

An Annalist For The ‘Silent Millions’: W.W. Hunter’s Annals of Rural Bengal And The Colonial Construction of ‘Tribal’ Identity

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Abstract

One of the principal strategies deployed by the British colonial government in India had been the accumulation of knowledge about the people it ruled. In this endeavour, which had become imperative in the changed political scenario post -1857, they identified caste as the key category which would enable them to navigate the baffling intricacies of social structure in India. ‘Tribal’ rebellions, particularly the Santhal Revolt of 1855, compelled them to turn their attention to sections of the population outside the caste hierarchy as well. Studies of the indigenous communities (‘tribes’) by British administrative officers formed an important dimension of colonial knowledge-production. This gives rise to several questions— were the officers’ motives solely administrative? What were their themes of focus and tools of analysis? Did they have prior assumptions? How did all this shape the colonial construction of the notion of ‘tribe’? How was this located in the broader context of colonial knowledge-formation? This paper delves into W. W. Hunter’s Annals of Rural Bengal (1867) in an attempt to find some answers. It was under Hunter’s stewardship that the Provincial and Imperial Gazetteers, central to the entire project of colonial knowledge-making, were produced. The Annals, as one of his earliest major works, offers a unique opportunity to interrogate the formative stages of this process.

Keywords: *Aborigines, colonial knowledge-production, ethnology, Santals, William Wilson Hunter, tribe.*

Introduction

Accumulation of knowledge about the subjugated peoples had always been a vital part of the strategies of governance for the British colonial government in India. This became particularly urgent in the decades following the Great Revolt of 1857, when caste was identified as category crucial to understand the bewildering complexity of Indian society (Metcalf, 1995, 117). However, they also sought to comprehend and ‘classify’ sections of the population palpably outside the caste structure since the Santal Revolt of 1855 (and other ‘tribal’ rebellions before it) had demonstrated powerfully that they could neglect to do so only at their own risk.

One particular form of colonial knowledge-production took the shape of accounts written by British officers about the indigenous communities (‘tribes’) and the remote terrain that they inhabited. Examples include W. W. Hunter’s Annals of Rural Bengal, E.G. Man’s Sonthals and Sonthalia, T.H. Lewin’s Wild Tribes of the Eastern Frontier, Valentine Ball’s Jungle Life in India, F.B. Bradley-Birt’s History and Ethnology of an Indian Upland, ¹to name a few.

Using W. W. Hunter’s Annals of Rural Bengal (1868) as a prism, this paper attempts to locate the answers to

some of the questions generated by this category of knowledge production— were the officers' motives solely administrative? What were their themes of focus and tools of analysis? Did they have prior assumptions? How did all this shape the colonial construction of the notion of 'tribe'? How was this located in the broader context of colonial knowledge-formation?

Hunter's ideas had a far-reaching consequences as he helmed one the largest knowledge-making enterprises in the colonial context— the production of the numerous Provincial and Imperial Gazetteers and the multi-volume Statistical Accounts of Bengal. The Annals, as one of his earliest major works, offers a unique opportunity to interrogate the formative stages of this process.

Background to the Annals

Hunter arrived in India in 1862 as a young ICS officer where in addition to official duties he wrote for newspapers and journals in Calcutta and London. His first book, the Annals of Rural Bengal, published in 1867 focused on the Santals of Birbhum, a district in western Bengal. This was followed by The Comparative Dictionary of the Non-Aryan Languages of Asia and High Asia which compressed a mass of vocabulary into a handbook. The two books and regular journalism established his reputation as a versatile and productive individual, though he was shuttled between various assignments. In 1871 he was made the Director-General of Statistics (the post was specially created for him). He is best known for his work in supervising the compilation of numerous provincial gazetteers and the nine-volume Imperial Gazetteer of India (Greenough, 1998, 243).

It has been argued that the orientation of Hunter's work on the Santals was different from that of most contemporary administrators who wrote on the indigenous communities (Chaudhuri, 2012, 52). He began his book by clarifying that his focus was not the achievements of the 'governing race', rather, his 'business' was with 'the people' (Hunter, Dedication, xvii). He differentiated himself from his predecessors by claiming that their works were mostly records of the English Government or biographies of English Governors, not histories of the Indian people—'The silent millions who bear our yoke have found no annalist' (Hunter,1996 [1868] 4). Thus the task he had set for himself was clear. He focused on the history of a particular district in Bengal (Birbhum) and its people, in particular, the Santals who formed a significant portion of the population.

Bernard Cohn has shown that these efforts were prompted by a mix of scholarly interest and the practical need to harness the human and material resources in the colonies to fulfill the demands of the metropolitan capitalist economies (Cohn, 2004 [1981], 54). ²Hunter too, was driven by this dual motive. He wished to interest both the scholar and the administrator in the aboriginal communities, by recording 'the history, the language, the manner, and the capabilities' of one of them. He hoped that scholars would find that their language and traditions threw light on an 'unwritten chapter' in the history of 'our race'. With this hope, Hunter placed himself squarely within the Prichardian ethnological framework which endeavoured to study the language and customs of 'primitive societies' to fill the gaps in human pre-history. The rise of the new discipline of Ethnology in mid-nineteenth century Europe aimed to study the different human races, in particular the the "dark-skinned savages". One of the objectives was to explain the observed differences between the races and their present distribution (Stocking, 1987, 47-51). In Britain this was chiefly associated with the works of J.C. Prichard. Prichard's work influenced Robert Gordon Latham whose works included extensive references to India. ³This

framework for the study of 'primitive' peoples influenced British Indian administrators; for example, B.H. Hodgson and E.T. Dalton referred to Prichard and Latham respectively in their writings. The methods included investigations of the language, physical traits, customs, livelihood practices and religious beliefs of the hill communities concerned. Ethnology thus, provided several of the key tools with which a 'tribal' identity was constructed for the inhabitants of Bengal's forests and hills. It will be seen that Hunter too was influenced by the principles and methods of Ethnology and referred to Hodgson in his work.

Political considerations were important as well. Hunter was critical of what he perceived to be the prevailing official view of the aborigines—

...Government has too generally dealt with the aborigines of Bengal as with tribes incapable of improvement – as a race from whom the best that can be hoped is that it will keep quiet till it dies out (p.100).

He hoped that his work would encourage the administration to discover that the aborigines whom they neglected were prompted by the same motives of self-interest, amenable to same 'reclaiming influences' as other men. Hunter, thus, subscribed to the view that all men irrespective of physical and cultural differences possessed certain common faculties which were capable of being 'developed'.⁴

For sources of information, Hunter relied mainly on old district records which he discovered in a locked room at the Birbhum District Treasury, after he had been made the Assistant Collector of Revenue of the district in 1863. He also acknowledged his debt to missionaries of various denominations (Episcopal, Baptist and American Dissenters) active among the Santhals, who contributed their observations. Added to this were manuscripts of genealogical records of royal and aristocratic families, local histories collected by 'pandits' and folklore compiled by 'native gentlemen' (Hunter, 3-8).⁵

Ethnic conflict in Lower Bengal

As an administrator himself, Hunter was aware that for the British to both govern well and prosper such a significant section of Bengal's population ought not to remain 'unknown' and therefore in neglect. He pointed out that the government was under the misconception that the four-fold caste division decreed by Manu prevailed in Bengal, as it did in the rest of India, and thus had failed to understand the true ethnic composition of the population of the province and nature of their social organization (Hunter, 66-72). This misunderstanding, he felt, affected negatively the working of the British Indian administration. Hunter argued that the caste system was in reality to be found only in the Middle Land (by which he meant the whole river system of Upper India, extending up to Allahabad in the east); and that caste, in Lower Bengal was 'neither rigid nor artificial', but was built upon the 'universal and natural basis of an ancient society- the conquerors and the conquered' (Hunter, 66).

Tracing the history of Aryan migration into Bengal, he concluded that the population of Lower Bengal consisted of two ethnic elements: the Aryan invaders, almost all of whom assumed the rank of Brahmans; and the resident, dark-skinned aborigines whom the invaders 'reduced' to 'serfdom' on the plains or forced them to flee into the jungles' (p.70, 77-78). The upper caste Hindu prejudice against the aboriginal groups influenced the British officers as the latter interacted mostly with men of the higher castes. Hunter warned against judging the aborigines by the accounts of the Sanskrit writers, as the picture was 'by an unfriendly hand'. He argued that the bias was rooted in numerous differences—in speech, colour of the skin, diet, religious beliefs and con-

ceptions of time and immortality. However, though Hunter quick to note the prejudice of the Aryan against the indigenous population, he did not acknowledge his own. Some of his remarks show clearly that he shared this deep-rooted bias—

The superiority of the Aryans was so great, that they looked upon the aborigines as lower animals....In every point in which two races can be compared, the aborigines...were painfully inferior...[...].It is not difficult to understand the contempt with which the Sanskrit –speaking conquerors regarded a speech squeezed into such narrow and so ignobly objective moulds...(pp.78-79).

In his view, the Aryans' contempt for the aborigines was perfectly valid. To justify this he referred, not the Sanskrit texts, but to the work of B.H. Hodgson⁶ thus proving doubly the existence of the bias among the colonialists. Hunter's ideas also revealed the influence of contemporary British ethnologists such as Robert Knox who warned of the grim consequences of racial intermingling between different racial 'stocks' and varying degrees of 'civilization' (Bayly, 1995, 199).

As proof of the 'inferiority' of the aboriginal language, he pointed out that its 'most striking feature' was its multitude of words for whatever could be 'seen or handled' and its 'absolute inability' to express 'reflex conceptions of the intellect' and emotions which belonged to man's 'inward life'. He described it as a language of 'sensation' rather than of 'perception'; of the present rather than of the past and future, stamping the aboriginal mind as incapable of comprehending any abstraction of thought, as surely as any Sanskrit text was supposed to have done. He quoted copiously from Vedic literature to illustrate their abhorrence for the 'black' aborigines and his own comments leave no doubt that he shared the same sentiments—

The invaders...deeply felt that repugnance which the white man everywhere entertains to the black... [...]... [the aborigines] all made use of animal food to a degree which shocked the nicer sensibilities of the Aryan (Hunter, 80).

However, the decisive factor proving the 'superiority' of the Aryans was their body of religious beliefs. Hunter stated that the Aryans brought with them an array of 'stately rights' and 'highly developed beliefs' which included 'two of the noblest doctrines' of pre-Christian religion- the unity of God and the immortality of the soul. In contrast he found little to say about the religion of the aborigines; of the seven pages devoted to the comparison of religions, the aborigines merited only one. Far from having a distinct conception of the unity of God, he wrote, 'they seemed to the Aryan, to possess no conception of a God at all'. He disparaged their funerary rites—

The great object of these aborigines is to get their dead out of their sight....No stately rites are observed.... Among the tribes that have developed funeral ceremonies, a burial is only an occasion for gluttony and drunkenness (Hunter, 87).

And their preferred mode of celebrating festivals—

The continued heavy roar of so many drums, and the clamour of a multitude of human voices, the wild gaiety, the grotesque costumes of the dancers, and their half-naked bodies, all combined to produce a spectacle of savage life at once imposing and impressive (Hunter, 129).

Hunter argued that this 'unequal degree of enlightenment' was the 'true explanation' of the 'cruel' social distinctions that divided the population and which, as rulers, it was vital for the government to understand.

Understanding the Santals

For Hunter, the religion of the Santals was more significant for what it revealed about their past history than about their present beliefs. Stating that it was based upon a mix of fear and superstition, he argued that as the Santals had been driven from country to country by a superior race, they failed to understand how a Being could be more powerful than them without wishing to harm them. Hunter's reconstruction of their social organization employed religion as the crucial cohesive factor. Each family had its own deity which it worshipped using rituals kept secret; thus by definition the family unit comprised those who were privy to this knowledge. The village as a whole worshipped at the sacred sal (*Shorea Robusta*) grove which was the abode of all the family gods. Of the next level, 'tribe' (by which he meant the sept), he stated that each of the seven claimed descent from a common parent and preserved its own rites. Finally, he identified the Santals as a 'nation' and defined it as comprising all those in Birbhum and elsewhere who revered a common god, Marang Buru (Great Mountain). In Hunter's view, he was the one religious link that bound together the Santal nation. Earlier colonial accounts rarely delved into the inner world of the belief system of the hill communities and tended to be more preoccupied with their revenue-paying capacity and issues of law and order (Chaudhuri, 2012, 54). For Hunter, deployment of the tools provided by ethnology (such as analysis of religion) enabled him to categorise the Santals as a 'tribe'— a social group which evinced common features irrespective of location and distinct on all counts from the surrounding Hindu population.

Hunter was unusual in his deep interest in the process of 'tribalization' or the ways in which tribal influence had permeated the Aryan culture (Hunter, 53)⁷ and had altered the 'language, religion and political destiny of their conquerors'. He demonstrated that the common speech in the districts of the 'ethnographic frontier' (which included Birbhum), contained a multitude of words which had no links with Sanskrit. Such words were frequently uttered by the peasants, the herdsmen and the forest-dwellers but were missing in formal, written Bengali.⁸ Moreover, he conflated the Santal deity Marang Buru (Great Mountain) with the deity Rudra of ancient Sanskrit literature and Siva worshipped by the 'mixed Hindu population' of the plains. Hunter cited a variety of evidence in favour of this assumption—similarity of worship between the two deities (consisting of "bloody" sacrifices), events mentioned in Sanskrit scriptures (such as the 'struggle' of the 'aboriginal deity' Rudra for admission into the 'Aryan Olympus'), fables (the Baijnath temple being named after one Byju, a 'black' hill man) as well as the general location of Siva temples up among the mountains (Hunter, 131-134). For Hunter, this influence was pernicious. He linked the tendency of the Hindus of Lower Bengal to propitiate malignant deities rather than venerate the beneficent ones, to the influence of demon worship and blood sacrifices practised by the aborigines. In fact he claimed that a similar process was at work across the country. Added to this were other customs such as the worship of village and household gods in Lower Bengal, a 'harmless superstition' which he believed, the Hindus had derived from the hill men. He endorsed Francis Buchanan-Hamilton's opinion that the sacrifices were made partly from fear and partly to 'gratify the appetite for flesh'. The 'fierce aboriginal instincts' exemplified by the desire to consume flesh was believed to be so strong that it 'broke loose' occasionally (during certain festivals) even among the mixed castes, who according to Hunter had better accepted the 'restraints of Hinduism' (Hunter, 90-92).

Hunter's interest in the process of 'tribalization' was unusual as the most administrators of the period, such as

T.H. Lewin and E.T. Dalton, focused on the opposite phenomenon. Hunter's reasons were two-fold. Firstly he wished to emphasise that the standard four-fold division of caste, was inapplicable to Lower Bengal; and that the real division here was between the conquerors (the higher castes among the Hindus) and the conquered (the mixed castes and the aborigines). Secondly, he analysed in detail what he believed to be the impact of the extreme animosity between the two groups in Bengal. He asserted that knowledge of these historical processes to be of great importance to administrators in charge of governing Bengal—

“...the influence of the aboriginal tribes... [has] exercised an infinitely abiding and more baneful effect upon the social condition and the political destiny of the people. It is chiefly to the presence of a heterogeneous population of a mixed descent, the Bengalis owe it that they have never been a nation; for two races, one consisting of masters, the other of slaves, are not easily welded into a single nationality (p.95).

Hunter was convinced that the ‘ethnic shape and structure’ of Bengal, would remain largely unintelligible if the tribal component of the local population and the role of tribal culture in shaping the local culture as a whole were ignored (Chaudhuri, 2012, 52). A better grasp of the ethnic composition of the population which they ruled would benefit the British; moreover, such knowledge would also enable it to position itself as the sole entity which could maintain a tenuous peace between the two hostile groups. The unstated implication was that such knowledge, above all, would empower the British government to ensure that the people of Bengal never did become a nation.

Reconstruction of Santal history

Western scholarly tradition prioritised the writing of history of all peoples. Since to discover the history of something was to explain it (Cohn, 2004 (1981) 51) and thereby facilitate its regulation, this was particularly important in the colonies. Hunter therefore set out to record all that was known about the Santals of Birbhum. His opening comments on the physiognomy of the Santal were,

...a man created to labour rather than to think, better fitted to serve the manual exigencies of the present, than to speculate on the future or to venerate the past (Hunter,102).

This meant that the history of the Santals would have to be written for them by others. It has been argued that Westerners have distinguished between history, believed to represent ‘reality’, and myth, representing ‘flawed, irrational fairy tale[s]’ which constitutes an ‘unconscious history’ suitable only for savages and children (Nandy, 1983, 60). Hunter was aware of the vast store of oral traditions that the Santals possessed (as his own work proved); but he refused to accept them as ‘history. In imperial ideology, colonial rule was often justified by representing the colonized in terms of a lack- the insistence that the colonized lacked history was a part of this (Skaria, 2001, 2). He regretted that an ‘ethnic frontier’ which had ‘seen and suffered so much’ should be without any record of the past and lamented that the present generation of Santals had no idea ‘where their forefathers had come from’ (Hunter, 103) . It was his hope that this task would now be taken up by officers of the colonial government; he expected them to perform the dual duty of ‘preserving’ the early records of British rule in Bengal and of ‘interpreting’ its ‘rural millions’ to the western world.

A major tool in this process was an investigation into language. For Hunter, the Santali language was a rich field of enquiry, an ‘intangible record’ in which a nation’s past was graven deeply (Hunter, 109). Never having

been subjected to the 'conservative' influences which written documents exert, it had come down to the present generation as the 'debris' of an ancient language rather than the language itself; nevertheless for Hunter, it was 'breathing linguistic organism', which connected the present with an 'unfathomed past'. He therefore aimed to ascertain the place of the Santali language in the 'great community of languages' (Hunter, 113).

Hunter's reasoning displays the influence of the discipline of comparative philology which had emerged in Germany in the early nineteenth century.⁹ He followed the system of linguistic classification developed by Augustus Schliecher¹⁰, to conclude that Santali belonged to Schliecher's second group—the Compounding languages. Hunter traced the evolution in linguistic structure and noted that the varieties of human speech rose above one another in 'easy gradations', each class exhibiting a higher degree of activity than the one below it. For Hunter, the hierarchy thus formed could be applied to categorise areas of activity beyond language—
...it is curious to notice... that each of the great families of the human race has exhibited more or less political and social activity in proportion to the formative powers of the language which it speaks (p.116).

In Hunter's view, linguistic sophistication was an indicator for many abilities including the capacity for social complexity and political dominance. He cited examples of Sanskrit words forcing out aboriginal terms deducing that just as the Aryans had pushed the aboriginal hill communities out of Bengal, so also Sanskrit being the 'stronger' language, had driven the poor aboriginal word out of Bengali speech (Hunter, 124). Hunter was particularly interested in tracing the original homeland and the migration routes of the Santals. Through linguistic analysis he concluded that as Sanskrit pointed to the north-west of the Himalayas as the starting point of the Indo-Aryans, so Santali pointed to the countries on the north-east as the primitive home of the Indian aborigines. Santal legends contained within them the story of their migration through eastern Bengal, moving westwards until forced by the oncoming waves of Aryan migrations, to retreat to the highlands of the lower valley.

The Santal as a 'Tribe'

Hunter's assessment of the Santals' 'character' resonates the ambivalence already seen in many earlier accounts¹¹— the well-known picture of the tribesman as a 'savage' who delighted in bloody sacrifices but was cheerful, hospitable, honest and self-respecting (in contrast to the 'cringing', unscrupulous Hindu). Hunter also included an elaborate description of the causes, progress and termination of the Santal Revolt of 1855-56. The Santals were depicted as innocent victims of the fraudulent ways of the Hindu moneylenders and traders, who were swayed by circumstances as well as by their own 'savage' instincts,

Want drove them to plunder...The inoffensive but only half-tamed highlander had tasted blood and in a moment his old savage nature returned (p.166).

Both characterisations were understood to confirm their 'tribal' identity where they were perceived to lack the guile as well as the restraint of the plainsman. Their 'lapse' to violence was seen more in terms of a 'instinctive' reaction to events which swept them along in their wake rather than any 'desire' for plunder and raiding which had characterised official descriptions of causes of the Kol Rebellion of 1832. Thus the Santal was seen more as a victim than as a predatory raider. Hunter viewed the rebellion as an 'assertion of race' (Bayly, 1995, 202) and emphasised the unplanned nature of the whole uprising. He failed to see its political goal and acknowledged no autonomy of the Santals for deliberate choice or decisive action. He was critical of the role of the Company's

government, ascribing its failure to detect and remedy the causes of the revolt to its commercial mind-set and ignorance. However, he commended the subsequent steps taken by the government in making separate administrative arrangements as well as a separate district for the Santals (Hunter, 160, 175). He stressed that thorough knowledge of all such groups was essential for the British government to record their past and present it to the world and to maintain a precarious social balance between two hostile communities.

Hunter, thus, came to identify the Santals as an aboriginal tribe. The 'tribe' was understood to be an entity with certain discernible characteristics, which could be observed and recorded for future reference. Just as zoologists recorded the features and behaviour of a particular species of animal, and expected each member of the species to conform to the 'known' data, the lifestyle and customs of the tribes documented meticulously for similar reasons. Hunter could discuss the characteristic features of 'the Santals' but never that of 'the Englishmen'. This essentializing tendency meant that the officers operated on the belief that once these features were described and written down, the tribe could be 'known' forever.

Hunter also saw the 'tribe' as a group distinct from caste Hindus- in language, religion and customs. In his view they were the inferior as they had had to give way before the latter who were superior in every way. Both groups had influenced each other as far as Bengal was concerned.

The tribesmen had only myths but no 'history'. Hence their history would to be written for them by others, just as Hunter had done through his reconstruction of the Santal past— their origin, migrations, trials and tribulations down to the rebellion of 1855. Hunter argued that it was necessary for the colonial administration to do this since this knowledge would ensure better understanding and therefore more effective governance.

Hunter shared the mid-century ethnological conviction in the potential for improvement inherent in all men. It was believed that the 'savage peoples' could be civilized through proselytization and encouraged the accumulation of ethnographic data to inform progressive policies (Kuklick, 2008, 52). Benevolence and commerce, however, were deeply enmeshed here. As Kavita Philip has shown, labour was the activity that simultaneously created civilizational values and met the immediate material needs of the Empire (Philip, 2003, 164).

Hunter pointed out that the future extension of colonial commercial operations in Bengal depended to a large extent upon the tribesman's capacity for civilization. In his eyes, the skill of the Santals in clearing forests and extending cultivation to be unmatched, while their 'willingness' to work as wage labourers in the indigo plantations made them the 'sinews' by which English enterprise was carried on in Eastern Bengal (Hunter, 156). To ensure smooth and regular supply of 'tribal' labour for colonial capital, it was essential to integrate them into the wider economic and administrative processes.

For Hunter, the Santal was simple and honest tribesman but also an untamed savage who was driven by instinct. He believed that proper 'care' and appropriate measures taken by the government would eliminate the grievance of the hill communities and 'uplift' their condition. For this, it was necessary to collect accurate and detailed knowledge as he was convinced that the government could 'not afford any longer' to be 'unacquainted' with their 'character, conditions and necessities'.

Impact

The Queen's Proclamation of 1858 strictly charged those in authority in British India to 'abstain from all interference' with the religious customs or beliefs of any community. This policy of non-interference made it necessary for the colonial government to have comprehensive knowledge about their subjects (Dirks, 2002, 149). Hunter's work had already demonstrated that religion and language were the two essential tools to understand Indian society. His primary argument, that detailed knowledge of ethnic composition of the population was necessary for effective governance— was put into practice by the imperial government. The publication of *Annals* was soon followed by Edward Tuite Dalton's *Ethnology of Bengal* (1872) which sought to map the diverse population of the vast province. Hunter's ethnological understanding of caste and tribe as racial categories, continued to dominate colonial thinking decades after the publication of the *Annals* (Bayly, 1995).

Indians were to be understood through primordial categories such as 'caste' and 'tribe' and experiences such as the Santal Rebellion of 1855 placed the 'tribes' or indigenous communities directly under the scanner. Hunter's views about ethnic mapping and the status of adivasis in it assume critical importance since he steered one of the largest knowledge-gathering exercises in the colonial context. The twenty-volume *Statistical Accounts of Bengal* which recorded the minutiae of material and human resources for each district of Bengal was a mammoth exercise. This endeavor was subsequently amplified to higher levels with the publication of the *Provincial and Imperial Gazetteers* after he was made the director-general of gazetteers in 1877.

From the perspective of the colonial administration, ethnographers who collected such knowledge were seen as the critical link between the ruler and the ruled (Philip, 2003, 149). Philip has cited Edgar Thurston's volume on Madras Presidency for a series on *Provincial Geographies of India*, to highlight the political value ascribed by the colonial government to such ethnographic knowledge. The series editor, Sir T.H. Holland, not only linked effective administration with the acquisition of accurate data about local practice and custom but emphasized the need for ethnographic techniques in comprehensive yet specific knowledge of all parts of British India (Editor's Preface, Thurston, 1913, v-vi). It may be argued that Hunter's *Annals* was one the earliest works to anticipate and set the tone for such knowledge-gathering endeavours.

Conclusion

Hunter's main conclusions in the *Annals* may be summarized as follows— firstly, the tools of ethnology (analysis of language and religious beliefs) had been successfully used to reconstruct the history of a people who 'had no history'. This reconstructed history shows that the population of Lower Bengal, the area with which he was primarily concerned, consisted of a 'superior' Aryan race which had subjugated an 'inferior' indigenous one and that the four-fold varna divisions of Upper India were inapplicable here. The relationship between the two groups was one where, strangely, mutual hostility and mutual influence co-existed. In fact, Hunter was one of the rare colonial officers who noticed the phenomenon of 'tribalisation'. Knowledge of this history and the correct ethnic composition of Bengal's population was essential for the British Indian administration not only for effective governance but also to be able to claim the status of arbiter over the two eternally hostile groups. However principal among Hunter's conclusions was the construction of a distinctive 'tribal' identity for the Santals in particular, and other indigenous communities in general. The attitude was one of ambivalence — a

contradictory combination of ‘blood thirsty savage’ and honest, upright and friendly tribesman. Hunter dissected the events of the Santal Hool (revolt) of 1855 to argue that the ‘tribal’ Santals were innocent victims defrauded by the crafty Hindu merchants and moneylenders. All this justified the colonial rule as British presence was needed to maintain the precarious balance between two antagonistic groups, which would in turn, ensure that such a population could never become attain nationhood. Moreover, Hunter subscribed to the mid-century ethnological belief in the inherent ‘improveability’ of groups characterized as ‘primitive’ once they were subjected to ‘enlightened’ governance. This too formed one of the important justifications for colonial rule. Scholarly enterprises like Hunter’s thus were rooted in political and imperial contexts.

The kind of knowledge Hunter accumulated in the *Annals* and the principles on which he organised it had long term effects. E.T. Dalton’s *Ethnology of Bengal* (1872) which was published soon after the *Annals* referred Hunter as did T.H. Lewin’s *Wild Tribes of the Eastern Frontier*. The desire to obtain comprehensive knowledge of the ethnic and social composition of its subject population led the colonial government to commission a series of ethnographic glossaries for the different provinces of British India¹². The first of these was H.H. Risley’s *Tribes and Castes of Bengal* (1891).

Although Hunter’s ethnological conclusions came to be questioned later, there can be little doubt that the political imperatives emphasized by him, were reflected in government policies and publications. The latter included the widely circulated *Statistical Accounts of Bengal* and the *Imperial and Provincial gazetteers*. These projects were applied to nearly the entire country to collect information compliant with a centrally designed protocol. As director of gazetteers, Hunter designed this central plan. In Paul Greenough’s words—‘The completion of these great orientalist grids of knowledge was costly and required political support from the highest levels’ (Greenough, 1998, 245).

Thus the framework constructed by Hunter for collecting data about Indian society in general and the indigenous communities in particular provided the scaffolding for a massive knowledge-gathering exercise across colonial India. Within this framework, his construction of a distinctive ‘tribal’ identity for the Santals resonated beyond south-western Bengal to the far corners of British India.

¹ W.W. Hunter, *Annals of Rural Bengal*, W.B. District Gazetteers, Calcutta: 1996, [London: Smith Elder and Co., 1868]; E.G. Man, *Sonthalia and the Sonthals*, Calcutta: Geo. Wyman & Co., London: Tinsley & Co., 1867. T.H. Lewin, *Wild races of the Eastern Frontier of India*, Reprint- New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 2004 [First Published 1870]; Valentine Ball, *Jungle Life in India, or the Journey and Journals of an Indian Geologist*, London: Thos. De La Rue & Co., 1880; F.B. Bradley-Birt, *History and Ethnology of an Indian Upland*, Reprint- New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1990, [London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1905]. Christian missionaries also wrote accounts of the indigenous communities: W.M. Jenkins, *Life and Work in Khasia*, Newport: W.Jones, Printer (1904); Sidney Endle, *The Kacharis* London: Macmillan & Co. (1911); Reginald A. Lorrain, *Five Years in Unknown Jungles*, London: Lakher Pioneer Mission, (1912); P.O. Bodding, *Traditions and Institutions of the Santals*, New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2013 [1942].

² Colonial efforts to collect and organise information on indigenous people driven by a Euro-centric framework have been criticised in international fora, for instance in the Durban Declaration (World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance 31 August-7 September 2001, Durban).

³ James Cowles Prichard, *Researches into the Physical History of Mankind*, Third Edition, London: Sherwood, Gilbert and Piper, 1844; R.G. Latham, *The Natural History of the Varieties of Man*, London: John Van Voorst, 1850; *The Ethnology of British Colonies and Dependencies*, London: John Van Voorst, 1851, *Descriptive Ethnology*, Vol 1, London: John Van Voorst, 1859.

⁴ This too was a key belief of Pre-Darwinian ethnology, which did not seriously question the basic psychic unity of all the diverse groups. George W. Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology*, p.17.

⁵ The role played by Indians in colonial knowledge-gathering projects have been acknowledged in several studies. See for instance, Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002, p.218; Dwaipayan Sen, 'The 1872 Census: 'Indigenous Agency' and the Science of Statistics in Bengal', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. LIII, Nos. 26& 27, June 30, 2018, pp.38-39; Sanjukta Das Gupta, *Imagining the 'Tribe' in Colonial and Post-Independence India*, *Politeja*, No.59, India and Pakistan: Reflections of Politics and Culture 70 years after Independence, 2019, p.109.

⁶ Hunter referred to Hodgson's work, *Essay the First: On the Koch Bódo and Dhimal Tribes in Three Parts*, (1847) to state that in Kochh, Bodo and Dhimal there were no words to express 'matter, spirit, space, reason, consciousness, heaven, hell, etc. In Bodo and Dhimal cause and effect could not be expressed at all and in Kochh, only by words borrowed from Sanskrit. Hunter, *Annals*, p. 79.

⁷ Modern research, however, does not support all of Hunter's conclusions. It is possible that Hindu practices like demon worship and propitiation of malevolent spirits which he ascribed to tribal influence, may have had independent origins. B.B. Chaudhuri, (2012), 'Towards an Understanding of the Tribal World of Colonial Eastern India' in Sanjukta Das Gupta and Rajsekhar Basu (eds.) *Narratives from the Margins: Aspects of Adivasi History in India*, Delhi: Primus Books, p.53.

⁸ W.W.Hunter, *Annals*, p.89. Hunter gives the example of the Santal numeral pon-ea or pon (four), which is completely different from the Sanskrit (chatur) and modern Bengali (chari) equivalents. However, he points out that the lower classes in Bengal use poun-e to signify 'one-fourth less'. Hunter, *Annals*, p.123.

⁹ Friedrich Schlegel, a German scholar who published *On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians* in 1808, explained it thus: "that decisive factor which will clear up everything is the inner structure of languages, or comparative grammar, which will give us altogether new insights into the genealogy of languages..." quoted in Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology*, p. 23. Comparative philology provided the methodological underpinning for ethnology, and by 1850, the two disciplines were closely bound as both assumed that linguistic linkages proved racial affinity. Friedrich Max Müller's methods of comparative philology served to provide British intellectuals of the 1860s with a framework to probe the early stages of civilization. George W. Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology*, pp. 23-24, 57-61.

¹⁰ August Schleicher (1821-1868) was a German linguist known for his work *A Compendium of the Comparative Grammar of the Indo-European Languages* (1861). He proposed the following arrangement of languages: a) Isolating Languages, e.g. Chinese, Siamese, Burmese which consist of roots incapable of forming compounds and not susceptible of inflectional change; b) Compounding Languages, e.g. Finnic, Tataric, aboriginal languages of America, which consist of roots which do not change but can form compounds and are susceptible of inflection; c) Inflecting Languages, e.g. the Semitic and Indo-European Languages which consist of roots that undergo change in inflection and are also susceptible to inflection by means of prefixes and suffixes. W.W.Hunter, *Annals*, p. 112.

¹¹ Late 18th century and early 19th century accounts of officers deputed to work in the areas inhabited by the indigenous communities reflected this ambivalence clearly. Examples include—James Browne, *India Tracts: Containing a Description of the Jungle Terry Districts, Their Revenues, Trade and Government: With a Plan for the Improvement of Them*, Blackfriars: Logographic Press, 1788; John Eliot, 'Observations on the Inhabitants of the Garrow Hills Made During a Public Deputation in the years 1788 and 1789', in *Dissertations and Miscellaneous Pieces Relating to the History and Antiquities and the Arts, Sciences and Literature of Asia*, Asiatic Researches, Vol. III, Reprint-New Delhi: Cosmo Publications 1979 [First published London:1796] pp.21-45; John Bryan Neufville, 'On the Population and Geography of Assam', *Asiatic Researches*, Vol. XVI, 1828, pp. 331-352.

¹² A series of such ethnographic glossaries were published at the turn of the century. H.H. Risley, *Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, (2 volumes), Reprint-Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1998, [First Published- Calcutta: 1891]; Edgar Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, Vol 1-7, Madras: Government Press, 1909; R.V.Russell and Hiralal, *The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India*, Macmillan & Co., London, 1916; H.A. Rose, Denzil Ibbetson and E.D. MacLagan, *A Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab and North-Western Frontier Province*, Superintendent, Government Printing, Lahore, 1911.

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