

Reviews

Environment and Ethnicity in India 1200-1991, by Sumit Guha. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press (1999), xv, 217 pp.

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Environment and Ethnicity in India studies the peoples of the Vindhya, Sahyadri, Satpura and Satmala ranges of western India over several centuries. Following Barth's ecological model, where it is argued that a Pathan lifestyle was viable in a rugged terrain inaccessible to central authority, Guha suggests that such 'no go areas' existed in every part of the subcontinent. Nonetheless, he goes on to argue that a complex political economy existed in the region well into the eighteenth century, where even apparently isolated groups such as the Baiga participated, and tribute and exchange with settled peasants was part of the life of forest communities. Such interaction, he notes, needs to be seen as adaptation, a strategy to draw on the resources of the surrounding countryside. The forest communities were at an advantage in this regard, because of their familiarity with the woodlands and the possibility of flight into them to evade the control of the local landlords.

In analysing the forest polities of the early modern period he engages with the terms "indigenous" and "tribe" on a theoretical level and argues that an uncritical adoption of these categories is not supported by the historical record. This latter exercise is the more problematic one, for while he is quite aware of the political efficacy of using these terms, for example by people displaced in recent times by dam projects to claim compensation, he condemns their usage as being historically inaccurate. Indeed, Indian nationalists have traditionally been suspicious of such claims to an authentic "indigenous" status and such discourse has in recent times been co-opted by right wing proponents of the nation-state based on the notion of a unified national culture and a singular national history. Despite these developments, Guha is quick to dismiss these categories as being historically invalid. He seems to sympathise with the position of the unashamedly assimilationist sociologist, G.S. Ghurye (1943), who held the position that adivasi (indigenous peoples of India) were part of mainstream Hindu culture and needed to be totally assimilated. If, in the process they were further marginalised, so be it.

Much recent work has moved beyond mere assertions of the historical invalidity of such categories, and has effectively argued that ethnicity and ethnic ideologies are historically contingent creations. Thus, much of what Guha says may or may not be true depending on the specific case. For example, it is true that the Chakmas of the Chittagong Hill Tracts were by no means the first people to enter CHT; in fact, they were one of more the recent immigrants, following the Arkanese and Tripurans. Nonetheless, today Chakma identity is firmly linked to the hill tracts where they have sought to develop an "indigenous" model of state, society and culture. Elsewhere in India, as Hardiman (1987) argues, the term adivasi relates to a particular historical development, that is, the subjugation to colonial authority of a wide variety of communities during the nineteenth century. These communities, which had been relatively free from the control of outsiders before colonial rule, experienced a shared spirit of resistance, which incorporated a consciousness of the "adivasi" against the "outsider." As Hardiman notes, the term was used in the 1930s by political activists in the area of Chotanagpur in eastern India with the aim of forging a new sense of identity among different 'tribal' peoples, a tactic that has enjoyed considerable success.

What was the process that led to the marginalisation of many local forest communities? Guha argues that the appropriation of a European racial ethnography was used by indigenous elites to justify an indigenous hierarchy on the one hand and to assert parity with the European upper classes on the other. The upper strata took enthusiastically to racism and the academic study of "raciology." In his chapter on race and racial ideas in the nineteenth century, he notes that these ideas had considerable resonance in colonial India. H.H. Risley advertised India as an ethnographer's paradise on precisely such grounds. The caste system had prevented mixing and the 'primitive' tribes were not dying out as a consequence of western contact, and could therefore be readily measured by the visiting ethnographer. These ideas were well received by the Indian elites and Risley noted the alacrity with which his ethnographic exercises were assisted by various "native gentlemen".

However, Guha needs to make more of the fact that the new racial science confirmed the old hierarchy at home. To be linked to the wilderness or the jungle had been considered pejorative from ancient times up to the eighteenth century and was not a recent phenomenon. It must be noted, and I fear that in his haste to dismiss the notion of the unchanging primitive tribe Guha does not sufficiently emphasise this fact, colonial epistemology lined up with Brahmanical knowledge, resulting in the depoliticisation and emasculation of many communities that came to be later termed as adivasi. Brahmanical theories of society that had long been propounded in the ancient centres

of Hindu scholarship became more widely influential with the growing power of Brahmin ritual in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As Hindu caste society became less mobile and more codified under colonial institutions, these older images of the tribes received a new impetus. Guha himself notes that in western India, little trace could be seen in the more modern epigraphs of Bhar chiefs, the Tharu gentry or Bhil kinglets that had traditionally occupied a higher status in medieval society. The social downgrading of these communities quickly followed military marginalisation and the turn of the eighteenth century saw severe Maratha reprisals against the Bhils in Khandesh. What needs to be examined more carefully, therefore, is the way in which Brahmanical and Kshatriya values seemed to acquire a more exclusive dominance. As Rosalind O'Hanlon notes, citing Christopher Bayly, "what brought these Brahmanical values into wider currency was not some extraordinary piece of colonial conjuring. It was rather a complex set of processes to which British and Indian alike contributed, and some of which, such as the association of Brahmins with newer pre-colonial dynasties, were already in train during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries" (1989:99). With the emergence of a more settled and homogenous peasant society and the increased pressure on land, the exclusion of potential competitors became a more appropriate strategy. She argues that "where the British did contribute to the processes it was to stimulate them indirectly, in their project for the classification of castes, in their production of new regional histories and in their enshrining of what was in effect Brahmanical precept and custom as law within the Anglo Indian judicial system."

Guha's work seems to follow the line, recently criticised by Bayly and O'Hanlon, that the British invented nineteenth century caste and tribe. In order to challenge the notion of an ageless caste based social order, his argument may have been carried too far. Colonial regimes did not simply invent caste and tribe out of pre-colonial systems that were uniformly mobile and uncoded. The agency of Indians and long-term structural continuities need to be taken more into account in these studies. Nineteenth century preoccupations with caste needs to be understood in terms of continuity with precolonial Brahmanic and Kshatriya precepts and traditions. While one cannot deny the existence of competing local ideologies and alternative forms of social organisation, the growing dominance of Brahmanical ritual and scribal specialists in the immediate pre-colonial period needs to be sufficiently studied.

Guha may be right in arguing that pastoralism as a way of life had its origins in desertions from mixed farming communities under the impact of both natural and social change. He argues that the middle centuries of the first millennium saw pastoralists renegotiating their relations with settled villages and their Brahmin parasites, resulting in the rise of various dynasties whose names associate them with pastoralism, such as, the Palas, Yadavas, Gurjaras. Kingship, however, was available only to a few of them. The remaining pastoralists, like the Banjaras, gradually integrated themselves into the renewed agrarian, political and natural environment. Much of the history cited here is conjectural, but what he fails to emphasise sufficiently is the "gradual loss of status suffered by pastoralist and tribal groups, their assimilation into the expanding ranks of low caste agricultural labourers, the closing off of social boundaries around the great agricultural castes and their more marked internal stratification, and an intensified concern with the purity of lineage amongst the martial clans such as Rajputs and the Marathas whose war bands had been domesticated under the British peace" (O'Hanlon 1989:98).

Despite the validity of his thesis that "the wanderers might settle and the settled wander; forests might be cleared and forests grow, ploughshares might be beaten into swords and vice versa," the problem remains of explaining the spread of principles of hierarchy and social differentiation.² The main thrust of Guha's concluding section is to demonstrate how the twentieth century isolation of 'remote jungle tribes' was an artefact of colonial rule rather than a survival of some remote epoch. In these chapters, which are executed with a fine eye for detail, he argues that the behaviour and ideals of the forest folk suggests that they partook predominantly of one of the mainstream cultures of medieval South Asia, that of, "soldier rather than that of cleric, merchant or peasant" (p. 163). At the top of the hierarchy, some successfully made the change from warlord to landlord, while some made the transition from peasant militia to dominant caste. Still others, joined the proletariat while some remained committed to a mobile and independent lifestyle and found the agricultural frontier closing around them. Guha usefully shows that the Bhils, like the Kolis, "were not isolated remnant populations savagely defending themselves against encroaching civilisation," rather, they were deeply integrated into the political economy of medieval India. However the declining status of the Katkaris and Varlis and the processes involved in their proletarianisation needs to be the focus of much more analysis. Clearly, more needs to be made of Bayly's thesis, that continuity with pre-colonial Brahmanic social precepts was an important part of the process which led to the emergence in the nineteenth century of firmly bounded caste communities informed to a much greater extent by Brahmanical values and practice.

In his chapters on forest rights and forest changes, Guha's rather uncritical acceptance of the Leach-Fairhead thesis, which suggests that in Guinea, the Kissidougou landscape is one that is currently filling up with rather than being emptied of forests, and his argument that similar processes occurred in western India is hard to accept. While

it is useful to retain a critical perspective, and to be wary of romanticising indigenous peoples and their attitudes to the environment, it is much harder to dismiss the very real evidence of ecological change and deforestation that took place in India all through the colonial period. In attempting to understand the nature of the woodland changes; and in the face of overwhelming evidence, Guha hazards a reluctant guess, "Woodlands in western India exist today as islands in a sea of tillage, degraded pasture and barren waste; two centuries earlier the picture might have been reversed, archipelagos of tillage were found in a sea of modified woodland and open savannah" (p. 40). This seems contrary to the Leach thesis, that historical Kissidougou enjoyed no more tree cover than modern Kissidougou. Elsewhere Guha notes that, "through the nineteenth century, the forests receded as trees went to feed the demand for beams and rafters...the rapid thinning of the mountain forests would have been accelerated by the fact that little large timber remained in the Dakhan plains. This process was encouraged by the British regime" (pp. 51-52). His application of the Leach - Fairhead thesis to Western India is thus untenable, even based on his own evidence. One is not making the case here for a pristine environmental past. Clearly the people's engagement with the forest in multiple ways resulted in the creation of a human landscape, one that was ever changing, with forests giving way to settlements shifting agricultural practices, and the altering of boundaries between villages and forest. Nature was not "out there"; it was a lived relationship for local communities. However, only a much more detailed environmental history of local villages will allow us to piece together these rich and complex stories.

In this context Guha's rather off-hand comment that "the Baiga were another forest community with a useful sideline in magic and healing" (p. 41), that they were totally integrated with other local communities through the wood trade and had been since the early nineteenth century, is not the whole story. It has been noted that until the 1850s the British hesitated to impose strict measures against the wood trade in the Central Provinces because they feared "a flight of tribals in areas under company rule," and that most Gonds in Mandla depended on sales of wood for their livelihood. However these communities were clearly distinguishable from other low-lying populations in their overwhelming dependence on the forest products, not just for trade but also in terms of their life style. Baiga and Gond understandings of landscape, their stories of nature, their lived history were very different from the perception of nature and the land of local settled communities. Many of these groups tended to experience the forest and village as ontologically part of each other, one being the life force of the other. Elsewhere, for example, in the Dangs, the village was part of the jungle and sacred groves were located at the outskirts of villages where boundary deities were believed to reside. Ritual practice with strict prohibitions on felling, drinking and sexual intercourse ensured that forest deities would not be hostile to the Bhils (Skaria 1999:59). These perceptions were very different from those of the settled agricultural communities of the plains, the Thakur farmers or the Maratha Kunbi peasantry in western India. To say this is not to romanticise these communities and their relationship to nature. In his recent reply to Obeyesekere, Marshall Sahlins has noted, that the post-modern attack on the notion of a bounded and coherent culture has occurred at the very moment when groups such as the Maoris, Tibetans, Australian aborigines around the world 'all speak of their culture using that word or some other equivalent, a value worthy of respect, commitment and defence'. He argues that no good history can be written without regard for "ideas, actions and ontologies that are not and never were our own" (Sahlins 1995:1-15). While Guha's point that a multiplicity of occupations was shared among the marginal communities of the Konkan, such as the Katkari and the Bhils of Khandesh, is well taken, one cannot dispute that in many parts of India there existed communities, such as the Birhor in eastern India, who had a sophisticated knowledge of the jungle environment and depended on it to an overwhelming extent in comparison to the more settled agricultural communities. The Hos of Singhbhum in the nineteenth century, for example, had names for all the common plants and those of economic importance to them and, like the forest Mundas, were well versed in the edible properties of plants. The forest environment, and a knowledge of it, were thus of critical importance to the local people, particularly in dietary terms. This importance in terms of food was paralleled in terms of belief; the two were not truly separable and Chotangpuri folk taxonomy was completely embedded in and mediated by the local cultural order. Evidence from western India, among the Gonds, Baigas and Bhils suggests similar associations with the forest environment.

Guha's analysis then, is in part dictated by the nature of the sources he uses. While he puts considerable effort into demonstrating the way in which the Bhils and the Gonds were well integrated into the local political economy, there is no exploration of local Bhil traditions, no analysis of their ideological engagement with the forest except as timber traders. In addition, Guha's analysis of forest politics in the colonial period does not sufficiently examine the impact of the dwindling of the forest on Bhils or the nature of Bhil resistance. While local perceptions do emerge in the description of the disarticulation of forest politics, as in the story of the Akrani plateau, one wishes that Guha had included more information from the local communities' perspectives, rather than the perspective of the local Ranas, or chiefs. Guha is aware of this obvious lacunae in his work and acknowledges that he has looked at forest people largely from an 'external perspective', a perspective dictated by the nature of his sources. Nonetheless, this proves a glaring omission. Guha could have made more use of other studies in this regard. For example, there is

little discussion of Hardiman's excellent study of the adivasis of southern Gujarat beyond noting the futility of what he calls the messianic nature of the movement in question. Such a comment testifies to Guha's neglect of local traditions, mythmaking and ritual practice among the communities he purports to study.

In the last chapter, the trajectory of his thesis leads him to the inevitable conclusion that having being integrated into the local political economy from the very beginning, the maintenance of artificial boundaries between caste and tribe first by the colonial and then by the post-colonial state could not but benefit the so called tribes. He argues that in the post-independence period, the protective policy of the Indian state has led to tribal communities in Khandesh moving from being mainly landless to acquiring shares of land not much below their percentage of the population and that tribals in areas such as Jalgoan and Dhule were better off than in the mid-nineteenth century. Once again, there are problems with the sorts of evidence he uses, for as he himself notes, there is some degree of underestimation in the nineteenth century surveys, in that swidden farmers in the hills would tend to be omitted. In addition, his conclusion about the impact of protective legislation is certainly not borne out by what he said at least for the immediate pre-independence period where the status of these communities suffered a steady erosion all through the nineteenth century. In much of western Khandesh, for example, tribals in the possession of lands on inalienable tenure were perhaps saved from becoming landless labourers as a result of protective colonial state policy. However, on account of their indebtedness to moneylenders, they had acquired a serf status, working their fields for bare subsistence. David Hardiman's excellent study of the Devi movement (1987) outlines this story in fine detail. He notes that between 1895 and 1913, 42% of the land in the Baroda Taluka of Mahuva changed hands through sales and mortgages and a high proportion passed from adivasis to moneylenders. By 1913 his evidence reveals that a majority of the adivasis who made up 75% of the population of the Taluka lost their lands through sales and mortgages. Guha himself agrees that the limited protection afforded by the state conferred little advantage to the semi-proletarian communities in and around the forest in the 1930s, but he does not follow this idea through for the post-independence period.

The protection afforded by the independent Indian state from 1947 through the 1990s has been negligible; the interventionist developmental efforts of the post-colonial state during this period has wrought tremendous damage on Indian forests and its fast dwindling wildlife. In this context, the fate of marginalized forest communities, often dispossessed and resettled on marginal unproductive lands can only be imagined.³ Guha needs to examine his evidence much more critically than he does. Hardiman once again shows the way in which the tenancy legislation in the post 1950s period, which Guha credits as having so benefited the tribes, actually worked. Hardiman notes that the land lost by Parsis and urban sahumkars to their adivasi tenants following agrarian legislation benefited mainly the bigger adivasi landowners, and lead to a growing polarisation between rich and poor adivasis in the period after independence. He further argues that in many other areas, like in Rajpipla state, high caste farmers had managed to grab large amounts of land during the period after 1920 and turn local adivasis into bonded labourers. Here, as they were not classed as tenants, these communities did not regain the land through tenancy legislation.

Christopher Von Haimendorf's classic study, forcefully underlines the marginalisation of these communities in many parts of India in the period immediately after independence and in the 1960s and 70s (Furer-Haimendorf 1989:323-326). Understanding the true impact of the tenancy legislation of the 1950s in western India requires going beyond a mere review of official sources, and needs much further study.

In conclusion, one might argue that adivasi claims to an 'authentic indigeneity' cannot be easily dismissed on the basis of Guha's evidence, as other researchers, most notably Hardiman (1987), Skaria (1999) and Bhaviskar (1995), have shown for western India.. Skaria in particular notes, that the way in which forest communities used the identities being attributed to them is important. The fact that the term adivasi, with its connotation of autochthonous power, has found so much favour with these communities is of great significance. Their embrace of an adivasi identity can be seen as a way of creating alternative power structures and of being outside the narratives of the Indian nation state. As Skaria puts it, "being adivasi or indigenous is about the shared experience of the loss of the forests, the alienation of land, repeated displacements since independence in the name of development, and much more" (p. 281). The recent debate over the damming of the Narmada has highlighted the question of indigenous rights. Approximately 37,000 hectares of land and 152,000 people are scheduled to be displaced due to the reservoir. Secondary displacement will raise the total to 1 million (Bhaviskar 1995: 200). While it is true that the hill adivasis are only one third of the number ultimately affected, their plight has been highlighted to garner support from global environmental awareness. For example, the activists of the Narmada Bachao Andolan have been helped by the contemporary political prominence of the issue of indigenous rights and the international shift in attitudes towards indigenous people since the Second World War. Especially since the 1960s and 1970s, there has been a marked growth of interest in the value of indigenous cultures; as well as in environmental activism and the two movements have been viewed as symbiotic. The assumption has been that supporting indigenous land rights is compatible with

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and even promotes environmental values, for it cannot be denied that local practices of forest peoples in many parts of India incorporated valuable environmental lessons. This was nowhere more evident than in western India, where the politics of local forest communities was often in violent confrontation with the developmental policies of the colonial and post-colonial state.

The cultural struggle for indigenous rights being waged in many parts of contemporary India must be seen as essentially a movement directed towards transforming the balance of power in the region. In Gramscian terms, it may be seen as a struggle for hegemony in the cultural and political arena. In rejecting terms such as *jangali* that forms part of a discourse that aids compliance towards forms of economic and political domination, and by forcefully claiming indigenous status and rejecting the notions of backwardness and inferiority in comparison with the plains Hindus, adivasi leaders in the twentieth century have attempted to secure political advantage in the colonial and post-colonial period. In the process, claims about the inherent originality or purity of adivasi culture are made and the history of acculturation with the dominant Hindu culture is pushed aside. It is in this moment of struggle against dominant values and the narratives of the state, as Homi Bhabha notes that the “meanings and symbols of culture are appropriated, translated, re-historicized and read anew” (Bhabha 1996:37).

Despite his skilful use of early modern sources, Guha’s reassessment of this period needs to take into account local traditions and transforming historical developments that have led gradually to the emergence of the identity of the adivasi. In the absence of such an analysis, his conclusion that invocations of indigeneity can only have explosive consequences, ignores the politics of such identity formations in India. The embracing of the identity of indigenous or adivasi must be seen in political terms. Given the effects of economic exploitation, political disenfranchisement, social manipulation and ideological domination on the cultural formation of minority subjects and discourses, a redefinition of the subject position of tribes and an exploration of the strengths and weaknesses, affirmations and negations, of the term adivasi itself was inevitable.⁴ In this context, it becomes useful to see contemporary adivasi culture and the assertion of indigenous rights in many parts of India today as a form of political struggle.

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1. The term *adivasi* or original inhabitant rather than 'tribal' is seen as preferable by some writers for it is free of the evolutionist implications of the latter term.

2. In dealing with his evidence here, the lack of chronological sequence is irritating to the reader. When Guha talks of adaptation of forest communities, nineteenth century evidence for the Bhils is cited alongside data from the first millennium. Clearly such a handling of the obviously rich material, does not allow for the specificities of the historical conjuncture of the nineteenth century, for example in eastern India, where the discourse of marginality forcefully articulated the history of the region as one in which the local inhabitants of Chotanagpur were gradually peripheralised in regional politics and subject to the whims of the colonial state.

3. In neighbouring Rajasthan, Maya Unnithan's work on the Girasia tribes shows, that while the marginalisation of these groups is of recent origin for in their oral narratives they record themselves as being Rajput, their current status is a tragic story of gradual dispossession and resettlement on unproductive lands. See Unnithan-Kumar (1997).

4. See also Abdul R., Jan Mohammed and David Lloyd, *Cultural critique*, Fall 1987.

Marxism, Revisionism, and Leninism: Explication, Assessment, and Commentary, by Richard F. Hamilton, Westport, CT: Praeger (2000), x, 269 pp.

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In a very timely book, Richard Hamilton has attempted to revisit the empirical claims of Marxism, Revisionism (in particular, the "evolutionary socialism" of Eduard Bernstein), and Leninism. With the crumbling of the Berlin Wall--symbolizing for many the end of the relevance of Marx's political theory--and the veering toward a "third way" (read, neo-liberal way) in various Western European countries by formerly avowed socialist parties, Marxism, and its brand of socialism, is now universally assumed to be an historical artifact, and maybe neither a very interesting nor productive one at that. If we were to look at the proclivities of theorizing within the social sciences and humanities, we would not see much that would point to Marxism's conceptual centrality either. Instead of finding the specter of Marx haunting the halls of academe, we are more prone to confront various hagiographic personifications of J. S. Mill, Michel Foucault, and Gayatri Spivak. So, in such a context, it might actually be fruitful to once again look at the theoretical and empirical relevance of Marx's thought so as to assess whether his absence in conceptual and practical affairs is warranted. Hamilton, coming from a rather different problematic (one that sees Marx and his heirs behind every theoretical and conceptual corner), steps up to offer one take on this issue.

In general, Hamilton attempts to verify and/or falsify what he sees as the empirical hypotheses of these three strains of the Marxist tradition. What makes the book significant is his attempt to clearly articulate the empirical