We Were Adivasis Aspiration in an Indian Scheduled Tribe

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This is a book that about the conundrums of modern ‘tribal’ or *adivasi* subjects in India. The promise of modernity for these subaltern groups is, ultimately, the prospect for improvement in both individual and collective terms. Yet this quest for improvement in postcolonial India is necessarily embedded within all-too-modern hierarchies of caste and gender in which different households and communities jostle as well as coexist with each other. On the basis of long-term fieldwork in an urban *basti* in Jaipur, Rajasthan, Megan Moodie offers readers a rare ethnographic window into the inner dynamics and tensions within one such community known locally as the Dhanka. Her fine-grained, intimate ethnographic narrative takes us into the living quarters of Dhanka families to appreciate how they aspire for better lives in terms of material possessions as much as social respectability. Older and young men as well as men and women differ in their aspirations even as they are held together by the state-validated social experience of being Dhanka. These aspirations, whether of individuals, households or the community as a whole, are, moreover, in flux as state and society transform rapidly in an era of economic liberalization and globalization.

The book begins with a fuzzy ethnohistory of a little-known community (Chapter 2). Neither colonial records nor popular memory offer much clarity on the Dhanka prior to the mid-twentieth century. This lack of clarity is, in fact, taken as part and parcel of the community’s low social status and their *jungli*, itinerant ways across what are now the states of Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Madhya Pradesh. When the Dhanka do finally appear in the annals of postcolonial anthropology, they are characterized as a ‘tribe in transition’ and as a community in need of ‘social uplift’. Although Moodie does not delve into these characterizations, they reveal a latent tension within the postcolonial anthropology of ‘tribes’ in India. The former suggests continuity vis-à-vis the colonial anthropology of tribes. The latter, however, implies a mix of Gandhian reformism and Nehruvian state developmentalism for those presumed, in G.S. Ghurye’s words, to be ‘backward Hindus’. There is a dual tension at work here: firstly, ‘tribes’ are expected to de-tribalize yet retain their new constitutional status as ‘scheduled tribes’ with reservations in government and educational institutions’ secondly, ‘tribes’ are expected to improve themselves vis-à-vis dominant castes, whether Brahmins or Rajputs, yet the prospects of social equality remain elusive in a caste society. In the realms of both state and society, therefore, groups such as the Dhanka must grapple with opportunities for improvement as much as constraints.

The tensions of Dhanka modernity in Jaipur play out along gendered lines (Chapters 3 and 4). The Dhanka men who built the *basti* speak of the toil and trouble they endured in order to improve themselves with the aid of the state. As low-level government workers who helped build the city’s waterworks, these men enjoyed secure employment as well as social respectability that distinguished them sharply in their own minds from their ancestors. This was, they recall, the promise of postcolonial India, in which individual aspirations and state developmentalism went hand in hand. In the social realm, Hindu devotionalism in the form of the Radhasoami sect offered a parallel notion of improvement as modern Hindu men who avoid meat and alcohol, and marry Dhanka women who dress and act respectably as ‘good’ homemakers, that is, as devoted wives and mothers. Indian sociology has tended to explain such behavior in terms of a caste-based politics of emulation using concepts such as ‘Sanskritization’ and ‘Rajputization’. Yet Moodie refuses to follow this well-trodden path. For her, these structuralist concepts fail to grasp that the Dhanka will to improve is about postcolonial subjecthood and the formal equality it represents at least in aspirational terms. For Dhanka women, this willingness to improve themselves and their community is a matter of their agentic desire to become ‘good’ or respectable women in veils or *ghunghat* as opposed to stereotypical tribal women viewed as freer or looser in their sexual morality. Moodie’s approach as an ethnographer takes the ‘emic’ understandings of her research subjects seriously rather than impute ‘etic’ meanings to what they do.

Indeed, we must recognize that appearing respectable in a caste-ridden society is hard work for subaltern men and women, and performances of respectability are directed as much within the community as projected outside it. Nonetheless, the ethnographic method presents a problem here and, perhaps, more generally too. In this instance, Moodie’s ethnographic research focuses on what Dhanka women say about social respectability and what they do about it. We do not know what non-Dhanka women, particularly those from dominant castes, say about them or how they treat Dhanka women in everyday life. As a consequence, a narrow ethnographic focus on women’s agency in their own subordination prevents us from understanding how power relations in society are woven inside and outside the Dhanka community. At the same time, to the extent that Dhankas seek to become modern men and women as well as good Hindus, there are distinctive tensions at play, and they are resolved in the idioms of a reactionary modernism. Even if we avoid the conceptual baggage of Sanskritization, the politics of self-improvement and the politics of emulation are inextricably intertwined in these circumstances. In a sense, these circumstances define the community’s subalternity in postcolonial India because Dhanka men and women simply lack the power to act autonomously of social hierarchies and define the terms by which they can fashion themselves. Dhanka notions of respectability are necessarily defined by others in society who enjoy power over them, and they must conform to those social expectations in ways of their own choosing. There is, in other words, no agency without ‘structuration’.

These epistemological problems are most clearly visible in Moodie’s analysis of *samuhik vivaha* or collective marriage (Chapters 5 and 6). Moodie argues that the collective marriage ceremony, which began in 2001, ‘tells the Dhanka who they are becoming…that they are modern and no longer backward’ (119). Yet, on the very next page, she must acknowledge that Dhanka marriage ‘follows a familiar ritual sequence for weddings among Rajput-influenced segments of north India’ (120). Furthermore, she accepts that Dhanka women are rarely educated enough to be self-sufficient in economic terms, and that for them, it is ‘marriage for the Samaj’ or society and ‘takes on a connotation of social service’ (123-4). For the Dhanka as a whole, it is ‘an opportunity to remind residents of Jaipur and political parties that they are a relevant community to consider’ (126). These shards of evidence point to the invisible workings of power underlying the agentic performances of Dhanka men and women as subaltern actors. For Moodie, however, collective marriage is simply ‘an embodiment and signal of a new kind of aspiration’ in an age where economic liberalization erodes the salience of government jobs and reservations (133). Such a claim obfuscates as much as it reveals, and leads us to ask why the Dhanka pursue this particular aspiration as opposed to others and why Dhanka women, as doubly subaltern actors, remain ambivalent about their complex calculations and negotiations over marital life. Sanskritization or not, there is ample evidence of a reactionary modernism in which neo-traditional social hierarchies are the only game in town. Subaltern men and women have little choice except to situate themselves strategically within these caste and gender hierarchies. It is unclear what is gained analytically or politically by celebrating agency of this highly circumscribed kind. Is it not a celebration of the circumstances that produce subalternity in postcolonial India?

Dhanka men, too, are bearing the brunt of subalternity in an increasingly precarious economy (Chapter 7). Unlike older men who enjoyed the security of government jobs and reservations in the early postcolonial era, young Dhanka men now live in the age of contracts or *thekedari*. In an increasingly market-driven society, reservations in the public sector matter much less, and the certitudes and security that the state once offered are dissipating steadily. This is, in Moodie’s words, the ‘era of contract’ as opposed to the ‘era of service’. Joblessness and uncertain employment are the new norms in a community that lacks the educational and social advantages enjoyed by privileged and literate castes in India after liberalization. Those young Dhanka men who do secure work contracts to, say, build or repair waterworks become *thekedars* for the local municipal government in Jaipur. Their relative success do not make them a ‘creamy layer’ within the Dhanka community, but valuable assets for a subaltern group that is struggling to maintain its hard-won social status in the previous generation. Newer forms of subalternity in which caste and class meld together are thus taking shape, and the Dhanka are struggling to stay afloat as old hierarchies give way to new ones.

Whatever its limitations, this is a book written with rare skill and empathy. The richly-textured, intimately-detailed ethnographic narrative is truly unparalleled in studies of Dalit and Adivasi communities in contemporary India. The evocative title *We Were Adivasis* hints at a subaltern past that the Dhankas wish to shed and an aspirational future in which the promise of postcolonial citizenship will bear fruit. Between the past and the future lies the precarious present, marked by gender and intergenerational tensions within a community trapped in the social idioms of a reactionary modernism in north India today.

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