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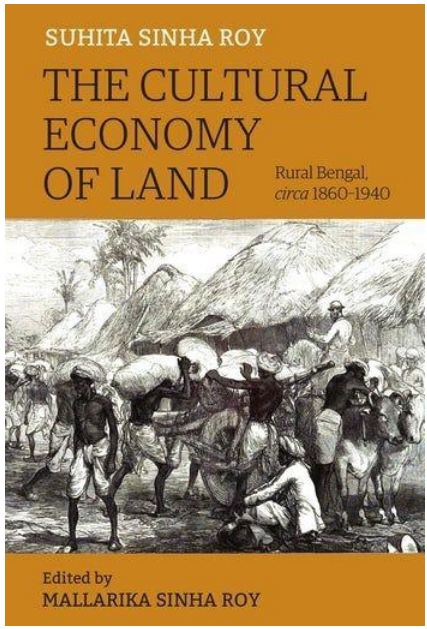
BOOK REVIEW

Culture and Land in the Making of Rural Bengal

Deepak Kumar *

Suhita Sinha Roy. 2019. *The Cultural Economy of Land: Rural Bengal 1860-1940*. New Delhi: Tulika Books. ISBN: 978-81-9373-297-7, pp. X+186, INR 595 (HB).



This book explores "the small voices of history" by focusing on rural Bengal, especially "the small history of Birbhum" (7) during the high period of British colonial rule. For Roy, land is more than property and revenue: it is a form of knowledge that is inextricably linked with landscapes, habits, gender, festivals, and the sociology of power. Though she acknowledges that economic factors are important as they relate to the productivity of the soil, the reclamation of land, emphasis on commercial crops, and monetization of the economy, she argues that these are not sufficient to explain the crisis in agriculture. For example, how did the numerically weak

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Brahmins gain ascendancy in a peasant society? Was there any breakdown of social institutions?

While Roy turns to "local history" and micro-studies to examine changes in rural Bengal, she also utilizes the notions of "slow motion" and "enlargement" as proposed by the philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin. Roy points out how in an essay in 1931 titled the "Small History of Photography", Benjamin used the analogy of a microscope to emphasize the need to identify different patterns and grasp otherwise hidden details. In a similar vein, this book pursues a fine-grained analysis that attempts to capture and reveal "the enmeshed character of the economic, social, and cultural aspects of agricultural communities" (1–2).

The first chapter is devoted to meticulously tracking the caste–land relationships in early nineteenth century Birbhum by focusing on the emergence of landlordism (*Surul zamindari*). With the gradually growing ability to buy land through loans (of course at exorbitant interest rates), erstwhile weavers, peasants, and even a family from the Goala (cattle raisers) caste were able to assume the title of *sarkar*—indicating a higher status within the *sadgop* (a status higher than the cattle-raisers). This is how the notion of the Bengali *bhadrajati* (gentlemen) took form within a rural set-up. This upwardly mobile land-owning group, Roy informs us, then sought the cultural endorsement of the Brahmins. The new land-owning castes, however, soon revealed their dark side. They not only leased lands for cultivation at extortionate rates but also got forest communities such as the Santals and Mahtos to do the actual work of clearing forests and cultivating fields. Though resentment and disquiet grew, the new landlords often used a mix of litigation and violence to suppress resistance. Roy argues that upward social mobility went hand-in-hand with economic exploitation, deforestation, resistance, and violence, which were shaped by each other.

The second chapter begins by asking if it was the "Rule of Knowledge" rather than the "Role of Knowledge" that shaped the colonial land regime. The "natives", we are reminded, had their own repertoires of knowledge about local resources and environments. Although their knowledge was largely experiential, it enabled the *mandals*, the village heads, to outwit the local zamindars often. Company officials, as expected, distrusted these local officials and set about profoundly changing the rules of revenue assessment and collection. In due course, the peasants found themselves racked with oppressive laws that only amplified their suffering during recurring famines and epidemics. The poorer lower castes like the Bagdi and Bauri were compelled to leave their villages to find harsh work in collieries and railway construction.

The third chapter tries to identify links between seemingly "disparate episodes of resistance" such as social banditry and the so-called criminal behaviour of the lower castes. The Santal rebellion of 1855 was a volcanic eruption against the triumvirate of sarkar, *sahukar,* and zamindar (government, merchant, and the landlord). It was brutally suppressed, and the Santals, unable to retreat into the forests and their settlements, turned into dispossessed labourers. Interestingly, the Santals were branded on the one hand as "child-like" and on the other as "savages". The violence was subdued, but resistance continued in the form of petitions. After the turn of the century, Durga Manjhi and later Jitendra Lal Banerjee emerged as petition leaders. A new solidarity was sought, by evoking religious affinities, although divisions remained between the Hinduised Santals and the non-Hinduised Santals. Even though C.R. Das was a metropolitan leader, he was accepted and revered by the peasants of Birbhum. But the Gandhi-led non-cooperation (1920–22) and civil disobedience (1930–31) movements failed to address India's growing agrarian crisis. So, the anti-zamindar and *mahajan* (landlord and moneylender) plank was silently dropped. The modality of resistance was changing fast. Militancy was considered acceptable by those who looked to Soviet experiments at the cost of, as Roy puts it, "indigenous social formations and their histories". Here, Roy points to the limitations of nascent communist interventions.

Chapter 4 moves from high politics to everyday life in Birbhum. Here, the author introduces the notion of subtlety, which is described as turning "the space of religious orthodoxy into a space of laughter" and where caste and gender can be interpreted alternatively as the "tacit celebration of sexual transgression". Cultural significance is noticed even in how huts and temples are structured. In view of the permanence of *thakur* (God), the *thakurbari* (temple) was made of brick, while the *kothabari* (brick house) was made of mud. This was not a sign of impoverishment but of dignified domesticity. Educational activities were not limited to the Brahmins alone. The Muslim *bhadralok* (upper caste social elite) had hand-written copies of the Quran while the Vaishnavas (a prominent Hindu sect) had *Padavalis* (book of devotional songs). A lower caste Teli (who pressed oil) ran a *pathshala* (school). A subtle challenge to orthodox Vaisnavism came from the deviant Bauls (itinerant musicians). In rural Bengal, the snake was a totem for the Oraons and Mundas. So, different kinds of Hindu goddesses such as Chandi and Manasa were worshipped. Muslim *pirs* (Sufis) were also popular.

Chapter 5 is devoted to the study of Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay not only as a laureate but a chronicler of rural Bengal (*anchalikta*). As a Patna native, I felt happy to note that Tarashankar's mother was from Patna and was more

educated than her husband! The influence of this *bhadramahila* (urbane lady), Roy points out, is writ large on her son's success. Tarashankar was both rural and urban, local and metropolitan, insider and outsider. His life can be seen as the lens that brings various aspects of rural living to life. A desire for freedom, a revival of a long-lost golden era, and socialism all find a place in his works. He even dabbled in politics and was imprisoned in 1930, but he was soon disillusioned with both factionalism and activism. Literature remains his greatest legacy. I missed any reference to *Arogya Niketan,* the novel written by the celebrated writer Tarashankar, which focused on rural health. In a similar vein, I wish more space had been devoted to the ideas of Satinath Bhaduri, Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay, and Phanishwarnath Renu.

Despite the book's excellent and compelling discussion on how notions of land shaped colonial rural Bengal, one is still left with a few questions. Did the British establish any experimental farms in Birbhum as they had in many other places? Equally, we would be keen to know if cattle fairs were held regularly or whether there were gradual changes in the tools of the *chasha* (cultivator). Did sericulture help in creating viable livelihoods?

This book has a comprehensive bibliography and is supported with substantial endnotes. However, there should have been a glossary of certain revenue terms like *lakhiraj*, *baze-zameen, halbhanjan,* etc. Dr. Sinha Roy puts forward her arguments convincingly and fluently negotiates historical and literary boundaries. This book will be of interest to those researching agrarian history, local ethnographies, and culture studies.