

Tribes and States

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Bhangya Bhukya, *The Roots of the Periphery: A History of the Gonds of Deccan India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. 209, Rs. 750.

This book on the Gonds of the Deccan region in India navigates at two levels – the conceptual one where the category of ‘tribe’ is critiqued in its various avatars made familiar to us over time; and the second, where the author devotes due energy to his empirical material to build a coherent tale spanning the early Gond rulers from the thirteenth century and our own times, with the largest chunk being devoted to the colonial era. The chief conceptual problem with the category of ‘tribe’ is of course the linear and unidirectional view of history with its sequential stages, presuming the *adivasis* to be less advanced than the caste-class societies and requiring them to be civilized by embracing the dense structural features of the class society. In its utter objectification of the hill communities, the word ‘tribe’ also offers the license to regard these communities as innocent children to be reared afresh and educated but on occasions also a nuisance for their supposedly wild and unruly behaviour. This is not an ambivalence easy to dispel and the idea of the tribe in modern times invariably comes loaded with it. The author instead proposes the category of ‘periphery’, emphasizing the political-geographical aspect but also the vast natural resources often obtained in the hilly tracts of India inhabited by the *adivasis*. In many ways, the book presents an account of the increasing peripheralization of the *adivasis*, a phenomenon that first pushed them into the relatively secluded hilly areas and then continued to push them further through the migration of the plains people into their remote havens.

Through a sweeping view of the empirical material gathered, the author tries to demonstrate that during the pre-British era, the Gonds often had a working relationship with the larger feudal entities by means of treaties, tributes, taxes and their sub-feudatory status. He brings out the fact that around the mid-thirteenth century, Gond rajas ruled four kingdoms in the area

known as Gondwana. This continued for almost five hundred years and the Gonds were well used to the idea of sovereignty, an idea they have retained in their communal memories to this day. Even as feudatories, the chain of feudal ties at different levels allowed the Gonds some autonomy and looseness of political structure which was eroded speedily during the colonial period and the process continues into our own post-colonial times. The colonial regime and the dispensation that followed were not content with the loose allegiances and wanted firm and unquestioned control over natural resources and the *adivasis* as citizens, claiming the forests and rivers as the property of the state. The independence of India saw a further intensification of the process instead of relief. The British practice of declaring ‘tribal areas’ as protected left much ambiguity over who was to be protected from whom as vast tracts in Gondwana, as well as Jharkhand to take another example, were taken over by the plainsmen who used both wile and violence to take over the *adivasi* lands, dispossessing them rapidly and continuously since the mid-nineteenth century. This process has seen little reversal since and the changed demographics that favour the plainsmen hailing from caste societies bear it out rather dramatically. The author attributes the ‘Naxal’ problem entirely to the gradual cornering of a self-respecting people accustomed to a high level of political, cultural and religious autonomy.

Bhukya combines documentary evidence with ethnography, archeology, folk lore, elements of oral culture and symbology to construct a convincing portrait of a reign shrouded in mystery. The keyword here is ‘autonomy’ as a negotiable system of co-existence clearly contrasting with the modern state’s urge to tightly control its populace as well as the natural resources within its frontiers through a clear-cut legal order. How the land settlements of the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries affected the peasantry all over India is a story told more often and with greater consensus. As for the *adivasis*, who were often driven from the lower reaches of the forest tracts to more remote ones, the modern Indian state,

despite its democratic system, continues with unabated zeal in claiming much of their forest wealth through mining and other modes of extraction. The *adivasis*, for understandable reasons, see this as loot and vandalism or at least a lack of sharing and a reassured sense of co-ownership. The state-industry nexus continues to tighten its noose around their mineral and forest wealth, leaving the *adivasis* uncompensated in all senses of the term. There is thus a great divergence in the historical narrative voiced by the state and that of the *adivasis* with an enormous moral gulf that places the *adivasi* at the periphery of the nation as well as the democratic system.

Bhukya claims on the basis of empirical material that the difference between the impact of the British and that of the earlier indigenous regimes was of a relative kind even though the colonial insistence on fuller control of the resources should be seen as a watershed. Way back, the Kakatiyas, known for their massive irrigation network of tanks for example, appointed Nayaks as the village chiefs, the main purpose being to colonize forest lands and expand the reach of agriculture. Similarly, Gonds and other *adivasi* chiefs also acted as the intermediaries for the Mughals and the author provides a few accounts of active interaction between the mainland and the periphery. The periphery, according to the author, has to be seen as a political-social system on its own rather than the dark unknown inhabited by the 'tribals' as distinct from plainsmen. Even though the earlier rulers did see the *adivasi* as a different entity, the contrast became sharper and nearly absolute during the colonial era. Here, it may be important to note that the 'mainland' and the 'periphery' have been posited by the author as two domains neither completely isolated nor oppositional as was assumed by several colonial anthropologists and administrators. The formation of the periphery is also a historical process that goes back to the Neolithic era and the first settlements in the subcontinent. The process of state formation under different regimes over time and the state's hunger for more substantial revenues from land, forests and mines is the one historical arrow that seems to move in a straight line through the narrative here. The problem, however, is about how the peripheral also becomes the marginal in our times in the downright sense of democratic citizenship.

After a pithy introductory chapter that sets the context for this historical-ethnographic work, the author presents an account of the earliest Gond kings – for example Babji Ballal Shah (after whose offspring the railway station near Chandrapur, Maharashtra, is named), who is mentioned in *Ain-i-Akbari* and who ruled the kingdom of Chanda around 1442 and paid no taxes to the Mughals. It was only in 1667 that the Gond ruler of Chanda paid a tribute to Aurangzeb and accepted Mughal suzerainty though

only as long as it was unavoidable. Again, after the death of Aurangzeb, the Gond rulers enjoyed considerable freedom right until the Maratha invasions. Throughout their reign in central India, since the thirteenth century, the Gond rulers alternated between full suzerainty and subordinate raja status and built their own forts and had their own armies. A scarcely known fact – the Gond villages also practiced settled agriculture and were reduced to slash and burn farming as an opportune livelihood strategy much later and only after being pushed into the hills by the migrating plainsmen.

The following four chapters deal with the more recent history of the Gond rajas and their punitive taming by the British. As the colonial state takes root in the subcontinent, one gets a sense of both – a tireless push to take over the resources and an equally indefatigable attempt to deprive the *adivasi* of his custom and convention-based ownership rights. The details may be different but it is the same old enclosure principle the British applied to their own land in Europe, which they now employed for land settlement in its different versions in India, eliminating every kind of ambiguity in property relations that make an economy and society robustly organic. 'Taming' is the metaphor used by the author who also mentions the British horror of wildly growing forests and the fauna that inhabited it – they were all expected to follow the routinized drill of modern science and statecraft. Or simply get killed and wiped off till they conformed to a neater version of the modernist order! We may thus see the colonizer as a victim of his own flawed vision and our populations as victims of each other in an array of dominos shoving each other to what seems like an inexorable abyss at this point in history. We may also look at the entire saga as a spatial dynamic where the state pushes, corners and crushes any alternate social-political arrangement.

Of course, the spatial metaphor should not be extended too far – the state also insists on 'taming' the minds of the *adivasi* citizens through its own vision of development that may not square with the *adivasi* interests or temperament at all. In an epilogue, the author tries to reflect on the desperate urge of the *adivasis* to retain something of the autonomy they earlier enjoyed. Much of such *adivasi* defiance is directed at a caste society that props and arms itself with the might of the modern rational state. There are germs of a new line of political thinking here for those concerned with the overwhelming power of the modern state that is fundamentally at odds with the spirit of democracy. The historian in Bhukya however lets matters rest with all such questions instead of trying to answer them. There is much material and occasion in this Gond history to reflect and theorize on the modern state and its inescapable stranglehold.