Review


It is oft repeated, but no less true for its frequent invocation: India is a phenomenally diverse land. All too often scholars of India make a passing reference to diversity in their preface, and then proceed to focus their scholarship in such a way as to obscure that diversity. Frequently this occurs simply in the choice of a source base (be it art, literature, political documents, folklore, or any other means of studying a culture or a past) that implicitly limits one’s field of vision to a specific group of people. In this collection of essays, Pati makes a welcome attempt to combine numerous disparate sources in painting a multi-faceted picture of the social history of the Indian state of Orissa that is far more vibrant than the typical monocromatic scholarship derived from a less ambitious collection of sources.

This book is a collection of six separate essays, along with a brief introductory preface and a collection of field-note observations that serves as an informal epilogue. The preface draws attention to the common themes that permeate Pati’s essays. He mentions his clear debt to the theorists of hegemony and resistance, as well as the subaltern historians of India. Pati grapples with the ‘interactions of the common people with the structures of domination, power and control’ (p. viii), particularly as reflected by popular culture—the songs, the folklore, the literature, the belief systems—of the ‘tribals and peasants’ (p. ix). Pati rejects the unfortunate romanticization of the precolonial Indian past, and suggests that Orissa’s history demonstrates a marginalization of the poor and dispossessed, particularly the adavasis (tribal communities), that has both preceded and extended past the colonial period. Though clearly a work of history, contemporary concerns are never far from the surface, and throughout the book, Pati is concerned about ‘post-colonial underdevelopment’ (p. ix) and ‘the utter irrelevance of the various plans and programmes that are supposed to uplift the tribals.’ (p. 161)

The six essays are widely different in their foci: one concerns popular responses to medicine, two are organized around close readings of Oriya literature, one concerns the murder of an estate manager, one is a discussion of famine, and the sixth is an attempt to draw together common themes between the first five essays through a discussion of ‘popular memory’. In each essay Pati attempts to cast his net as broadly as possible, being careful not to neglect the implications of the given topic with regard to caste, class, religion, gender, or geography. At times this devolves into a rather pedestrian sequence of sections, as Pati works through the complex social divisions for his different topics. What this structure lacks in fluidity, however, it makes up in thoroughness. Throughout the essays, Pati draws...
upon extensive field work in Orissa, including oral histories and folktales and songs, as well as literature and more traditional archival sources. Pati’s own lived experiences in Orissa have also shaped his work, as more than once he refers to stories or observed phenomena from his youth. While the richness of Pati’s source base is to be commended (and hopefully emulated), Pati does not always mix his sources in his writing—the literature often discussed separately from the oral histories, or government archives not mixed in with field experiences, for instance.

The book’s third essay, ‘The Murder of Banamali: Collective Action and Popular Culture’, is Pati’s most successful. Pati uses a small historical event (the murder of a local estate manager) and the continuing folklore about this event to paint a compelling picture of the social history of Balanga (in Orissa) in the early twentieth century. Rippling out from his description of the murder, Pati describes social transformations, class and caste disputes, and economic interactions, just to begin. Pati moves easily between oral histories and court documents, as well as numerous secondary sources. Here Pati most clearly demonstrates his mastery of his sources, and his rich vision of Orissa’s past.

The fifth essay, ‘Tracing the Social History of a Famine: Kalahandi (1800–1992),’ is the book’s most ambitious. Here Pati attempts an environmental history of Kalahandi, from the pre-colonial period to the present. Pati argues that the recurrent famines in this region, and environmental transformation, are linked to a long-term history of human exploitation. He begins with the ‘peasantisation/Hinduisation of tribals’ (p. 100) in the pre-colonial period, continues through the alliance of colonialists with the feudal elites, and then moves to the current post-colonial development policies of India. This essay is richly suggestive, and would be well worth expanding into a book-length monograph. As it is, however, the essay remains more suggestive than definitive, and the discussion of more contemporary post-colonial development is particularly unsatisfying. Clearly, Pati as limited in what he could say by the essay format; I hope that he chooses to pursue this topic further. A series of omitted (or incorrect?) digits in population, rainfall, and land numbers given on pp. 111, 112, and 115 unfortunately obscure some of Pati’s statistical evidence.

Situating Social History is clearly history as social critique. Speaking of medicine, but equally apt for many of Pati’s themes, he writes ‘there are remarkable continuities in post-colonial Orissa, especially in relation to the indigenous people.’ (p. 25) And this, then, is the heart of Pati’s argument—that the study of the past is not always a study of change, but also of continuities, and that for the dispossessed of Orissa the continuities have been bleak: ‘as we enter the twenty-first century, we should not forget areas like Koraput which are yet to see the light of the nineteenth century.’ (p. 161) Although his description of contemporary politics is thin, his historical anecdotes are often rich and suggestive, and readers can draw their own fruitful connections to contemporary situations and debates.

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