



Review

Reviewed Work(s): *The Coming of the Devi: Adivasi Assertion in Western India* by David Hardiman

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David Hardiman, 1987, *The Coming of the Devi : Adivasi Assertion in Western India*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, pp.248.

The book is about the history of the Devi movement among the adivasis in South Gujarat in the early part of this century. The study is a part of the wider subaltern studies project, the primary aim of which is 'to understand the consciousness that informed and still informs political action taken by the subaltern classes on their own, independently of any elite initiative.

In the 1920's an indigenous adivasis' movement for a strong internal reform in their established way of life was witnessed by almost all the major adivasi jatis in the middle Indian region. This movement was largely initiated and carried on by the adivasis though many elements of the nationalist movement also harmonized with it. Therefore the nationalist historians attribute it to the nationalist upsurge. In South Gujarat, the Devi movement had started long before Gandhi appeared on the stage. Yet history records only the paternalistic bourgeoisie middleclass social worker who appears at a late stage to 'uplift' the adivasi and ignores the adivasis' own contribution to their history. The socialist historians were no better, for they ignored the centrality of the religiosity of the adivasi ideology, dismissing such movements as 'petty bourgeois' and imposed from above. The author claims that he follows a more genuinely socialist course of writing the adivasi history with a deep appreciation of religion as a part of the peasant consciousness which has developed from assimilated folk-beliefs over a long history of traditions.

The study of the Devi movement among the adivasis of South Gujarat deals with the historical context of both the micro and macro level socio-political forces operating towards the end of nineteenth and beginning of twentieth century. The new consciousness that emerged from the movement gave two very important elements to the peasant consciousness: one was that change was possible, the other that it could be brought about by their own actions.

Describing the adivasis of the region, David Hardiman analyses their relationship to land and with each other. Before their subjugation in the 19th century, the different adivasi communities lived in harmony and respected each other's identity while sharing a common material culture. They were anti non-adivasis, but had no tradition of confrontation with them. In the face of danger, their instinct was one of flight, frequently described as their 'love for change' or as their migratory habits. Their traditional pattern of living yielded adequately enough produce to survive, so that they never needed to rob the fruits of others.

In south Gujarat, as elsewhere, the adivasis were reduced to extreme poverty and indebtedness as a result of their involvement with 'civilization'. They could maintain their cultural identity in the face of a Brahmanical hegemony but crumbled under the pressure of fixed land cultivation and land tax in cash, that brought in merchant capital making them dependent and helpless. The Shahukars, mostly Marwaris or Gujarati Vaniyas, operated from the cities and appeared at the adivasi villages for arbitrary appropriation of their produce for repayment of debts incurred for borrowing seed grains or buying other necessities. The connivance of Shahukars with the officials who belonged to the same caste compounded their misery. Non-payment of land tax led to the appropriation of the adivasi's land, often without his knowledge. Between 1895 and 1913, 42 percent of the land in the Baroda Taluka of Mahuva had changed hands through sales and mortgages, and a high proportion of this land passed from adivasis to moneylenders. In 1913, the adivasis who made up 75 percent of the population of the Taluka, owned only 12 percent of the land. The adivasis thought their relationship with the Vaniyas as reciprocal and paternalistic. However, the Vaniyas proved to be "sharks" showing their exploitative nature during the famine of 1899-1900, refusing to advance loans even to their oldest clients.

Worse than the urban Shahukar was the Parsi liquor dealer who entered the adivasi villages as a resident. Parsis drew their power as tax collectors for the state under the Abkari Act (tax on distillation of liquor). Knowing the adivasis' need for toddy, a tree tax was levied banning the free use of trees even when they happened to be on the land where adivasis worked as labourers. This was a direct blow to the adivasi way of life. Toddy was not merely liquor, it was food to the poor for several months in a year. It formed an essential element in several rituals and was also used as an offering to the Gods. The adivasis were simply unable to pay any amount of tax. The Parsis stepped in to provide the Abkari tax to the state and forced the adivasis to consume *daru* (distilled liquor in Parsi-owned stills and factories) by pricing the toddy out of the market. The colonial rule and the princely states filled their coffers with taxes collected through the urban Shahukars and the Parsi dealers. Both expropriated the adivasis' fruits of labour. A process characteristic of feudal relationships was 'developed' in a society where it had not existed before. However, the adivasis began to resist before this sordid process could be completed.

The adivasi resistance was more against the Parsi who attacked what was central to their life. The Parsis were also the more "visible"

oppressors than the city-based Shahukars. The first attempts came from the educated adivasis but the true form of the protest came from the poor people who bore the brunt of the triple oppression of the Shahukars, liquor vendors and officials. The Devi movement was the answer of a people in their own idiom. It was decentralized and democratic, maintaining continuity of their religiosity emerging from their shared history. The adivasis used the long tradition of propitiating the Goddess in times of disease and disaster, to call for permanent changes in their values, in order to escape the fate imposed on them. Originating as a smallpox propitiation ceremony, the Devi assumed the name of 'Salabai' (Devi who gives advise) giving messages to abstain from meat and liquor, to stop working on non-adivasi fields, and later, under the influence of nationalists, to wear khadi, spin the charkha and to send children to nationalist schools. Gandhi, side by side with the Devi, were seen as the benevolent powers that would release the people from their burdens.

The skill with which David Hardiman shows the adivasi response to the oppressive economic system by internal reform is commendable. He does not see any direct link between the macro level happenings and the adivasi movement. He also rejects the popular interpretation known as sanskritization which he describes as a "very sluggish game of snakes and ladders" for understanding the attempt of adivasis of Gujarat to adopt the 'Vaniya' values. He views it as their claim to social equality with the Brahmans and Vaniyas (not a low status in the Hindu fold as would happen through sanskritization of a tribe). In its political content, this social movement for the values of the powerful Brahman-Vaniya group, was an attack on the power of the Parsis.

David Hardiman also examines the applicability of the concept of 'revitalization' for the understanding of the Devi movement. The assumption underlying the concept is, that first the individual, then the groups as a whole undergo a psychological disorientation, leading to revitalization through either resistance or emulation of the values of another group. This was not true of the adivasis of South Gujarat. They changed their rituals but not their religion. The strength of adivasi assertion against a traditional cultural value (toddy drinking) was in fact a double-edged sword with which they fought the 'rapacious Parsi exploiter, while appropriating the values of the regionally dominant high caste Hindus'. They also democratized the exclusiveness of these values.

Thus, the explanation given by David Hardiman establishes the relationship between values and power. The movement led to several

consequences. On the one hand adivasis showed a shrewd understanding for the need for cultural synthesis while maintaining their own religion intact. On the other hand, the social reformers welcomed the assimilation process, while politicians saw their potential power base in it.

The study of the Devi movement by Hardiman is a singular achievement and one of the first and finest full length accounts of a people making their own history. It is true that the adivasis consciousness does not admit that it is not Devi but they themselves who spoke a most astonishing language when 'possessed by the divine' because it was a language which arose from their shared history and misery. Devi was the legitimization of their social voice which always has been rooted in their religiosity. It is not the product of their superstitions and beliefs but the ideological superstructure of which their economic and political action was a part.

In this excellent account one misses some important links. By his own admission, Hardiman describes the adivasi society as more egalitarian in its relation between men and women. The movement itself is for the propitiation of the Devi and the mediums were often girls and women. Yet no effort is made to describe the movement from their eyes, for they were the worst exploited both as the adivasi poor and as women. The androcentric bias assumes that study of the movement through male accounts is both complete and adequate. The vast female population of adivasi peasantry participated in Bardoli movement. Its implications for the sexist values of the patriarchal adivasi society, have been ignored.

It is also not established that the movement was independent of any elite initiative. The educated among the adivasis, as well as 'outsiders', took the benevolent role which many followed. It is also difficult to prove that the Devi movement was not an attempt to enter the Hindu fold. The long period of interaction with the dominant high castes, whom they did not hold in contempt, could have formed a model for emulation in their consciousness. It should be remembered that they resisted the Parsis but emulated the Brahman-Vaniya. Hardiman's attempt at a historical-dialectical approach does not come through very well. The net outcome of the movement was for achieving a synthesis between the values of adivasis and non-adivasis; with a strong undertone of maintaining the structural infrastructure. The adivasis could not achieve their avowed goal of carving out a place for themselves because the nationalist movement diffused their struggle within the larger

movement. Yet, we see the alienation of adivasis by the nationalist movement, a process which continues even till today. It is time someone picked up the threads from where David Hardiman left. I would highly recommend the book to the students of social history and sociology of religion.

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Foning A.R., 1987, *Lepcha, My Vanishing Tribe*, New Delhi, Sterling Publishers Private Limited, pp XXIII and 314.

Books on tribes have long been the exclusive prerogatives of administrators and anthropologists who document their life and culture as unique specimens characteristic of the nascent stage of evolution. The basic objective is therefore to capture the tribal way of life in its pristine and kaleidoscopic manifestations and imprint it permanently before it gets diluted by the infiltration of foreign elements. This desire for preservation of the 'original' state of things has influenced the minds of tribals themselves. The book under review is one such example; the author, a member of the tribe himself, profiles one of the rapidly diminishing tribes of the Himalayan region. Equipped with first hand experience and a missionary zeal to preserve their rapidly changing culture and institutions, Foning paints a lucid picture of the Lepcha people, highlighting in particular, their mythological abode, myths and legends, religious institutions and their social customs and practices. Against a background of foreign invasion and cultural domination to which the Lepchas have been subjected for centuries, the author takes pains to isolate the indigenous strains in the Lepcha culture and social organisation.

To render Lepcha behaviour and practices understandable to outsiders, the author discusses at length their beliefs and 'superstitions' which served as the basis of their social organization. These myths and legends varied widely in range from pure folktales about things of nature, stories of origin and tales of gods and spirits to prescriptive and interdictory oracles directed towards educating the young in their age-