

**Aditya Pratap Deo, *Kings, Spirits and Memory in Central India: Enchanting the State* (London, New York: Routledge, South Asia Edition, 2022) 197 pp. Hardcover.**

Aditya Pratap Deo's *Kings, Spirits and Memory in Central India* is an "anthropological history" (xxii) that seeks to understand how a set of present-day popular accounts function as an alternative cosmology of both power and temporality. These *anga deo* accounts mostly collected orally are related to the veneration of and intercession by ancestral forces/deities related to the Gond and other tribal peoples of Kanker. Using these accounts along with archival sources, Deo shows how sovereignty was constituted as a layered and shared concept in what was once the colonial-princely state of Kanker in modern day Chhattisgarh in central India. Deo is clear that the colonial-princely state of Kanker is merely a "strategic holding point" (xxii) in his monograph as this was the most recent period when state power was most intermeshed with the practices and political cosmology related to the *anga deo* accounts. However, Deo points out that through the "mediation of the *anga deo* practices" "older regimes of power" associated with the colonial-princely state overlaps with "newer ones" emanating from the post-colonial state (108).

This monograph is unique as the author also doubles up as an important interlocutor in the understanding of this alternate cosmology of temporality and sovereignty. In the first chapter, Deo clarifies his positionality as both a descendant of the last ruling dynasty of the colonial-princely state of Kanker as well as the current ceremonial *Raja* or King who enjoys an exclusive position within the *anga deo* cosmology. Deo mentions that his earliest memories of the *anga deo* practices are from the 1970s when his father, Udai Pratap Deo as the titular *Raja* of Kanker participated in the "annual three-day madai (festival)" (1). The centre piece of the *madai* involved the two *anga deos*—Bade Pat and Chhote Pate kept with the royal family. The Bade Pat is housed at the "temple of goddess Shitala" and Chhote Pat at the "Old Palace" (2) both of which are under the custody of the royal family. These *anga deos* like most are essentially "two rounded logs of wood joined in the middle by a cross-bar adorned with ornaments" (2). *Anga deos* are mobile and are often carried on the shoulders of men. The *madai* would entail the Bade Pat and Chhote Pat taking over the *Darbar Hall* of the royal palace whereby the *Raja* is forced to sway with these *anga deos*. While in the *anga deo* cosmology it is thought that they move at their own will, Deo growing up would ask his father if "their bearers propelled them into action" (5). Deo in his youth would dismiss such beliefs as superstition and was "deeply embarrassed by [his] background" (5). After the

death of his father in 2001, though Deo retained his position as an academic succeeded to the position of the *Raja*. This led him to appreciate the world of the *anga deos* in a new light. Deo realized that royal *anga deos* were intrinsically connected with the village *anga deos* and found himself at the center of “the practice of taking the royal *anga deo* to the villages” (10). This process necessitated “submitting a request in a stamped document called *igrarnama*” to the *Raja* (11). These visits and activities related to the Chhote Pat and other village *anga deos* are known as “jstras” (12). Deo began to participate in these, both as the *Raja* as well as the historian-ethnographer.

The second chapter of the monograph is a broad sweep of the archival sources that engage with the *anga deo* accounts. Deo explores three types of archival sources—accounts by colonial administrator-anthropologists, administrative records of the colonial-princely state of Kanker, and semi-archival *igrarnamas* (29-30). Deo argues that the colonial anthropological writings were “complicit in the construction of the Gond peoples as primitive” in order to restrict the world of the *anga deos* to that of the “cultural” (39). Yet some of these writings particularly that of Wilfrid V. Grigson betrayed the political. Particularly writing in 1927, when he mentions “*panchayats* still regulated the religious and social life of the people” (34). Deo contends that a lack of resources and “resistance by local socio-political formations” (41) led to the concept of “indirect rule” (41) in the case of the princely states. Consequently, Deo cites two instances when the princely state of Kanker could be subjected to “closer colonial intervention and control” (41). The periods between 1892-1894 and again between 1925-1944 due to mental incapacity of King Narharideo (41) the minority of King Bhanu Pratap Deo (42) respectively. Deo posits that the close examination of the Annual Administrative Reports of the colonial-princely state however reveals that the princely regime “appear less successful in producing their modern, rational regimes of administration on the ground” (44). This according to Deo is best exemplified by the co-option of the figure of *Kotwar* as village police. In reality, *Kotwars* were “local notables attached to the village and Gond clan hierarchies, who could hardly be called police” (45). This for Deo, shows that both the princely regime and the colonial state desired to “appropriate the commanding heights” (46) of sovereignty collaboratively. However, the political cosmology of the *anga deos* at best allowed “a contested and negotiated space” (46). For Deo the semi-archival *igrarnamas* are the lich-pin which shows that the colonial-princely had to negotiate with the villages and the cosmology of the *anga deos* (48). The fact that these *igrarnamas* were “stashed away in trunks in the storeroom of the palace” and not part of the official archives also serves as corroboration that the colonial-princely regime reluctantly acknowledged the alternate cosmology of the *anga deos*. However, had Deo engaged with the latest historiography by scholars such as Angma Jhala, Benjamin Hopkins, and Sanjib Baruah he might have somewhat different conclusions regarding the formation of “indirect rule.” These scholars have shown that the colonial state did not always

acquiesce to “indirect rule” because of inability to exert sovereignty but there were distinct advantages to be gained through such political regimes. The same perhaps could be argued for the shared nature of sovereignty maintained by the princely state of Kanker.

Aditya P. Deo in the third chapter discusses “the meaning and implications” of his “power-filled location in the field as historian-ethnographer and raja” (61). In that context he explains the centrality of the figure of the *Raja* in the “*anga deo-raja* complex” (65) and how this complex has “adapted quite successfully to the political life of post-colonial state in order to maintain power and influence” (63). In chapter 4, Deo explores the fine balance of the power and sovereignty through the orally collected *anga deo* accounts. Deo discusses the fine balance achieved between “ancestral forces” (79-84) and “non-ancestral forces” (85-88) and how this is reflected on the ground. Despite the *Raja's* claims of sovereignty, the state of Kanker was organized in terms of *pargana deos-anga deos* whose realm covered large territorial units (81-82). These contestations between the *bhumkal* (village society) represented by the *siyan* (elders) and princely regime played out in other ways as well. While the *gaita* was “the propitiator and interpreter of the *anga deo*,” (100) the village headman or *majbi/patel* were forced to be the secular link to the princely regime (102). Other such interventions by the princely regime included the insertion of the figure of the *malguzars* or revenue collectors for the state. This category obtained its position through bidding and therefore came mostly from outside of village society—upper caste Brahmins and Thakurs (109-110).

Deo in chapter 5 explores how the “imperious state” of Kanker was drawn out by the *anga deo* cosmology into an “enchanted land” whereby sovereignty was clearly divided (129). Deo shows that the sovereignty of the *Raja* was challenged in all three citadels—Kanker (134-138), Bansla, and Govindpur (139-143). This section is followed by a discussion on the organization of the Kanker state on the basis of *anga deo pargana* (143-156). This shows “how large areas of Kanker work with the idea of two or more *rajas*—the *raja* of Kanker and the *anga deos*” (131). Deo then goes on to show how the sovereignty of the *anga deos* often went beyond the “territorial limits of the *raja* of Kanker” (157). Often it spilled into neighboring princely state of Bastar thus undermining sovereign claims of both the princely regimes. Deo concludes his monograph with an afterword where he outlines his theory about “an alternate geometry of polity” (171). In this theorization the “polity is horizontal, constituted through a field of forces where neither the *raja*/state nor the *anga deo-bhumkal* complexes have a clear superiority over the other” (172).

Aditya Pratap Deo's monograph is an excellent subaltern ethno-history of power and sovereignty from below which paints an optimistic picture on the limits of state power. The book makes an important contribution to the scholarship of political economy particularly on those areas that experienced forms of indirect colonial rule. The lucidity of the prose makes the monograph amenably suitable

for general readership as well.

*Tathagata Dutta*  
*Tufts University*