

Global Histories

A Student Journal

Review: Steel Town Adivasis: Industry and Inequality in Eastern India — By Christian Strümpell
Ankit Chowdhury

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/GHSJ.2025.712>

Source: Global Histories, Vol. 10, No. 2 (December 2025), pp. 127–132
ISSN: 2366-780X

Copyright © 2025 Ankit Chowdhury



License URL: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Publisher information:

Global Histories: A Student Journal is an open-access bi-annual journal founded in 2015 by students of the M.A. program Global History at Freie Universität Berlin and Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. *Global Histories* is published by an editorial board of Global History students in association with the Freie Universität Berlin.

Freie Universität Berlin
Global Histories: A Student Journal
Friedrich-Meinecke-Institut
Koserstraße 20
14195 Berlin

Contact information:

For more information, please consult our website www.globalhistories.com or contact the editor at: admin@globalhistories.com.



**Steel Town Adivasis: Industry and
Inequality in Eastern India
by Christian Strümpell,
Social Science Press, 2023.
ISBN: 9789383166572**

REVIEWED BY

Ankit Chowdhury

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Ankit Chowdhury holds a BA in History from the Scottish Church College in India and an MA in Dependency and Slavery Studies from the University of Bonn, where he will begin as a pre-doctoral fellow in January 2026. His current research, centred on “Cold War dependencies,” which compares steel towns in India and Brazil established during the Cold War to examine how labour, technology, and ecological transformations became intertwined in ways that produced enduring asymmetries and continue to shape present-day inequalities. Furthermore, he is particularly interested in the labour, urban history as well as the history of science and environment

In his book *Steel Town Adivasis*, anthropologist Christian Strümpell has exposed how a flagship project of postcolonial development in India has reshaped an entire region by transforming land, labour, identity, and power. Further, it reveals that industrial progress did not dissolve caste and ethnic hierarchies but rebuilt them in new forms. Through the rich ethnography of Adivasi,¹ populations across generations, the author has shown how displacement, union politics, stereotyping, and neoliberal reforms produced shifting class divisions within Adivasi communities. He has analysed how the identity of Adivasis, “impinges on their class position and vis-à-vis” intersect with class and caste over time.² Therefore, by examining these dynamics, the book forces us to confront the human costs of development and rethink what industrial modernity has truly meant for India’s marginalized citizens.

Strümpell’s extensive ethnographic investigation, conducted from 2004 to 2019, focused on a public sector steel plant built in 1959 in Rourkela, which is located in the eastern Indian state of Orissa (Odisha since 2011).³ In particular, the monograph stands as a rare lens into how the indigenous population navigated industrial modernity in India, which means the dream of progress that steel plants symbolised in the Nehruvian era and the reality of its unequal outcomes. Hence, this compelling work is an addition to the ongoing literature on Indian steel towns and to global labour studies. For instance, in his study on Bhilai steel town, anthropologist Parry focused on the shifting nature of labour as it reveals that the line dividing secure wage labour from insecure ones, transcends the conventional divisions between manual and non-manual workforce, which is an important indicator of variation within the industries of India, rather than multiple gradations. Including that, one of Parry’s main hypotheses was that working-class politics had not emerged in Bhilai because its labour force was deeply divided by class.⁴ Similarly, anthropologist Sanchez’s work on the private sector Tata Iron and Steel plant in Jamshedpur has led us to consider how corruption is rooted within economic negotiations between political figures, entrepreneurs, industrial corporations, and violent actors. He asserted that labour discourses raise uncertainties about whether economic liberalisation from the 1980s has resulted in a more open and meritocratic society. Additionally, he argued that the endemic corruption found in the plant is a perceptual example of political consciousness that surmounts the divisions

1 In Odia, *Adivasi* means “original inhabitants,” where *Adi* means beginning or first and *vasi* means dweller. It is also a term used in collective reference to indigenous people in some parts of Indian subcontinent – mostly the central and eastern belt of India.

2 Christian Strümpell, *Steel Town Adivasis: Industry and Inequality in Eastern India* (Social Science Press, 2023), 11-13.

3 Ibid., 27.

4 Jonathan Parry, *Classes of Labour: Work and life in a central Indian Steel Town* (Routledge, 2020), 13, 118, and 302.

between workers who are employed permanently and those who are not.⁵ Conversely, where Parry focuses on working-class moral life and Sanchez on political and criminal economy, Strümpell synthesises these concerns but roots them in the Adivasis' experience of displacement, marginalization, and uneven incorporation into modern industry. Conversely, while Parry's scholarship gives us a deep moral anthropology of steel works, Strümpell gives an ethnography of inequality, ethnicity, and class formation, and while Sanchez foregrounds corruption and political violence as an everyday practice in his study, Strümpell foregrounds historical structural inequality and the reproduction of ethnic hierarchy within an industrial town.

After that, one of the key themes of the book is how the caste and class intersect to play a broader divisional spectrum in the workplace of Rourkela Steel town (RSP). According to Strümpell, the industrial labour in Rourkela was not merely in a process of economic modernisation but also a contradictory space of identity formation and socio-political struggle. Furthermore, the monograph is structured around four interrelated foci, where the first is on displacement and dispossessions, in which the author has shown that the primary protagonists, Adivasis, were left out of the early phase of the plant's land acquisition process, and their exclusion simultaneously has changed the overall course of Rourkela's socio-political paradigm.⁶ Thus, it systematically highlights the long-term effects of land alienation on livelihoods, social mobility, the shortcomings of public compensation schemes, and the systematic and institutional marginalization of displaced populations.⁷

The second part concentrates on the issues of class and caste, where the author provides examples of the deeply ingrained caste-based disparities in the workplace, where the upper-castes who came from various parts of India have generally taken on skilled, managerial, and technical roles, while the Adivasis have been moved to the lower echelons of the workforce. This comparison showcases how formal employment in the public sector has led to internal class stratifications, and the book critically analyses the diverse class trajectories under this framework. For instance, it shows how they were embedded in precarious contract-based employment as well as how they were often seen as "jungli" (wild and uncivilized) and prone to drunkenness by their so-called upper counterparts.⁸ Conversely, these stereotypes were challenged over time. As Santosh, an Adivasi worker, prided himself on countering the derogatory

5 Andrew Sanchez, *Criminal Capital: Violence, Corruption and Class in Industrial India* (Routledge, 2016), 6-8.

6 Strümpell, *Steel Town*, 3.

7 Ibid., 25.

8 Ibid., 103 and 125.

remarks from upper-castes by illustrating his competence and cultural pride.⁹ His sister and son undertook vocational training and higher studies, which was a deliberate attempt to challenge this top-to-bottom stereotyping, and it also shows the broader consciousness to claim middle-class respectability in the township.¹⁰ Additionally, the Jharkhand movement in the 2000s also provided direct platforms to Adivasi workers by advocating for labour rights and ethnic recognition, which perpetuated their rightful place in industrial society.¹¹ Therefore, the monograph carefully demonstrates a dual process of how structural inequality ensured that negative stereotypes remained influential in shaping Adivasi identity in postcolonial industrialization, despite showing that their agency acted against such prejudice.

In line with this, the third part is based on resistance and political mobilization, where Strümpell illustrates how Adivasis have participated in a variety of resistance to counter their marginalised positions in the region as from wider political mobilization to trade union practices. Further, he offers a detailed investigation of labour conflicts by highlighting the protests and strikes of the 1970s and 1990s, which indicate both changes and continuity in collective actions.¹² Nevertheless, these agitations achieved limited effectiveness by securing fundamental demands like better wages and job security for selected workers but were undermined by ethnic divisions, managerial resistance, and the weakening of trade unions.¹³ This pattern again highlights the marginalization based on class, which eventually cracked the solidarity of labour in the post-independence development of India. In this context, the author used a metaphor to better crystallise this situation, as he suggested that the social nature of the RSP township has evolved into more of a “salad bowl,” where every element retains its uniqueness rather than a “melting pot.”¹⁴ This pattern not only shows a break from the Eurocentric perceptions of labour but also reflects how the residents continued to have connections and interactions within their ethnic and caste-based community as part of their narrow social lens.

Then, the last part is based on the concept of space. Here, Strümpell has carefully demonstrated how the urban space (township and *basti* [slum]) in the region is structured along class, caste, and ethnic lines, which not only illustrates the material inequalities but also showcases their “life-worlds and social imaginaries.” Likewise, the author also discussed how colonial bureaucracies

9 Ibid., 200.

10 Ibid., 201 and 217.

11 Ibid., 127-130.

12 Ibid., 212 and 275.

13 Ibid., 149-150 and 309.

14 Ibid., 261.

in planning logics were still embedded in postcolonial steel town planning.¹⁵ In line with this, he shows how these spaces were used as a disciplinary mechanism to regulate the agencies of those inhabiting them. Additionally, these forms of trajectory were also contested over time; for instance, Strümpell has observed how disposed villagers settled in unauthorized slums as a form of resistance and negotiation with the authority. This finds similarities with Lefebvre's construction of the "representational space," which suggests how the multifaceted meaning the space takes on in daily social interaction.¹⁶

After that, another fundamental reason for this monograph's contribution to the scholarly discussion lies in its intensive approach to the interdisciplinary methodology. Strümpell's employment of participant observation, coupled with interviews and data collection, provides rich qualitative insights into the lived experiences of the RSP workforce. Meanwhile, this study goes beyond Rourkela's uniqueness to contribute to more general conversations in global labour studies. The study challenged the prevailing Eurocentric discourse, which frequently ignores how indigenous and subalterns navigated the power structures, especially in a postcolonial context. While comparing the challenges of indigenous people in Africa¹⁷ and Latin America,¹⁸ the study adds to the comparative discussion on extractive economies, displacement as a showcase that the pattern of Rourkela was not a solely isolated scenario.

Finally, only one major issue that remains insufficiently answered in this, otherwise rich ethnography, is the unresolved tension between Adivasis' agency and structural constraint. As throughout this book, the author brilliantly shows how Adivasis were the backward other of industrial modernity, who contested these structures through union politics, educational strategies, and everyday practices of resistance. However, the analysis never fully explains why these acts of resistance failed to produce any significant collective reordering of power, especially considering the moments when Adivasis achieved upward mobility and numerical majorities in certain strata of the society. Nevertheless, the study offers an inclusive advocacy which incorporates the indigenous community, especially, illustrating that when freedom arrived in India in 1947, the concept of that freedom still differed for decades to come. In this way, the book serves as a gentle reminder to those working with steel towns or those interested in the study of labour, Adivasis, subaltern etc., of the significance of consistently exploring the history of industrial growth from the perspective of the under-represented and marginalized in the archives and the subalterns

15 Ibid., 20-21.

16 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*. trans. by Donald Nicholson Smith (Blackwell, 1984), 38-39.

17 Strümpell, *Steel Town*, 6 and 333.

18 Ibid., 248 and 345.

in the societal paradigm — thus, this book has achieved that objective as the author wishes to do and will be invaluable for a range of scholars from diverse discipline.