

Review: Bidisha Chakraborty and Sarmistha De, *Calcutta in the Nineteenth Century: An Archival Exploration*, with an introduction by Ranabir Ray Choudhury, Delhi: Niyogi Books, 2013, pp. 428, including glossary, acknowledgements, and index. ISBN: 978-93-81523-81-0.

As Ranabir Ray Choudhury points out in his introduction to this volume, this book is truly a diamond mine for future research: each topic and chapter opening up fresh vistas of the history of nineteenth century Calcutta. Bidisha Chakraborty, an alumnus of Presidency College, now Presidency University, Calcutta, and Sarmistha De, doctorate holder from Jadavpur University, Calcutta, both archivists at the West Bengal State Archives have collaborated to offer rich material from the archives that will be fascinating not only to budding researchers, historians, but also to the general reader.

The authors do not claim to write a comprehensive and chronological history of Calcutta; rather they cover themes ranging from administering the city, governance of public affairs, infrastructural development of the city displacing its original inhabitants, sanitary measures and public health, to establishment of educational institutions, social reforms, and growing urbanisation. The first chapter is on City Administration, and opens with a particularly perceptive essay by Charaborty on the dishonest functionings of the Lottery Committees, which she points out was a form of 'legal gambling', sponsored and farmed out by the East India Company's government. However, there is no denying the fact that they played an important role in the urbanisation and development of Calcutta as a city. De's illuminating essay on city lights shows how gas lights on iron posts were adopted on a large scale in 1857. This while the mutiny and rebellions of 1857 raged across the rest of northern India.

In chapter two, 'Controlling Public Affairs', the article on *Bijoya Dashami* by De highlights an interesting interface between Indians and their colonial rulers over rights and rites of passage for religious processions. It was not just a simple question of confrontation between the ruler and the ruled; emerging class divisions and *Bhadralok* culture saw confrontations between the upper and the popular culture of 'lower orders' or the 'mob', in which the British colluded. The essay on '*Churuck Pooja*' shows the contradictions within indigenous society and highlights the conflict between a colonial policy of non-interference in 'native' affairs and the desire for increasing penetration and control over indigenous society. Of course, the practice of hanging from a tree by piercing the flesh would appear strange to our eyes but then practices such as walking barefoot over burning coal, or, body piercings, especially popular now in the West, continue. The dialogue between elite and popular cultures is a complex issue. Similar contradictions emerged over the suppression of obscene literature: what could be legitimately (!) classified as obscene,

and the failure of moral policing shown in the case of the *Battala* presses. The notion that Indians were a highly stratified society is simple, as simple as the notion that the British were homogenous. De, in 'European Labourers in Calcutta' (chapter six), depicts how the bases of British rule over India were European sailors, women, and soldiers belonging to the so-called lower classes, who were a continuous problem for the ruling elite. These were fissured societies at multiple levels, both external and internal.

The essays on spatial expansion of Calcutta reveal several dimensions. *Bustees* or slums were a byproduct of urbanization. As they mushroomed so were they harshly erased to make way for urban expansion. As Chakraborty notes, a large slum was destroyed and the Eden hospital was built on that land. This is ironic; slums were sources of labour but at the same time threats to public health and sanitation: the added moral justification for their destruction was that they were sources of disease. The twin processes of government acquisition and privatisation competed with each other, as shown by the various articles in this chapter on the spatial expansion of Calcutta. This chapter is an important addition to our comprehension of aspects of the urbanisation of Calcutta and its environs.

Plagued with disease, the East India Company governors created water tanks following indigenous traditions, while condemning the Salt lake wetlands for their miasma. Chakraborty and De highlight these contradictory trends present during the nineteenth century. This book is a good example of the history of urbanisation.

The section on education lacks the vigour of the earlier chapters, though the piece on Eden Hindu Hostel of Presidency College is enlightening. Clean and safe drinking water was always a problem for Calcutta: was the location of the city a curse? continuing flooding indicates so. The theme of continuity, indicated by Ray Choudhury, shows how notions of improvement and nature's moods of Bengal Presidency struggled against each other. Fever Hospitals and the Medical College were established by government around the 1830s. As Chakraborty points out, they were not immediately popular with the local population, but yielded valuable first aid and emergency services, especially the Fever Hospitals.

This is an important book, ranging far and wide, but bound together by the collaborative introductions to each chapter. Drs Chakraborty and De have attempted a monumental task. The illustrations in the book are enlightening and enjoyable. Since this is a book on the history of the city of Calcutta some more secondary references would have been welcome. For example, Sukanta Chaudhuri (ed), *Calcutta the Living City*, New Delhi: OUP, 1995, 2 vols.

This is a valuable source book worth buying and keeping. It is rare that archivists venture out to make such valuable and important contributions to our existing body of knowledge. Completely dependent on archivists, historians often forget their essential help and support: basically knowledge. This book illustrates how important their contributions are. That Ray Choudhury got the authors to contribute regularly and structured a complete book is the

achievement of this triumvirate. The nuanced and variegated readings of the period, and presentation of archival materials, are a treasure trove. Though brief, the introductions to the chapters present a holistic approach, so we wait in anticipation for another rich volume by the authors.

Debjani Das

Pradip Chattopadhyay, *Redefining Tribal Identity. The Changing Identity of the Santhals in South-West Bengal*. Delhi: Primus, 2014. Pp. 252 + x, including acknowledgements, bibliography, and index. Rs. 995. ISBN: 978-93-80607-91-7.

It was a pleasure to go through Professor Pradip Chattopadhyay's monograph on 'the issue of the ethnic identity of the Santhals of south-west Bengal', formerly the *Jangal Mahals*, and comprising the districts of Bankura, Birbhum, and Midnapore. One reason is that he writes lucidly and includes all the details of facts and scholarly opinions, thus making it quite useful for those who wish to enter for the first time the much contested themes of tribe and identity in history and the social sciences. The other important reason is that he neither roots his exploration on any rigid *a priori* assumption, nor does he appear to be committed to 'essentialise' Santhal identity. He takes a long-term view spanning the colonial and post-colonial periods, at times the pre-colonial; he relies on a mass of archival data, events and contemporaneous opinions, and findings from interviews and observations in the field; and yet, he is averse to 'conclude' and appears to keep it all very 'open-ended'. The reader is thus left to mull on the matter, differ in opinion if so inclined, and thereby add to the deliberations.

The *raison d'être* of the work emanates from the author's concern that 'ethnic interests and corresponding violence/clashes are probably the root of all evils currently threatening nations all over the world...[and such] interests inflame relatively small issues into potentially dangerous, bigger ones and quickly convert a wide range of apparently political, social and economic problems of people into ethnic problems, thus paving the way for the rise of issues as serious as cross-border terrorism and other nefarious activities'. True, whereas dormant in the 18th and the 19th centuries, ethnic problems and assertions do seem to have burst forth with vengeance in the post-Second World War climate of democracy and civil rights world-wide. In India, the phenomenon surfaced during colonial rule that broke into and disrupted the customary ways of life of the submerged and the marginalised; continuing industrialisation, commercialisation, and urbanisation in the post-colonial era and the importance of civil rights, social justice, and economic freedom within a democratic structure have deepened the consciousness of subaltern groups, given an edge to their struggles, and broadened their demands into recognition of their languages, religions, and even territories. In the process, their identities seem to have continually and invariably undergone multiple transformations.

The author seeks to understand the ‘changing perception of Santhal identity as well as on the modality of their identity assertion that accompanied the massive transformation of Santhal society from the nineteenth century down through the first five decades of Indian independence’. He accepts the Santhals as an ethnic category, a ‘hereditary group with shared values, style of life, exclusive symbol of identity and consciousness of kind’; obviously, however, he considers them to be primarily and mainly a tribal category, in the sense that tribes have a ‘historical association or prerogative in respect of some productive resources’ – for the Santhals, *jal*, *jangal*, and *jamin*. Arguably, although elements of ‘imagination’ and ‘construction’ do go into its making – identity is never conjured out of nothing. The author thus shows how the Santhals who, like other similar communities, had always been a part of larger societies and polities of the subcontinent, nevertheless harboured a distinct and largely homogeneous identity out of their intimate economically-sustaining and emotionally-charged relationship with *jal-jangal-jamin*; a kinship-based, community-oriented and un-stratified social structure, a predominantly agriculture-based self-sufficient economy, an animistic religion and a moral and ethical code of collectivity, and a village politico-administrative organization headed by the *manjhi* were elements of this identity.

It is indeed important to concede that identity is entwined with material conditions and struggle in a curious manner; it at once feeds into, and adds to, the others, and in such a way that it often becomes difficult to extricate and distinguish it from the others. To confound matters, identity is in a state of constant flux as material conditions and conditions of struggle themselves undergo changes – so much so that it becomes difficult also to pin it down to anything very specific and forever. This appears to be the central thesis of the work in review. As the author states at the outset: ‘The process of identity formation symbolizes a curious mix of history, religion, art and polity over the centuries – all fusing together to give birth to a notion about a community which is both comprehensive and distinctive at the same time...As such this process of construction never ends nor does the concept of identity once formed stop evolving...the notion of identity...seems to have undergone changes with the change in its constituent variables and context.’ He thus takes the reader, phase by phase, on a journey about the changing perception of the Santhals as to who they are and the changing modalities of assertion of their identity; at every stage, what actually happened in the specific area under study is spelled out too.

The age-old Santhal identity was first rudely shaken when colonial exploitation ruptured the community’s traditional way of life; hence the resultant Hool of 1855, the first openly violent attempt to preserve a habitual mode of existence and identity. Exploitation continued unabated with the failure of the revolt; apart from land being robbed and customary forest-rights denied, the undermining of the status of the *manjhi* who held together the community was now another blow to Santhal identity. The subsequent demonstrations against rent-increase, the birth of the Kherwar Movement in 1874, and the violence during census operations actually testifies to the community’s desperate and relentless struggle to preserve its identity. However, the adopted

process of acculturation – borrowing from Hinduism and Christianity with the intention of moral regeneration and religious purification – that entailed divergence in modes of life among the Santhals emanating from different religious, ethical, and educational mores and practices had a detrimental effect on their communitarian identity too. An ensuing phase thus saw a new consciousness to overhaul Santhal culture; to restore faith in their ethnic identity, there was now an upsurge in observing traditional practices and a bid for recognition of their distinct script of *Ol-chiki*. It is against the backdrop of this ‘cultural’ phase that the Jharkhand movement that began during colonial rule and continues still, is to be studied. It was/is an altogether ‘new’ attempt to assert Santhal identity: although the Santhals had always had a sense of territory, the demand for their own province demonstrates both their willingness to be an integral part of the Indian polity and yet have their own preserve within it. Meanwhile, affirmative state policy and action, economic well-being, and educational progress in the post-colonial era have helped bring about significant changes in Santhal society. Class stratification and inter-group rivalries are the evident results of modernising instruments; differences in the mental worlds are more subtle and therefore hard to detect. The higher the age, the greater is a Santhal torn between nostalgia for past life and modernity; the lower the age, the more receptive is a Santhal towards opportunities of uplift and less likely to be sentimental about the past. As the author concludes, ‘the successful co-existence of the tribal sentiments alongside modern parameters of change and institutional facilities’ is what characterises Santhal life at present – the concern now is thus with simultaneous/selective preserving/borrowing, in order to fashion and assert a ‘modern’ ethnic identity.

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