state the book’s few limitations, perhaps its biggest weakness is its inability to relate its observations with other scholarship about adivasis in India as well as about issues pertaining to indigenous peoples in non-Indian contexts. While the book quotes some important adivasi scholars

20 Dasgupta, 242-253, and chapter 4.

21 ‘...Koi aadmi tha jiska naam German Baba tha’ (There was a person whose name was German Baba). Unnamed Tana Bhagat respondent cited by Dasgupta, 293.

22 Dasgupta, 177.

23 At local levels the Tana Bhagats appear to have received support from Congress even when their actions contravened central diktats of non-violence. Dasgupta, 273

24 Bihar Act 2 of 1948, cited at footnote 12, p. 291; Dasgupta, 290-291.

25 Although this Act saw several amendments, changes in its bureaucratic administration, and claims to have restored lands and awarded compensation, it appears to have failed to address Tana Bhagat grievances. See Dasgupta, 292.

and intellectuals, it could perhaps have done more to expressly engage with their ideas.²⁶ From a historical perspective, while there is considerable detail about the colonial actors in the late 19th century, those in the early part of the 19th century under the English East India Company appear only fleetingly.

In conclusion, it is commendable how Dasgupta painstakingly sources fragmented archival material from across multiple geographies and languages, and skilfully arranges it to present a vivid portrayal of how adivasi identity was shaped in colonial India. The book challenges us to look beyond the adivasi as a 'heroic rebel, always resisting the onslaughts of outsiders with the utmost determination. Such a representation relegates the adivasi to the realm of the primitive, unable to negotiate with the transformation and change.'²⁷ She writes further that

The categories of 'tribe', 'aboriginal', 'agriculturist', 'forest dweller', and so on, as I have argued were products of history, a history in the making of which colonial officials, missionaries and anthropologists had participated since the early decades of the nineteenth century as they constructed the near imaginary boundaries between communities. And to this day, historians have been unable to break out of this mould.²⁸

Historians have begun to grapple with this question. Will those in the legal world be up to this challenge?

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26 Dasgupta often cites Bhangya Bhukya's *Subjugated Nomads: The Lambadas Under the Rule of the Nizams* (Orient Blackswan 2010), along with the writings of Ruby Hembrom and Ivy Hansdak.

27 Dasgupta, 258.

28 *ibid.*