

Book Reviews

Sacrificing People: Invasions of a Tribal Landscape (new and updated version with a new foreword by Hugh Broody), by Felix Padel, New Delhi, Orient Blackswan, 2009, Paperback Edition 2011, xxxvii + 465 pp, ₹ 495.00, ISBN: 978-81-250-4189-4.

Kasturi Ghosh is an Assistant Professor of English at Salesian College, Siliguri Campus. She holds MA and MPhil degrees in the subject from Jadavpur University, Kolkata. Her areas of interest include gothic literature, religion, religion and visual art and cultural studies.

Sacrificing People: Invasions of a Tribal Landscape is a new and updated version of another book by Padel, which was an adaptation of his doctoral thesis completed in the year 1987, titled *The Sacrifice of Human Beings: British Rule and the Konds of Orissa*, published by Oxford University Press in 1995. The author decided to rewrite this book after fifteen years in the light of the Konds having come into a new relevance locally in Orissa and nationally in India owing to their invasion by the mining companies, who swamped their mountains to mine the best and the largest deposits of Bauxite available in India, or even the world. In fact, the British conquest of the Konds, under the pretext of civilising them, was really for the control over the mineral rich topography of eastern India. The central thesis of the present book is not only a narrative critique of the conquest of these tribal landscapes and their inhabitants, who the author points out are hardly known to the world for anything else other than their ancient practice of human sacrifice as a fertility ritual popularised by Frazer in *The Golden Bough*, but also a severe indictment of their conquest by the British in the name of suppressing human sacrifice. And in order to understand their present predicament, we need to keep track of these two aspects. The author explains in the preface that he seeks to understand the politics of a new age war, i.e., the "war on terror" which is full of the same contradictions that this book brings forth; and he is looking to answer questions like "Who is an innocent victim? When is taking of human life justified? Who claims the right to take human life? Who is sacrificing whom?" (p.xix). He adds, "anyone who wishes to penetrate the surface of the war on terror needs to face the shadow side of the society we live in....what this means is: understanding human sacrifice." (p. xx).

The author urges us to look at human sacrifice not only as a superstitious custom of the ancients but also as a phenomenon that is taking place even today, before our eyes, where those in power are sacrificing those who are not, in the name of economic progress and development. Sometimes entire races are wiped out for political control. Agricultural populations are displaced for building dams to supply power to nearby industries, natural resources, flora and fauna, and the people who have lived among them are supplanted from their natural habitat for various mega projects, to the detriment of living and nonliving resources of the region. More often than none they are neither compensated nor rehabilitated as promised, and when these deprived and

aggrieved people protest or at times take up arms, they are labelled as terrorists and/or anti-nationals, who stand in the way of economic progress and the greater good of the country, and are brutally suppressed with all the might of state power. To prove these points, the author focuses on the Konds whom he studied and lived among to bring out sides of their culture that are productive, peace loving as well as more predominant than their one old and ruthless tradition. By doing so he wants us to contemplate on the sacrifice and loss of potential that each human being is born with at the altar of development and progress.

At the very outset, the author declares that he expects a vast readership and does not want to limit it to socio-anthropologists alone, therefore, he deliberately tries to write as simply as possible. He maintains a simple narrative approach towards the history of exploitations suffered by the adivasis of Orissa in the hands of their colonial oppressors before independence and subsequently by their own fellow citizens, along with foreign investors, after independence. He argues that the colonial regime was responsible in undermining and invalidating their indigenous culture, religion and even their very existence. These agencies - the administrators, the missionaries and the anthropologists - under the guise of civilising, educating, rescuing and studying the Konds were actually committing atrocities on them. The author satirically names these agencies as 'Enlightened Government', 'Soldiers of Christ' and 'Merchants of Knowledge', proving in each of the chapters how in the name of rescuing the adivasis from cruel practices the government resort to more cruel punishments, like public hangings and imprisonment, all to stop a practice that was never ever witnessed or recorded by a single British authority. The author does not give any real proof of the ritual of human sacrifice either; he leaves us with some stories of such practices to decide for ourselves on the truth of the matter. The missionaries attacked and dismissed the religion of the Konds as a sinful pagan practice, and segregated them into different conflicting sects of Christianity and taught them values of modernity, submission and self-sacrifice after Christ. Such segregations and differences cause conflicts and deaths even today. By calling the Socio-Anthropologists 'Merchants' the author criticises the scientific approach practiced by Victorian and later anthropologists, where these scholars have studied tribes as one would study insects or lower animals, observing and reporting and not interfering even when interfering would have proved beneficial to them, or only the most human thing to do. The author pointedly accuses these anthropologists of heartlessness, and adds that one cannot study anthropology, which is the study of human beings, by subtracting humanity from it. After reading the book one is reminded that bridging the gap between cultures and not dehumanising one race and/or calling another superior is the aim of anthropology, or any other discipline under the social sciences.

Padel uses both published and unpublished archived sources to support his arguments and illustrate his view points. He also uses maps to point out the affected regions over the ages. By citing incidents from the past and the present, he looks at the

dichotomy of nature and nurture, proving to us how the total happiness quotient is adversely affected in an effort to 'nurture' and 'civilise' a people who belong to nature. He clearly defines the concepts of power, imperialism, Othering and the relationship between Othering and knowledge production in the context of Konds, by looking closely at the idea of sacrifice and its meaning at religious, cultural as well as personal levels. When I finished the book, I sadly realised that not only did the British treat these adivasis as their Other but we, their very own fellow citizens, who claim to be more civilised, progressive and knowledgeable than these naked jungle dwellers are carrying on with the legacy left behind by our colonial oppressors, and are continuing with the process of othering and obliterating their existence with our mad pursuit of an unreal future, an illusion of progress.

The author focuses on the negatives, as he believes only by knowing them clearly can one look for positive changes. When we come to the present problem of bauxite mining the only solution that the author provides is that mining should be stopped as depletion of bauxite destroys the moisture retentivity of the soil making it unfit for cultivation and posing more threats of occupational crisis and displacement to the Konds. As a reader who has been shown the mirror and then the light this solution is slightly disappointing. We all know that if we keep on depleting the natural resources we will be left with none, so do we just stop using them and change our habit of easy living? No, instead we look for and use alternatives resources. After such an exhaustive research and convincing arguments one expects a prescription or at least a guideline to help the Konds defend their identity and their land from domestic and foreign invaders, equipping them with knowledge or training that will enable them to best use their natural resources to protect themselves, to provide them with a voice or an alternative means to preserve their ingenuity. Is sympathising and pleading to the human in each one of us enough at this stage? What about empowering the weak, preventing them from becoming a 'National Sacrifice People'? What responsibility do the people of this democracy have towards these marginalised brothers and sisters when their own government is failing to protect them, and creating several loop holes in the existing laws to further sacrifice their interest in the hands of the capitalists? Perhaps that is the matter of another book. Perhaps I am getting carried away by this sudden change in my own perspective of the Self? Further, one must not forget that we should not force our opinion and our idea of right and wrong or what is good or bad for someone else on them; through the example of the different agencies the author proves how our patronising may also terrorise and alienate those whom we do not understand completely. This book has certainly made me stop and think as it shocked me out of my complacency and broadened my horizon. I would recommend it to scholars of contemporary studies simply because it pushes one out of his/her comfort zone and poses questions against what has been taken for granted.