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The Conquest of an Adivasi Homeland

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A new history of the transformation of Singhbhum district in Jharkhand under colonial rule breaks ground in Adivasi studies.

In 2018, Umar Khalid submitted a thesis to the Centre for Historical Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University, for which he was awarded a PhD degree. For reasons beyond Khalid's control, however, he has been unable to work on this draft any further, and *Fractured Communities* has come out almost exactly in the form in which it was written: as a history of the colonial conquest, control, and transformation of an Adivasi homeland (now in Jharkhand), spanning the period from the early 19th century to Independence in 1947.

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Extraneous circumstances aside, a reviewer entrusted with the task of critical assessment has to honestly and fairly answer the question: *does the thesis stand its ground as a monograph*? I think that it does. Moreover, with a persuasive new argument pitched at the thematic intersection of agrarian, environmental, legal and tribal/Adivasi studies, Khalid's book constitutes a significant addition to the field of modern Indian history.

The spatial theatre of *Fractured Communities* is the Kolhan Government Estate. Located in the Singhbhum district in the southeastern portion of the Chota Nagpur region, Kolhan has been home to the Ho inhabitants (called Larka Ho or 'Fighter Ho') who consistently rebelled against the imposition of an alien system of land and revenue administration by the East India Company. Their social structure comprised a dominant religious head, the *deuri* (village priest), under whom there were secular chiefs called *mundas* (village headmen) and *mankis* (headmen of a confederation of 12-15 villages called *pirs*). Together, they managed village affairs, allocated land for cultivation, and resolved disputes. On account of this local-level tribal organisation, the socio-economic, political and religious realms of the Ho community were relatively autonomous. In the precolonial political landscape, even local non-tribal chiefs like the Raja of Porhat or the Thakurs of Seraikela and Kharsawan vied to get the support of these Ho leaders in their internecine turf battles.

This was the context in which the East India Company intervened, seeking to maintain its strategic interests in a region close to the colonial power's capital at Calcutta. Owing to the prohibitive cost of military operations, it was fiscally imprudent to extend tight control over a territory where the presence of an organised state form was historically weak, and the subjects were recalcitrant. Moreover, the company needed allies and financial resources to efficiently run its administration.

The virtual freezing of governmental rent demand under the Permanent Settlement in Bengal and the consequent stagnation in revenue acted as a strong incentive to clear forests and extend the arable frontier. Consequently, large numbers of land-hungry peasants from the surrounding regions arrived in Kolhan to clear forests and expand cultivation. In time, the combined forces of these *dikus* (non-aboriginal outsiders), aided by the company courts and legal functionaries, dramatically increased land alienation amongst the tribals, making this a permanent aspect of politics in Chota Nagpur. Such discontent was the cause of the Kol rebellion of 1832, after which a simplified model of administration was introduced which privileged the European 'man on the spot' unencumbered by law codes, courts and pleaders.

Even as Kolhan emerged as a 'non-regulation' territorial space, exempt from the imposition of standardised administrative and legal regimes, company rule in Singhbhum required a fulcrum of native support. To fulfil this role, British officials sought help from the traditional leaders of the Ho society. Consequently, the key category that Khalid investigates throughout this book is the 'headmen', the mankis and mundas who gradually emerged as indispensable allies of the British Raj. The colonial rulers privileged them over the deuris, slowly displacing the latter's power and primacy in society. In Kolhan, the mankis and mundas started acting as the "eyes and ears of the colonial state" and became its chief "intermediaries".

In this sense, the account focuses on figures who are neither from the top echelon of colonial bureaucracy nor are the raiyats, the tenants at the bottom. In abjuring these two familiar levels, Khalid successfully opens up the discourse of power from within tribal

society. Through multiple examples, he convincingly shows how the mankis and mundas cornered the material benefits of their closeness with British power, especially in terms of land ownership and claims to being the khuntkattidars or original clearers of the soil. This alliance between the Raj and the traditional secular leadership (now acting as intermediaries) benefitted both groups, but in the long run also ossified hierarchies within Ho society, ultimately fracturing the community itself.

> This book is archivally rich and analytically focused. It opens up and investigates new questions, thereby revising existing scholarship on this region and theme. As such, it should be widely read and frequently cited.

Khalid marks his departure from Sanjukta Dasgupta's 2011 monograph on Singhbhum, *Adivasis and the Raj*, by emphasising that the mankis and mundas were not mere 'safety valves' for the colonial state. Since all state-forms continuously engage in a balancing of interests through functionaries on the ground, an identification of groups who were at times colluding, and at other moments competing, generates a dynamic canvas of change across a long expanse of time. The book ably demonstrates that the mankis and mundas were not merely community-minded leaders working for the common good but often acted in self-serving and self-interested ways. This was often done in collusion with or under the influence of the neighbouring Oriyas and Bengalis, or Christian missionaries, or native village groups like the Tantis. This is a powerful and new argument that Khalid makes, and is a very welcome move as it breaks the insider-outsider boundary which has become the staple orthodoxy of Adivasi history as well as politics. Moreover, by generating a narrow but consistent focus on this intermediary class, Khalid creates a powerful weighing in of evidence which makes his argument very persuasive.

The heart of the book is its second section, with twin chapters focusing on fields and forests. The undiluted focus is upon colonial land-management policies and the consequences they generate. Khalid tells us human stories in the context of "shrinking resources and other social and cultural changes". Together, these chapters present both an agrarian and an environmental history of the Kolhan Government Estate through the unique vantage point of quasi-state functionaries.

Traditionally, land was divided into *bad* (low embanked rice lands for wet cultivation), *bera* (middle lands) and *gora* (upland). In the first settlement of revenue in 1854, rents were kept low, but "differentiated rates of rent for different classes of land with a moderate increase in proportion to productivity were introduced in the region". For fear of rebellion, gora lands (primarily used for foraging of cattle) were entirely left out of the settlement operations. The fundamental unit of enumeration was the plough, and their total numbers were vital information that the manki and mundas provided to the company state. In return, 'pattahs' or title deeds were granted to them for a period of twelve years.

At this stage, a major problem that company officials encountered was the concealment of information by mankis and mundas about the real extent of expansion in cultivation. This issue was addressed during the next settlement operations in 1867, which entitled mankis and mundas to retain half of the total rents collected from inhabitants settled on newly reclaimed lands. An earlier practice of rewarding certain tribal heads was institutionalised by creating a new tenure called lakhiraj, under which select headmen and their families were granted rent-free villages in return for "military assistance and loyalty to the British during periods of unrest and rebellion". Nineteen 'loyal' families were so identified and exempted from the obligation of remitting rent collected to the government. The other significant aspects of this settlement were the rhetoric of 'improvement' and the change in the unit of assessment from plough to land, for which the village area was mapped and surveyed more closely. The special incentive worked miracles, and by 1890, almost half the region was under regular cultivation. When the next settlement operations culminated, the total area under cultivation had more than doubled to 1,94,738.9 acres in 1897 from 82,427 acres in 1867.

Throughout these three settlement operations, Khalid has emphasised that the undulating and jungle nature of the landscape meant that the efforts to extend the arable frontier were necessarily slow and heavily reliant on the intermediation by the mankis and mundas. He has argued, however, that while the colonial self-representation of the settlement proceedings was to ensure benefits to the villagers, in practice "these operations provided an opportunity for privileged sections within differentiated local communities to enhance their own social and economic status". The British attempts to individually enumerate tenants and classify their claims to village resources exacerbated the "pre-existing hierarchies within Adivasi communities while creating new ones". Since the cooperation of headmen was essential to these settlement proceedings, the mankis and mundas, as intermediaries, "used these moments to legitimise their own claims over land and forests at the expense of others". I am most impressed by Khalid's close reading of the three settlement reports of 1854, 1867, and 1897 in conjunction with the forest, revenue, land survey, village notes and related documents from the District Collectorate Record Room, Chaibasa. He presents this exceptional evidence not to reproduce the archive, but to interrogate administrative categories along with their underlying, often invisible, assumptions.

Moreover, Khalid has demonstrated that as the extension of railways and silvicultural operations started dominating the agenda, a pincer movement began. The government began demanding rent for the gora uplands while simultaneously demarcating jungles into Reserved or Protected Forests, curtailing any further extension of agriculture. He shows how the ecological logic began to displace the purely agrarian one as the region became increasingly integrated with wider markets.

The one major weakness of the narrative is the insufficient space given to the role of the deuris, especially in the late colonial period, when this displaced religious elite, along with other marginalised groups, propped up, supported and led a string of socio-religious reform movements seeking to reverse the dominance of the manki and munda intermediaries. Khalid brings out these details very well in his account of the Haribaba movement, which is based on entirely new sources. However, because he has not set up the deuris in opposition to the mankis and mundas in the rest of the narrative, the internal dissensions do not come out as strongly as they potentially could. Had such internal polarity been attempted, it would have possibly bolstered the argument of a 'fracture'. The collision of these contending forces-religious versus secular-could then be shown to compromise the organic nature of tribal social organisation.

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Another weakness is that the narrative flags after the 19th century and is marked by large gaps in the parts dealing with the 20th century. For instance, while the Bengal Nagpur Railway has been mentioned at different places, its effect on surplus extraction and migration patterns is left out almost entirely. Similarly, the effect of the Great Depression and the drop in commodity prices remains a blind spot. The two world wars, in which Singhbhum participated through sending men and material, are not given adequate attention, as is the interwar period. While there is a useful discussion on food scarcity between 1915-1918, its effects on increased state employment and the formation of Chota Nagpur Unnati Samaj (the precursor to the Adibasi Mahsabha) have been left out of the analysis. In a glaring oversight, the entire section on the Adibasi Mahasabha movement (which demanded an autonomous tribal state of Jharkhand in the late colonial period) is based on a solitary file from the year 1947. In an otherwise archivally grounded study, this instance of the primacy accorded to a single source with little corroboration from other primary or secondary sources sticks out.

Khalid also stops shy of enquiring into the role of Christian missionaries in the politics of Singhbhum. While they do appear sporadically, a systematic treatment of their role in the creation of a broad-based Adivasi political identity is wanting. At this stage, the word 'Adibasi' was not only identified with those communities classed as Backward Tribes but instead acted as a regional umbrella term which included everyone who supported the Jharkhand statehood demand. Indeed, Ranchi was the nerve centre of this movement, but Singhbhum was the other district where first-generation Adivasi leaders tasted electoral success. How many of them were Christians, and what was the connection with mankis and mundas given the very limited nature of franchise?

In better times, I hope that Khalid will be able to fill in these gaps. For now, his focused source-work and rigorous arguments make this book an outstanding representative of the best practices and traditions of socio-economic historiography for which his alma mater, the Centre for Historical Studies, is well-known. The literary quality of the prose is consistently high and occasionally brilliant. Khalid marshals a wide array of primary documents from the local, regional, provincial, and national archives.

Another remarkable aspect of this book is its overall Marxist framing of the problem. In a fast-changing academic context where archivally grounded histories abjure historical materialism, Khalid embraces it willingly and with aplomb. By combining Marxist methods deeply informed by class analysis with the concerns of environmental and agrarian history, *Fractured Communities* breaks with the boredom of orthodoxy and succeeds in forging a creative form of Marxism. In a nutshell, this book is archivally rich and analytically focused. It opens up and investigates new questions, thereby revising existing scholarship on this region and theme. As such, it should be widely read and frequently cited.

Saagar Tewari is a historian based in Delhi-NCR.