



Biswamoy Pati

South Asia from the margins

Echoes of Orissa, 1800–2000

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Abbreviations

AICC	All India Congress Committee
AISPC	All India State People's Conference
CFLN	Confidential file on Laxman Naik at the Mathili police station
FIR	first information report
HP	Home Political fortnightly reports
IOL	India Office Library
NAI	National Archives of India, New Delhi
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NMML	Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi
NPARI	<i>Nilgiri Praja Andolanara Itihasa</i> (The History of the Nilgiri Prajamandal)
OLAP	Orissa legislative assembly proceedings
ORP	Orissa research project
OSA	Orissa State Archives
PCC	Provincial Congress Committee
RPEAEC	<i>Report of the Partially Excluded Areas Enquiry Committee</i> file
WWCC	Who's Who Compilation Committee

*For Indrani
in friendship and in love . . .*

Preface

This book is the outcome of a number of years of researching and writing on diverse aspects of the history of Orissa. In the course of this long journey I have incurred several debts, both institutional and personal, which I would like to take this opportunity of acknowledging. I would begin by personally thanking everyone I interviewed for my research. Over the years a number of fellowships, such as the British Academy 'Visiting Fellowship'; the 'Ratan Tata Fellowship' at the London School of Economics; the 'Baden-Wuerttemberg Fellowship' at the South Asia Institute, Heidelberg; the University Grants Commission 'Research Award'; an 'International Visiting Fellowship' at Oxford Brookes University; and a 'Visiting Fellowship' at the Department of History, Aarhus University, Denmark have helped me to carry on with my research. In addition, travel grants from the Charles Wallace (India) Trust, UK and the Wellcome Trust, London enabled me to, among other things, collect source materials to do the research for this book.

The help I have received from the staff of various archives and repositories in course of my work has been invaluable and I wish to record my gratitude to them here. These include the Orissa State Archives (Bhubaneshwar); the National Archives and the Nehru Memorial Museum Library (both in New Delhi); the West Bengal State Archives, Bhowani Dutta Lane and the National Library (both in Calcutta); the Oriental and India Collections at the British Library; the Wellcome Library, the libraries of the London School of Economics and the School of Oriental and African Studies (all in London); the University Library, Cambridge; the India Institute Library and the Bodleian (both at Oxford); and the South Asia Institute Library (Heidelberg).

I would like to acknowledge the encouragement and support of professors Amiya Bagchi, Amit K. Gupta, Hermann Kulke, Gyanendra Pandey, K.N. Panikkar, D. Rothermund and Sumit Sarkar at various stages of my research. Friends like Amar, Amit, Archana, Arun, Bahuguna, the late Basudeb da, Bhairabi, Gopi, Irfan, Lata, Madhurima, Mark, Pralay, Rajkumar, Rajsekhar, Ramakrishna da, Sanjukta, Sarmistha, Shakti, Shashank, Shukla Ji, Uwe and Waltraud supported me in various ways. Whenever I had to work on my research in England, Manu, Menka, Projit, Samiksha and Saurabh were always there to help out and add cheer to my stay.

Many of the ideas and a lot of the research in this book were presented at lectures and conference presentations over the past decade. These include lectures at the University of Sussex and the 'Colloquium Lecture' at the

Department of History, South Asian Studies at Heidelberg. Conference presentations were made at the history departments of Utkal University, Berhampur University and Adaspur College (all in Orissa); the Centre for Contemporary Studies (Nehru Memorial Museum and Library) and Jamia Millia Islamia (both at New Delhi); the conference organised under the aegis of the European Science Foundation at Wolfson College, Cambridge; the International Institute of Asian Studies, at Leiden; the American Association for the History of Medicine, Johns Hopkins University, at Bethesda; the International Convention of Asian Scholars at Singapore; the two conference sessions of the Orissa Research Programme at Salgau, Germany; the two conferences at the University of Southampton; the conference in London jointly organised by Goldsmiths College and Edinburgh University ; and the panel on the 'History and Historiography of Dalits', at the India History Congress in Delhi. I wish to thank all those who interacted with me at these forums, with their questions, suggestions and comments: these have helped me to sharpen my focus and my arguments.

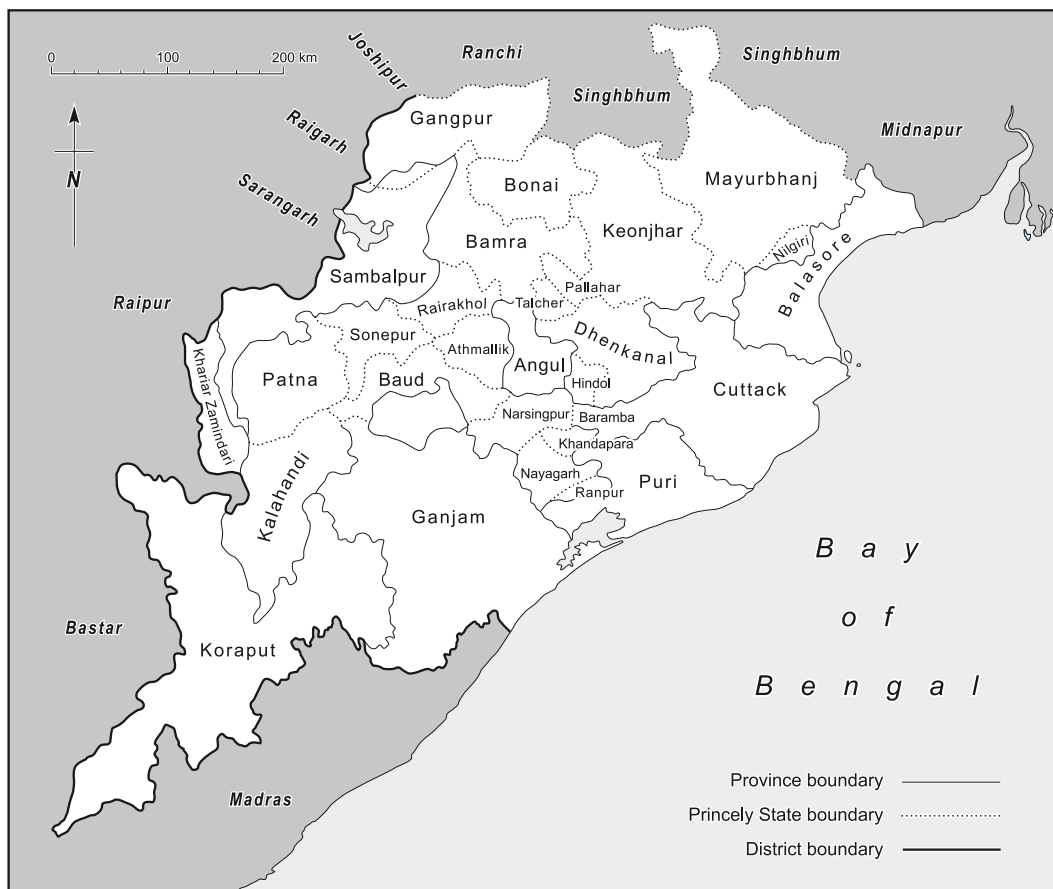
My parents, who were intimately involved in everything related to my research, are not there to see this book. I wish to acknowledge here the help of my family members, Alekha Bhai, Bhauja, Bindu, Jiban, Sukanta, Tina, and the enjoyable distractions provided by my nephew Sobhan and my two small 'grand children' half-way across the globe, Siddhartha and Francis. Indrani, my companion throughout this journey, helped me with the finalising of the manuscript.

At Manchester University Press, I would like to thank Emma Brennan and the valuable reports of the two anonymous readers that enabled me to finalise the book.

Some of these chapters are revised and extended versions of articles published earlier. I would like to thank here the editors and publishers of: *Environment and History* ([chapter 2](#)); *Canadian Bulletin of Medical History* ([chapter 4](#)); *South Asia Research* ([chapter 6](#)); *Social Scientist* ([chapter 7](#)); and *Economic and Political Weekly* ([chapter 9](#)) for granting me permission to include them in this book. [Chapter 3](#) owes its origin to a presentation at the Asia Research Centre, London School of Economics and Political Science ('Working Paper no. 7').



The princely states of Orissa



Orissa Province, 1977

Introduction

This book profiles Orissa, in south-eastern India, over the last two centuries. Geographically the present-day province of Orissa borders West Bengal in the east, Jharkhand in the north, Madhya Pradesh in the west and Andhra Pradesh in the south. A region that is shrouded in contradictions, post-colonial Orissa aptly presents a classic case of colonial/post-colonial underdevelopment. As a storehouse of natural resources, ranging from bauxite, iron ore and coal to forest resources, it has naturally attracted huge investments related to major multinational-backed projects, very often without properly assessing how these would impact the people or the region.¹ This is in sharp contrast to the life of the dominant section of the population – the marginal adivasis (tribals), low castes (which include the Sudras, the lowest category in the caste system, some of whom were/are defined as ‘untouchables’ due to the ambiguous and oppressive fluidities of the caste system) and outcastes.²

Along with other factors, this contradiction has generated a lot of conflicts related to land displacements that threaten to obliterate the already marginalised sections and polarise religious conflicts in areas like Kandhamal. In fact, such features question the very meaning of ‘development’. After all, the reality on the ground reveals an inverse relationship between ‘development’ and the human beings involved in this process, who face decimation. Nothing can explain this better than the bitter struggles in the recent past to oppose the efforts to mine bauxite in the Niyamgiri hills (in present-day Kalahandi district) by the Dongria Kandhas (tribals), who depend on it for their survival.

The aim is also to locate the pressures of patriarchy that marginalise women who have to cope with them. These range from discriminatory wages, violence in both the private and public spheres, and a shift to the dowry system from the system of ‘bride price’ among the tribal population, as well as a decline in Orissa’s female population (the male:female ratio was 1,000:981 in 1981, 1000:971 in 1991 and 100: 972 in 2001). This book examines the colonial roots of these problems, the understanding of which is essential in order to grasp post-colonial developments.

¹ There are very few studies on this area; to get an idea about this aspect see, for example, Felix Padel and Samarendra Das, *Out of this Earth: East India Adivasis and the Aluminium Cartel*, New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2010.

² ‘Tribals’ refers to tribal peasants and not the classic ‘hunters and food-gatherers’. I use the terms ‘adivasis’ and ‘tribals’ interchangeably in this book, remaining fully conscious of the associated problems.

One can perhaps begin by emphasising that Orissa is a very diverse region, historically marked by economic, social and cultural variations. By the time of the Mughals, who held sway over Orissa between 1578 and 1751, it had been split into two parts, based on geographical, ecological and economic divisions. It included the *moghulbandi* area (the tract controlled by the Mughals), which comprised the fertile coastal plain. The Mughals held this territory and collected tax in cash, through their *subahdars* or administrative heads (*subahs* = administrative units). Then there was the hilly and heavily forested hinterland. In fact, the Mughals did try to have access to and tap the resources of this area as well.³

In 1751 Orissa was taken over by the Marathas, and then by the British in 1803–4. Until 1947, when India became a free country, it comprised twenty-six princely states, some of which had zamindaris (estates) under them. Besides, there were a number of zamindaris along with and the coastal tract of Balasore, Cuttack, Puri and Ganjam all under direct colonial administration.

British colonisation of Orissa saw major interventions over the nineteenth century. These were primarily in the form of land revenue settlements that were aimed at tapping agrarian resources.⁴ Thus, whereas the land settlements with the princely states and the zamindars (landlords) were made on a long-term, permanent basis, parts of the coastal tract which was directly under the British only saw temporary settlements. Attempts to settle directly with the more affluent elements of the peasant population or with the villages saw the *ryotwari* (*ryot* = peasant) and *mahalwari* settlements (*mahal* = village) respectively. Whereas the former was confined to some parts of Ganjam, the latter was restricted to the Sambalpur region that had been taken over by the British in 1818, but was merged with the Central Provinces until 1905, after which it became a part of Orissa.

The colonial agrarian interventions led to a host of changes during the nineteenth century, including the emergence of private property, land rights, commercialisation of agriculture and an increasing monetisation.⁵ In fact,

³ Very little research has been done on this area and it would be difficult to make any serious generalisation based on the existing information.

⁴ It is not possible to quantify the agrarian resources tapped in nineteenth-century Orissa, though we have some figures for the whole of India for the late nineteenth century. For example, in 1871/72, of the total government tax revenues for India, amounting to Rs 347.3 million, land revenues accounted for Rs 205.2 million. By 1913/14, the proportion of land revenues to the tax revenues of the government had decreased. Even then land revenues accounted for Rs 320.9 million out of the total tax revenues of Rs 738.9 million; these details are based on Reserve Bank of India, *Banking and Monetary Statistics of India*, Bombay: Reserve Bank of India, 1954, p. 872. (I would like to thank Professor Amiya Bagchi for this reference.)

⁵ For details related to Orissa's colonisation, agrarian interventions and allied changes see Sanjib Rout, 'Rural Stratification in Coastal Orissa, 1866–1900', in *Social Science Probing*, 3:1 (1986), 136–50; Pradipta Chaudhury, 'Peasants and British Rule in Orissa',

Orissa's colonisation polarised the social stratification, and implied a consolidation of exploitation, power and dominance of the upper castes, like the Brahmins, Karanas and the Khandayats (the Orissan variant of the Kshatriyas). Simultaneously it led to an increasing marginalisation of women and the adivasis, low castes and outcastes (or untouchables).⁶ This becomes particularly relevant if we bear in mind that the western tract, for example, had/has a large tribal and outcaste population.⁷ The Kandhas, Santals, Mundas, Gadbas, Hos, Bhuyans, Koyas, Juangas, Parajas, Sauras, Kols, Bhumijis and Bondas are the prominent tribal communities. The marginal people also included the non-tribal low castes/outcastes. Prominent among them were the Panas, Bauris, Hadis and Kandaras. Most of the tribals and low castes/outcastes worked as agricultural labourers (some of whom were bonded, or forced, labourers), and some marginal peasants faced dispossession and loss of 'customary' rights over natural resources, like forests. Problems affecting women included the discriminatory structure of wages.

Over the last two decades or so significant efforts have been made to study aspects related to caste in colonial India and take it beyond the paradigms of colonial ethnographers. Thus, one shift that can be discerned is a critique of the elementary aspects of colonial anthropology that had earlier located caste in Indian society as something 'traditional', as opposed to the 'modern' world of Europe. Seen from this perspective, caste had been essentialised as a given fact that was static and a part of an imagined, unchanging Indian reality. Consequently, historicising caste has been a serious project that has led to unravelling the shifts, changes and the interactions generated.⁸ Thus, ideas about caste were not carried in suitcases from London to India, but developed

Social Scientist, 19:7 (1991), 28–56; Biswamoy Pati, *Resisting Domination: Peasants, Tribals and the National Movement in Orissa, 1920–50*, New Delhi: Manohar, 1993, chapter 1. For the variations between the coastal and the western tract see especially Shakti Prasad Padhi, *Land Relations and Agrarian Development in India: A Comparative Historical Study of Regional Variations*, Thiruvananthapuram: Centre for Development Studies, 1999.

⁶ For more information about tribals in colonial India see Binoy Bhushan Chaudhuri, *Peasant History of Late Pre-Colonial and Colonial India Vol. VIII, Part 2*, in D.P. Chattopadhyaya (ed.), *History of Science, Philosophy and Culture in Indian Civilisation*, New Delhi: Pearson Longman, 2008, especially chapter 11; and Biswamoy Pati (ed.), *Adivasis in Colonial India: Survival, Resistance and Negotiations*, New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2011.

⁷ In fact, post-colonial western Orissa contains a large tribal population. For example, according to the *District Statistical Handbook of Koraput, 1972–73*, Cuttack: Orissa Government Press, 1976, p. 29, tribals constitute 56.34 per cent of the population of the Koraput district.

⁸ Even though the work of M.N. Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India*, Berkeley: California University Press, 1966, preceded this debate, one perhaps needs to grasp this interactive logic while taking into account his point regarding the 'livening up of the caste spirit' in colonial India (p. 95).

on the basis of interactions between colonialists and the pre-existing knowledge systems that were dominated by the privileged upper caste/class order in colonial India. Alongside, we are also told about its diversities and complexities, its material foundations and the way it faced and negotiated challenges and contestations, as it evolved in colonial India.⁹ Nevertheless, the intimate association of adivasis with the process of caste formation has somehow eluded most historians.¹⁰ Thus, along with the well-known features associated with the process of caste formation – such as Hinduisation, and Sanskritisation¹¹ – the ‘Oriyaisation’ of tribals has to be also taken into account.

What of course seems to have been completely ignored is the manner in which the ‘present’ not only influences our understanding of caste in colonial Orissa or India, but also what is defined as their pre-colonial ‘past’ as well. These points do provide us with some insights that have a crucial bearing on this study as it aims to both analyse and interrogate colonial Orissa’s historiography, especially since it blurs the voices from the margins.

Talking of Orissa’s historiography, it trails the geographical boundaries of the coastal tract, especially Puri, Cuttack and Balasore. Almost carved

⁹ This theme has attracted a host of historians; see for example, Nicholas B. Dirks, *The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987; and especially his *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001, which focuses on caste. In this latter work, Dirks argues that caste as it is known today is not a remnant of India’s ancient past, but very much a modern phenomenon and a fall-out of the colonial past. While tracing the ‘career of caste’ in colonial and post-colonial India, he is quite clear that British colonialism did not invent caste out of nothing, since this did exist. In fact, Dirks argues that changing imperial concerns produced and contributed to different understandings of caste. As delineated, it is this history that produced an understanding of caste that continues to shape present-day political debates as post-colonial India struggles with the cultural legacy of colonial constructs. A great deal of work has been done by historians on the world of the low/outcastes; see for example Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872–1947*, Richmond: Curzon, 1997; Swaraj Basu, *Dynamics of a Caste Movement: The Rajbansis of North Bengal, 1910–1947*, New Delhi: Manohar, 2003; and Raj Sekhar Basu, *Nandanar’s Children: The Paraiyans’ Tryst with Destiny, Tamil Nadu, 1850–1956*, New Delhi: Sage, 2011.

¹⁰ In fact, it is here that we have to turn to social anthropologists like Surajit Sinha, ‘State formation and Rajput myth in tribal central India’, *Man in India*, 42: 1 (1962), 35–80, reprinted in Hermann Kulke, *The State in India, 1000–1700*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995, pp. 304–42. Nevertheless, I will discuss in chapter 3 how even some sensitive social anthropologists working on Orissa, like F.G. Bailey, *The Civility of Indifference: On Domesticating Ethnicity*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1996, fail to comprehend this association.

¹¹ I have in mind here Max Weber, *The Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism*, trans. Hans H. Gereth and Don Martindale, New York: The Free Press, and London: Collier-Macmillan, 1967, first published by Free Press, USA, 1958; and M.N. Srinivas, *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952.

in stone, as it were, this historiography has generally concentrated on the dominant, hegemonic tradition of the upper caste/class, male order. In so far as pre-colonial Orissa's social history is concerned this poses serious problems for the historian when it comes to research related to the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. This is in sharp contrast to the relative vibrancy of research on colonial Orissa which has seen a transition ranging from the exclusive focus on 'grand narratives' designed to valorise nationalist leaders and the post-colonial ruling classes,¹² the focus on 'Oriya nationalism'¹³ and its rather close affinity with the efforts to Hinduise Orissa¹⁴ to the extension of the boundaries of research into the 'western interior' and its 'invisible' people,¹⁵ although gender-related themes continue to be ignored. Of course, the efforts to mystify Orissa and project its post-colonial, 'orientalist' existence is very much alive and kicking even today.¹⁶

¹² See, for example, Hare Krushna Mahtab (ed.), *History of the Freedom Movement in Orissa*, Vols. I–V, Cuttack: State Committee for the Compilation of the Freedom Movement in Orissa, 1957.

¹³ Nivedita Mohanty, *Oriya Nationalism: Quest for a United Orissa, 1866–1936*, New Delhi: Manohar, 1982 was a pioneer in this field. Subsequently scholars have sought to discuss issues related to the question of identity, see for example Bishnu Mohapatra, 'Ways of "Belonging": The Kanchi Kaveri Legend and the Construction of Oriya Identity', *Studies in History*, 12: 2 (1996), 203–21. The basic problem of these studies has been their method of reinforcing the importance of the coastal tract and the Brahminical order, while simultaneously ignoring gender.

¹⁴ Very few scholars have been able to escape this trap. Here I would include the 'Orissa Research Project (ORP)1' supported by the German Research Council Programme, which is best represented by Anncharlott Eschmann, Hermann Kulke and Gaya Charan Tripathy (eds), *The Cult of Jagannath and the Regional Tradition of Orissa*, New Delhi: Manohar, 1978; and 'subaltern' historians like Ishita Banerjee-Dube, 'Taming Traditions: Legalities and Histories in Twentieth-Century Orissa', in Gautam Bhadra, Gyan Prakash and Susie Tharu (eds), *Subaltern Studies X: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 98–125. See also essentially non-subaltern, contemporary efforts of scholars in Ishita Banerjee-Dube and Johannes Beltz (eds), *Popular Religion and Ascetic Practices: New Studies on Mahima Dharma*, New Delhi: Manohar, 2008. A classic example that combines studying 'Oriya identity' with Hinduising Orissa is Pragati Mahapatra, 'The Making of a Cultural Identity: Language, Literature and Gender in Orissa in Late Nineteenth Century and Early Twentieth Centuries' (PhD thesis, Department of History, School of Oriental and African Studies, London University, London, 1997). After categorically stating that: '[A]n important cultural symbol [Jagannatha] is . . . excluded from consideration. . . [in this thesis]' (p. 11), her conclusion clearly invokes Jagannatha and 'Oriya identity'.

¹⁵ For example, this trend is visible in different volumes published under the aegis of the 'ORP 2'; see also Chandi Prasad Nanda, *Vocalising Silence: Political Protests in Orissa, 1930–42*, New Delhi: Sage, 2008. A great deal of research is being done now, which will add significantly fresh perspectives when completed.

¹⁶ A classic example is Prafulla Kumar Mohapatra and Ramesh Chandra Pradhan (eds), *Perspectives on Orissa: Cultural-Intellectual Contributions*, in D.P. Chattopadhyaya

This book draws upon a variety of sources, ranging from archival records, printed materials (viz. reports, newspapers, etc.) and private papers of individuals and institutions to oral traditions and personal interviews, to bring to life the people and the issues it examines. It unravels hitherto little-known or even unknown aspects related to the region on a canvas of social history. It focuses on a host of complex and interactive features that were marked by shifts and changes. Thus, these range from issues related to caste, class, gender/patriarchy, identity, environment and health to resistance, local interactions with Indian nationalism and the region's relationship with the newly born Indian state and its ruling classes in the post-colonial period.

The second chapter, 'Environment and social history: Kalahandi, 1800–1950', examines the colonial past of a tract that shot into international 'fame' in the 1980s as a chronically famine-affected area. It explores the colonisation of the Kalahandi tract over the nineteenth century, unravelling a process that disrupted the life of the marginal sections, especially the tribals and the outcastes. Simultaneously, it brings out relatively unknown aspects, including the aggressive terror strikes which were aimed at the tribals and the outcastes over the early phase of colonisation. The search for the 'barbaric' tribals who indulged in practices like human sacrifice rationalised these colonial strikes. These led to villages and grain being burned down and the disruption of agrarian cycles, and, in many ways, resemble the 'search' for the 'weapons of mass destruction' and the decimation of Iraq and its people in the twenty-first century. After all, present-day social anthropologists have questioned the existence of the so-called practice of human sacrifice among the Kandhas (tribals). Kalahandi's incorporation into the 'civilised' world of the nineteenth century – or to put it in another way, its integration into the world capitalist system – saw major shifts and changes. This chapter highlights the resistance and contestation by the adivasis and outcastes. Nevertheless, the combined forces of colonialism and internal exploiters reinforced the agrarian crisis and caused serious dislocations for the environment, from which recovery was impossible.

The next chapter, 'Hegemony, shifting identities and conversions', questions a basic assumption about Hinduism being a non-converting religion. It weaves together the process through which tribes and outcastes were (and are still being) 'integrated' into the caste system. This process can be traced back to pre-colonial Orissa but was substantially reinforced during the phase of colonisation over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Locating this process within the paradigms of shifts and changes in the political economy, this chapter seeks to establish its association with colonialism's desire to expand in the region and tap its resources. This is

located within an interactional framework that saw sections of the tribals and outcastes attempting, on their part, to get incorporated as well. Further, this particular chapter challenges the assertions of the fascist, Hindu right-wing groups that seek to 're-convert' tribal Christians into Hinduism, on the argument that originally they were Hindus. This has in fact led to bloody conflicts and the loss of innocent lives, with the tribal supporters of the fascist right-wing groups being pitted against Pana Christian converts in areas like Kandhamal – an area that has again acquired international 'fame'.

The fourth chapter, 'Negotiating *Dharma Pinnu*: towards a social history of smallpox in colonial Orissa', explores the area of illness and disease, focusing especially on the world of the tribals. The interaction between the 'indigenous' medical system (i.e. tribal and non-tribal) and the colonial vaccination policy, coupled with more complex processes like the Hinduisation of tribals, is scrutinised. What this chapter highlights is the manner in which episodes like the outbreak of smallpox not only reinforced the colonial power/knowledge system, but also brought out apparently hidden aspects related to gender devaluation and violence directed at women, who were targeted as witches responsible for the outbreak of smallpox.

The next chapter, "Religion" and social "subversion": re-examining popular movements', focuses on two different movements – the Mahima movement which developed over the second half of the nineteenth century; and the uprising in the years 1938–39 of the Munda converts to Christianity in the princely state of Gangpur. It highlights the efforts of the tribals and outcastes to interrogate and contest exploitation in colonial Orissa. These two movements developed in different contexts in terms of time as well as geographical area. Nevertheless, some commonalities like colonial modernity and the way it impacted the tribals and outcastes – a space that seems to have been dominated by the upper caste/class urban-centric bhadrals (middle class) – are examined. Thus, what is witnessed is the manner in which these movements drew upon ideas of equality and humanism that came in with the advent of imperialism and Christianity. This resulted in the invention of an order of equality that was denied to the tribals, outcastes and the rural poor by their inherited systems as well as Brahminical Hinduism and Christianity. Elements of syncretism can be discerned in the perceptions of those who were involved with these two movements. As demonstrated, the Christian Mundas turned the basic tenets of Christianity – that aimed to preserve social hierarchies – upside down. At the same time, a social historian cannot miss the manner in which the Munda rebellion not only drew upon Christianity, but also confronted imperialism. This chapter emphasises the importance of not only appreciating the dimensions of dissent and protest in colonial south Asia, but also of coming to terms with the limitations of movements of popular protest.

'Interrogating stereotypes: exploring the Orissan princely states', the sixth chapter, examines the historical basis of labels attributed to the *andharua*