The six essays and field notes (some of which have previ-
ously been published) are not linked by any overarching
theme. This is already evident from the preface in which Pati
traces no common thread. However, what runs through this
work is the author’s sustained interest in exploring different
facets of the social history of Orissa and the tribal world, so
as to write a ‘history from below’. The opening essay exam-
nines lirthuto marginalized aspects of the health and medi-
cine of indigenous tribes and demonstrates that colonial
health practices and belief systems met with an oscillation
between acceptance and opposition. Even the Oriya middle
classes, which were deeply influenced by Western scientific
discourse, opted for a system based on compromise between
their own indigenous methods and those introduced from the
West. Thus, colonial influence on health practice can be
assessed in terms of close, constant interaction and affinity
between the tribal, non-tribal, and Western systems.

The influence of the colonial period had far-reaching ram-
fications, from the alteration of the agrarian structure to the
very crystallization of an Oriya identity by means of public
debates. In fact, as the author argues, any attempt to con-
struct Oriya history begins after its conquest: the story of Oris-
a typically reads as that of the successive Hindu, Muslim,
Maratha, and British conquests. The British did not want to
upset the apple cart in terms of social structure, and there-
fore continued to enforce upper-caste class domination.
Hence, in this volume, the question of exploitation and dom-
ination is investigated, particularly in relation to British nine-
teenth-century colonialism.

One of the most fascinating essays, ‘The Murder of Bana-
mali’, returns to themes that invariably crop up in all the
eEssays: the nexus between feudal and colonial agrarian sys-
tems, the social and cultural practices adopted by the people,
peasant protests, the question of popular memory, and so on.
Employing typical ‘people’s history’ methods, Pati’s in-depth
micro-level investigation takes us into the world of Balanga,
a district in Orissa imaginatively employing court testimonies
given in relation to the gruesome murder of an exploitative
tyrant Banamali. It reveals Banamali’s iron grip, and how this
naib (estate manager) extended his ruthless control over the
entire rural society through his entrenchment in practically
all the village activities and his abuse of caste and class privi-
leges. Interestingly, the testimonies only gradually shift focus
from the hitherto much-maligned absentee Bengal landlord
in the coastal area of Orissa, this would be the Bengal land-
lord – the real exploiter was a ‘local’. The murder itself is per-
petuated in popular memory as it transgressed all codes of
peasant protest: the enduring images are of the murderers
hacking Banamali into pieces, garlanding themselves with his
intestines, and thus celebrating an end to their exploitation.
Though the perpetrators were all oppressed by Banamali, the
naib being a universally hated figure, the author’s etiological
perception of the murder as an act of peasant protest appears
problematic. Sometimes, testimonies tell us more about the
act than the act itself and maybe more can be understood of
the dynamics of a time through a more rigorous reading of
the sources. The fate of Banamali is echoed in the story of
the feudal lord Mangaraj.

Literary Cultures in History

With the volume Literary Cultures in History (edited by Sheldon Pollock), the study of Indian literature and South Asian culture
and history takes a leap forward. The book is the result of over a decade’s collaboration between scholars, most of whom are
based at the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago. The basis of this leap forward
over previous works in this field is the book’s pervasive critical reflection on the conceptualizations underlying any history
of Indian literature, and the profound consequences of any theoretical preference for specific conceptualizations. This reflection is
best indicated in the form of questions: (1) What is literature? (2) What is India or what is South Asia? Or, asked in a more general
way: What is the (linguistic) community defined by a literature? From a different perspective this further implies: Which language
does an author, or a community, choose for the purpose of literature? (3) What is history?

In earlier works on the history of Indian literature, these
questions have either been perfunctorily dealt with, or they
were not even asked. In his History of Indian Literature, for
instance, S.K. Das simply states that literature comprises ‘all
major texts’ in part ‘fairy tales and tales of adventure; songs of
various types and nursery rhymes’ – in short, ‘all memo-
rable utterances’ (cited after Pollock, p. 7). In the Literary Cul-
tures in History project the literary is seen as ‘a functional
rather than an ontological category’, hence it refers to what
people do with a text rather than something a text truly and
everlastingly is (Pollock, p. 9). However, what people do with
text varies according to the historical context. Hence, the
focus came to be on the history of ‘indigenous’ or ‘emic’
definitions and views of literature. Delineating a communi-
ty or area whose literature and language one wants to study
poses specific problems: ‘Boundaries of languages, cultures,
societies, and politics that were created after the fact and in
some cases very recently – boundaries that literature and lin-
guistic processes in large part helped to create – have been
taken as the condition of emergence and understanding of
these processes themselves’ (p. 12). It became clear to the
contributors that in South Asia ‘[b]orders of place and bor-
ders of language were as mobile as they were elsewhere, until
literature began its work of purification’ (p. 17). The arrange-
ment of the volume in five parts illustrates the pragmatic side of the response to this problem of delineation.

Part one, Globalizing Literary Cultures, consists of three chapters respectively on Sanskrit (Sheldon Pollock), Persian
(Muzaffar Alam), and English-Indian literature (Vinay Dhar-
wardhan). Part two, Literature in SouthernLocales, consists of four chapters on Tamil (Norman Cutler), Kannada (D.R. Nagaraj),
Telugu (Velcheru Narayana Rao), and Malayalam literary culture
(Rich Freeman).

Part three, The Centrality of Borders, consists of three chapters on the two histories (pre-colonial and colonial) of
literary culture in Bengal (Sadipata Kaviraj), and on Gojari
(Shintaru Yasuhara) and Sindhi (Ali S. Sattar) literary cultures.

Part four, Buddhist Cultures and South Asian Literatures,
consists of three chapters on ‘What is literature in Pali?’ (Steven Collins), on Sinhala literary culture (Charles

Situating Social History Orissa

Orissa as a state remains on the periphery of popular discourse, though catastrophes, cyclones, and famines
ensure that the region receives intermittent media coverage. While some regions like Bengal and Maharashtra
have occupied centre stage in writings on the social history of South Asia, regions like Orissa remain in
obscurity. Situating Social History Orissa (1800–1997) is a much-needed collection of essays that may help to
change this. Drawing upon a variety of sources, ranging from archival records to tribal folklore and songs,
literary works, popular memory, and interviews, Biswamoy Pati covers themes as diverse as the social history of
medicines, the creation of an Oriya identity, and peasant movements in Orissa, questioning the whole
process of colonial and post-colonial under-development through Kalahandi, a tract that ‘has virtually emerged
as a metaphor for famine’ (p. 19).