

## BOOK REVIEW

**'TRIBAL' HERITAGE: AN OVERLOOKED CHAPTER OF INDIAN HISTORY** by Promode Kumar Misra, 2017, Tallahassee, Florida, USA: Vasbandhu Misra

Fifty years ago I heard P. K. Misra confidently offer his own thoughts about potential research directions for the Anthropological Survey of India. The venue was an ASI staff conference in Kolkata that Surajit Sinha invited me to attend. It was clear to all that Sinha and N. K. Bose, although by far Misra's seniors in the ASI, listened attentively to his words. Perhaps it was a foregone conclusion then that Misra would someday be able to provide broad new insights about India, particularly about India's so-called 'tribal' peoples. In keeping with this expectation, the comprehensive scope and the depth of his *'Tribal' Heritage* are extraordinary. Findings of one discipline after another have been brought to bear on the subject and no time period is deemed irrelevant.

Misra examines early European roots of the term 'tribal'; he treats Indian prehistory and early history as revealed by Indology, archaeology, linguistics, ethnography, anthropometry, and DNA studies as they bear on hunter-gatherers and other forest peoples; and, in addition, he gives us what is at times a biting critique of findings of recent specialists on forest peoples. It is helpful that each well-documented chapter of this complex volume contains valuable notes and references. They add much to the value of the book.

Misra seeks to clarify the relationship between forest people, particularly hunters and gatherers, and the remainder of the Indian population today. There are folk theories about this, plus legal and political issues, but recent DNA studies by Richard Cordaux and colleagues have clarified one major point. Study of the Y chromosome of South Indian hunter-gatherers, other South Indian tribal people, and the main India-wide Hindu population show 'significantly' that southern hunter-gatherers are 'from a paternal lineage long separated [genetically] from that of the surrounding peoples'. In other words, they were definitely in India first and had to face perennial arrival of newcomers who, in Misra's words, sought to 'gain control over' what had once been exclusively the hunter-gatherers' own land and resources. He lists, for instance, arrival in India of speakers of Austric, Dravidian, Indo-European, and Sino-Tibetan languages. Naturally one issue today is population pressure and the resulting competition for resources, but relations in earlier times were both positive and negative and they varied greatly. Although the Pandavas are said to have burned off much of the forest in the north and, in Karve's retelling of the Mahabharata, punished forest people as well, they also sought their cooperation in subsistence.

Misra covers forest people capturing and training elephants, then serving as their mahouts in warfare, displays of status, and festivals in Mauryan times. He notes that interest was also growing in much else that forests offer. As forest peoples were seen as adept at climbing, hunting, and guiding, their help was sought in the quest for medicinal plants, spices, and precious woods. They appear to have become the main collectors of medicinal plants from the fourth century on—a specialty that continues until the present day. The ones who initiate in this contact are generally those in need of such services.

Once the forest became a retreat of ascetics and a common temple site, Chenchus, Soligas, Paliyar, Juangs, and Irula got drawn into serving as guides to temples, fetching water

for pilgrims, and, in some instances, participating in temple rituals. I myself have seen a Vaishnava priest stop on a forest path and recruit a tribal youth to accompany him to a forest temple and, once there, to co-officiate in a service in the *sanctum sanctorum*. Clearly life in the forest purifies people in Hindu eyes and even this belief can get translated into actions.

Misra notes, however, that if contact becomes problematic, Paliyar in South India and Birhor in the north deal with it in a way shared by many subordinate people. They withdraw into the forest until they feel it safe to re-engage with neighbors. The relationship does not have to get severed.

He notes too the negative side of contact in the peninsula. Neolithic agro-pastoralists herded introduced animals and tilled the soil for indigenous crops some four and a half thousand years ago. This meant eventual reduction of isolation of hunter-gatherers. They were no longer 'an isolated population'. By 3000 years ago, iron tools and great stone megalithic burials also appeared in the hills. Pastoralism became dominant. Although many whom Fox calls 'professional primitives' continued in the forest, others now lived in close proximity to them, albeit with their own separate identities.

When the British initiated nation-wide bureaucratic rule, they treated the hills as theirs to dispose of and exploited forests commercially. After 1869 even poor villagers had to pay to get firewood. British constructed high altitude retreats, introduced imported crops and trees, began commercial agriculture for local consumption, replaced some forest with coffee plantations, and developed wholly new means of transport and communication. These had enormous implications for the remaining hill peoples, including offering them new employment opportunities.

Unfortunately, unless they were religious idealists, senior colonial and subsequent Indian officials, tended to see tribal people as childlike creatures. Sadly, self-appointed 'scholars' were often just as insensitive. One sees lesser officials, such as forestry officers and police, dealing with them in an outright authoritarian way.

Misra's complex portrait of the ever-changing environment of India's tribal peoples should be mandatory reading for students of Indian society. Most anthropologists will find that they have greatly oversimplified culture contact.

Such encyclopedic tomes generally have a few flaws. I find, for instance, that Misra is insufficiently critical of methods used in 60-year-old studies of human biological differences. Also, as most non-Indians, including academics, badly mispronounce names of India's tribal groups, this might have been a suitable place to offer some guidance. However, such minor matters of scope do little to mar an otherwise extraordinary overview.

Because the book summarizes a lifetime of the author's own thinking on the subject, reviewing it amounts to reviewing Professor Misra's audacious career. Notably, with each decade, his awareness of new research techniques and findings furthered his understandings. These he passes along to us. We should be grateful that his being named as a National Fellow of the Indian Council of Social Science Research has allowed him to complete this worthy project.

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