Living with the Durwas

The Hindu

The book articulates the vast struggles over land and territory that haunt tribal areas. A young girl leaves her home in Parchanpal village, Bastar, to collect water. Photo: Akhilesh Kumar

Woodsmoke and Leafcups; Madhu Ramnath, Harper Litmus, Rs.399.
Felix Padel

The full joy of tribal life opens up in these pages. As do the painful struggles under the exploitative thumb of the state

If the world of learning and academia operates as it should, this book should transform ways of writing and thinking about India’s tribal people that colonial anthropology moulded into a set formula consisting almost entirely of negative stereotypes — a cultural racism and dehumanising objectification that remains largely unchallenged by intellectuals, even from the Left.

But Woodsmoke is written with deceptive, disarming simplicity, unfolding the social structure of a tribal people near the epicentre of today’s Maoist conflict through stories and anecdotes. The book is cheekily subtitled ‘Autobiographical footnotes to the anthropology of the Durwa’, a tribe that few of India’s reading public will have even heard of. There are many levels to this work, and one level is that of storytelling at its best through true stories of a tribal people’s daily life, and the interferences and abuses of power that come from government officials, politicians, lawyers — exploiters and manipulators of every hue.

The full joy of tribal life opens up in these pages without the slightest romanticisation. The violent and painful aspects are also presented unsentimentally — from internal conflicts to hunts and the killing of animals that form a thread through Adivasi culture — all manifesting through these pages with the wry, subtle humour that is intrinsic to tribal culture, and which mainstream anthropology hardly ever brings out.

‘The Department of Mysteries’, whose lower officials swagger over Adivasi landscapes like small kings, is the Forest Department. For example, “Moya was carrying his bow and arrows, considered a man’s shringar, as decoration and for protection. On the way, he was stopped by
the director of the National Park, and a few nakadars…” Moya is taken to jail and a court case is initiated, since hunting is forbidden in the Park. A post-mortem is performed on the deer he has killed, and finally it gets buried, rather than eaten. But who made these rules? Who made the Forest Department? How can anyone ban hunting when it’s an intrinsic part of this culture? All too easily, in the embedded power structure that has grown up in Bastar.

Another institution with similar powers is the ‘Rimni Department’ (Revenue), and it often happens that a man will come to a village threatening people with jail and fines for cultivating on ‘government land’, before responding to entreaties and taking money to enter names in a book to rectify people’s land entitlement (supposedly!) for a few hundred rupees. Often, these men are total imposters. Author Madhu Ramnath has fun with one such. “The Rimni ‘official’ would get a meal of chicken, toddy to wash it down, and hot water to bathe. The bathing was always a spectacle; most of these specimens who came were from Cuttack district, and bathed noisily in public, soaping themselves all over, including their hair, gargling and spluttering all the while, shouting orders to the children to pass the soap or fetch more water.”

Land questions loom large in Adivasi life, as we all know, and this book bears witness to rarely-articulated yet vital aspects of the vast struggles over land and territory that haunt tribal areas. For one thing, Ramnath shows how the traditional hunting territories of the clans that make up a village constitute its actual, culturally recognised territory, which goes far deeper than any written records of ownership. As Marx and Engels recognised, what differentiates ‘tribal’ from ‘modern’ societies most radically is the prior importance of communal land over any form of private property. These societies are communist in essence, in their egalitarian norms of behaviour as well as in their forms of ownership and exchange.

Many factors have combined to disturb this. For a start, other tribal groups have come in. The Durwas have suffered such incursions, where leaders of incoming groups befriended Durwa youth, took over hunting territories, cleared the forests, and began to question the authority of Durwa elders, who had managed these tracts of forest sustainably as hunting territories ‘since time began’.

And when ‘communist’ politicians come on the scene, and send out a message that all such land claims will be back-dated to allow cleared forest to be legitimised and more forest lands to be taken over and cleared as well, no force seems able to prevent this destruction. This reality is presented through many examples, adding immensely important detail to one’s deeper understanding of the forces at play.

The backdrop of the Maoist conflict is not tackled explicitly, though Durwas live right in the heart of the civil war engulfing the Bastar region, divided between the erstwhile Bastar (South Chhattisgarh) and Malkangiri districts of Odisha. To understand what has happened in this area, it is not enough to know the history of the Naxalite/ Maoist parties and the state’s war against them. The norms of daily life, including regular interactions with government officials and other exploiters, whose outlandish abuse of power has grown over generations, need to be understood too. These pages reveal just how Adivasi villagers have experienced all this and understood it, with vast wit and discernment, over time.

In terms of ‘anthropology’, this book offers what mainstream anthropology hardly ever does, for the simple reason that most anthropologists’ notion of ‘data’ is so superficial that it offers barely a clue about what is really going on. In Ramnath’s case, we read an author who has
immersed himself in adapting to life in a tribal culture for 30 years. For example, the book makes clear — supporting the ethnographic tradition in this — that in this culture, there are two kinds of death, which the mainstream tradition often refers to as ‘good death’ and ‘bad death’. Of course, the culture expresses this a lot more subtly and vividly: “There are only two kinds of death: chatta chayarana and bat-thel chayarana, dying on the mat indoors, and dying outdoors…” These kinds of death are illustrated, with humour and compassion, through the passing-on of old acquaintances and in their journey into the great unknown.

Along the way, and throughout the book, we get many examples of spirit possession. This is a fascinating subject. For the best part of 1,500 years, any form of shamanic possession was outlawed as witchcraft by Christian institutions in Europe, including the Inquisition, the ultimate censor. Between 1300 and 1800, many thousands of people, especially women, were burnt at the stake as witches. As a result, the colourful forms of social behaviour, songs, dialogues and much more that take place during spirit possession represents the ultimate ‘banned knowledge’ — the antithesis of modern university/ academically ‘legitimate’ knowledge.

Spirit possession is rarely described or analysed by anthropologists, largely because it demands huge linguistic as well as social familiarity with participants before one has any chance to even begin to understand what on earth is happening. The drama of spirit possession is rarely without huge humour, which lightens the atmosphere in the face of the worst misfortune, including disease and death.

This is a book highly recommended for anyone who wants to journey into a deeper understanding of tribal cultures, which currently face genocide in Central India. It is one of the most vivid, down to earth, and readable books ever written about a tribal people in India.

_Felix Padel is an anthropologist and writer who has worked on tribal and environmental issues in India over many years._

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