

---

Megan Moodie, *We Were Adivasis: Aspiration in an Indian Scheduled Tribe* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 240 pp., ISBN: 978-0-22-625304-6

Reviewed by **Emilio Amideo**

Megan Moodie's *We Were Adivasis: Aspiration in an Indian Scheduled Tribe* is an ethnographic study of the Dhanka population of Jaipur, the capital of the largest Indian state of Rajasthan.

One of the tribal groups of India, the Dhanka are often referred to as *adivāsis* (from the Hindi words *adi* "original" and *vāsi* "one who dwells") a term that, in designating the autochthonous inhabitants of a given place, characterises them as the descendants of the original population of the subcontinent. Coined in the 1930s, the term *adivāsi* came to posthumously embody a sense of collective group belonging and inclusiveness against an 'outsider', as many Indian tribal groups underwent land dispossession and resisted exploitation under British colonialism.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cf. David Hardiman, *The Coming of Devi: Adivasi Assertion in Western India* (New Delhi: Oxford U. P., 1987), 13-17.

Interestingly, as Moodie sustains, the Dhanka only refer to themselves as *adivāsis* in the past tense – as in the expression *Hum adivāsis te* meaning "we were adivasis" – and prefer to embrace the legal term of Scheduled Tribe (ST), as defined by the art. 366 of the Constitution of India. In Moodie's title, the location in the past of a collective identity (encapsulated by the expression "we were adivasis") seems to clash with the futurity embodied by the concept of 'aspiration', but it is precisely in the notion of ST that this tension is partially resolved. The embracing of the collective past of oppression and cruelty granted by their 'adivāsiness' is in fact used by the Dhanka, Moodie maintains, only in order to claim the status of ST, which enables them to have access to certain government benefits and thus to pursue their aspiration to economic and cultural betterment:

Scheduled Castes and Tribes are those groups designated as deserving and in need of special measures for their social uplift in recognition of their historical oppression by or isolation from the mainstream Hindu caste system. (8)

The recognition of being not only outside of the Hindu-Muslim fold but also outside of the caste system – and thus being characterised by a less rigid hierarchical social structure and by the lack of a permanent occupation – are among the prerequisites for being listed, or 'scheduled', as deserving state protection. Already contributing to the delineation of the Dhanka as a distinct cultural group, these features represent part of the requirements to attain tribal status, the others being: the presence of primitive traits, of geographic isolation, of

---

shyness of contact with outsiders, and of backwardness. One of the main issues emerging from the book is therefore this ambiguous interconnection of Dhanka's capacity to aspire with a certain acceptance of a state of 'primitivism' and of constant 'need' for the intervention of the government. The aim of Moodie's study is precisely to delineate the Dhanka aspiration to social, economic and cultural uplift in the tension between the traditionalism, legally required by their status as ST, and their drive toward modernisation. Under this light "we were adivasis" is to be understood both as a reminiscence of their past oppression (and, as a consequence, their present 'deserving' measures of protection from the state) and as a recognition of the long road that they have already trodden toward their socio-economic uplift. In other words, the recognition of the 'primitivism' necessary for their continual economic and social betterment is strategically located in the past.

The book, composed of eight chapters followed by a glossary, is loosely divided into what Moodie calls the "era of service" – a more traditional timeframe in which an older generation of Dhanka men would take on government jobs in order to pursue social and economic uplift – and the more recent "era of contract", in which younger generations face the precariousness of employment in a more and more fragmented job market. The first two chapters introduce the Dhanka and describe their strategies to fulfil the historical requirements of the ST role. Among the lack of fixed occupation, the aspiration to social betterment, and the historical and contemporary oppression, these strategies involve the definition of the different jobs taken on by the Dhanka as 'clean' in opposition to the work of low castes, and above all the insistence on providing different accounts of their origin in order to resist an essentialist closure. The third chapter 'What It Takes' starts with Moodie's exchange with Ravi Lal Dhanka, a community elder whose coming of age took place within the "era of service" between the 1960s and the 1990s. In this chapter Moodie delineates the collective aspiration at the basis of what she calls Dhanka's "willingness" – an affect exclusively associated with masculinity – that consists in constantly moving, in working for the benefit of society and in doing "what it takes to survive in the face of poverty and powerlessness" (65). The feminine equivalent of masculine "willingness" is "respectability" and represents the subject of the fourth chapter: 'A Good Woman'. Dhanka women manifest their "respectability" by taking pride and care of the house, by wearing the veil in presence of their husbands' elder male relatives in order to protect the boundaries of approved sexual relationships, and by loving their husbands. The participation of women in the collective aspiration of the Dhanka occupies the private sphere and is therefore mainly achieved through marriage, which occupies the next two chapters of Moodie's study. The fifth chapter 'A Traffic in Marriage' is dedicated to the emergence of the *samuhik vivaha* or collective marriage: a practice which envisages public collective marriages organised by the members of the Dhanka community. The involvement of the community in the organisation of the *samuhik vivaha* enables the Dhanka not only to ensure a regulation of the dowries (which are

---

all set to the same moderate amount, with the potential extra costs covered through community donations), but also the respect of the legal age for brides to get married. It additionally grants every member of the community, regardless of disabilities, senility, or poverty, the possibility to get married. The *samubik vivaha* epitomises the complexity of Dhanka identity in the tension between a strong traditional ritual character and the will to demonstrate Dhanka's progressive modernisation and their not being dependent on the help of the government.

Despite the fact that, as Moodie sustains, the “era of service” and the “era of contract” are not so neatly separable, the sixth chapter marks a slight movement to the “era of contract” with the new Dhanka generation entering adulthood. Entitled ‘Wedding Ambivalence’, it explains how, since marriage has become their only horizon of possibility, Dhanka women have to negotiate their individual aspiration and the community collective one. Often this means renouncing the interest in getting an education or seeking employment, activities that remain a male prerogative. The seventh chapter ‘Of Contracts and Kaliyuga’ focuses on the shift to the “era of contract” and the resulting threat of downward mobility that a younger generation of Dhanka men face in the context of precarious modern economies. In the last chapter, after setting her study in the background of the violent clashes between the Gujjars and the Rajasthani police in the summer of 2007 and 2008, Moodie reiterates the issue of Dhanka collective aspiration and how it inextricably intertwines intimate and political life. She thus explains how the expression “we were adivasis” comes to represent Dhanka's demand “to be both different and included, to leave the future undetermined in a not-yet, a hopeful *what if*, precisely because what is on offer from today's elites is found lacking” (176).

Moodie's ethnographic study is timely and responds well to a much needed intervention in the study of *Adivāsis*' historical and contemporary cultural manifestations. Her reading of Dhanka's strategies to collective aspiration is convincingly in communication with Arjun Appadurai's insight into the futurity of culture:

... culture is a dialogue between aspiration and sedimented traditions. And in our commendable zeal for the latter at the cost of the former, we have allowed an unnecessary, harmful, and artificial opposition to emerge between culture and development.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Arjun Appadurai, “The Capacity to Aspire: Culture and the Terms of Recognition”, in *The Future as Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition* (London: Verso, 2013), 179-95, 195.

The common view of culture as something connected to the past – evident not only in words such as “habit, custom, heritage, tradition”,<sup>3</sup> but also in the five parameters that, in defining the characteristic of a ST, point to “primitivism” and “backwardness” as specific ‘cultural’ traits – is strategically re-inscribed by the Dhanka, as Moodie suggests, in order to achieve a social and economic uplift. In other words, their embodying a partially essentialist conception of ‘adivāsiness’

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

---

does not confine them to the past, but serves as a propellant for their aspiration to a better future.

Moodie promises an intersectional discourse informed by the most recent scholarship on gender and social reform which remains slightly tangential and perhaps limited to the South Asian scholarship, but that nevertheless, by raising important questions concerning gender and identity negotiations, reveals the possibility for a fecund proliferation of further studies on the matter. Her idea of putting a “critical feminist ethnography at the heart of political practice” (181) promises a fruitful contamination of the field of cultural anthropology in the tension toward the politics of producing cultural change.