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Einladung zum Vortrag

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Remembering "Tribal" India

British Accounts of Jharkhand

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The colonial classification of Indian communities according to "shades of wildness" responding to a "politics of time", which placed the contemporary primitives of the time at the lowest rank in the hierarchy of human advance towards modernity, has been the subject of a lively debate for over a decade. Highlighting the multiple and contradictory strands within the colonial discourse, this paper seeks to demonstrate the complexities within the colonial writings and portrayals of indigenous communities. Colonial prejudices undoubtedly informed the approach of these writers, yet as travel literature of the time indicates, there was constant engagement with the ground reality. This is specifically evident in a particular genre of travel writings – the private accounts and recollections and semi-official writings of military and civil British officers, the "scholar-administrators" in nineteenth-century Chotanagpur and Santal Parganas in eastern-central India, then a part of the Bengal Presidency and now located in the Indian state of Jharkhand. These districts were the homeland of many diverse "tribal" or adivasi people of India: the Santal, the Munda, the Oraon, the Ho, the Paharia, the Birhor, the Gond, the Bhuiya, the Bhumij among others. All of whom were portrayed by the British as "primitives" and came to be categorised as particular "tribes" in the course of the nineteenth century. These colonial writers analysed the landscape and ethnology, constructed the history and attempted to frame a system of governance for the region in the context of a broader narrative of "civilization" versus "primitivity". Their reminiscences and memoirs added to, corroborated or controverted the official debates on the issues relating to "tribes" in India and thus informed the mental, emotional and cultural background which set the context of the public debates, while simultaneously establishing a content-oriented dialogue with the general public as well as with policy-makers.