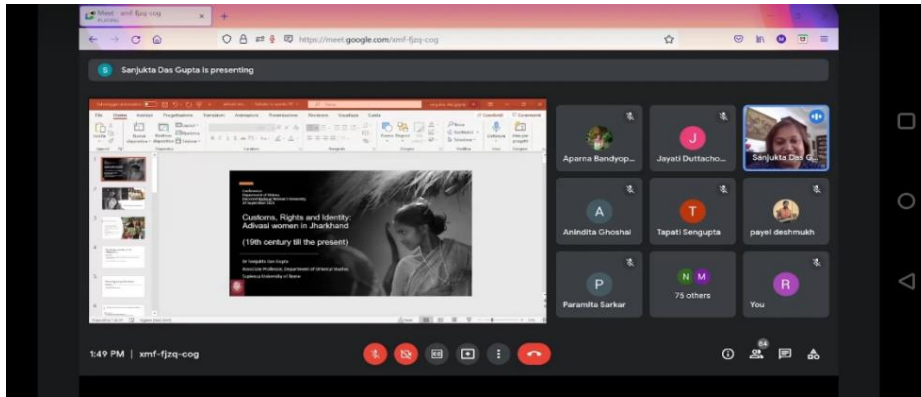


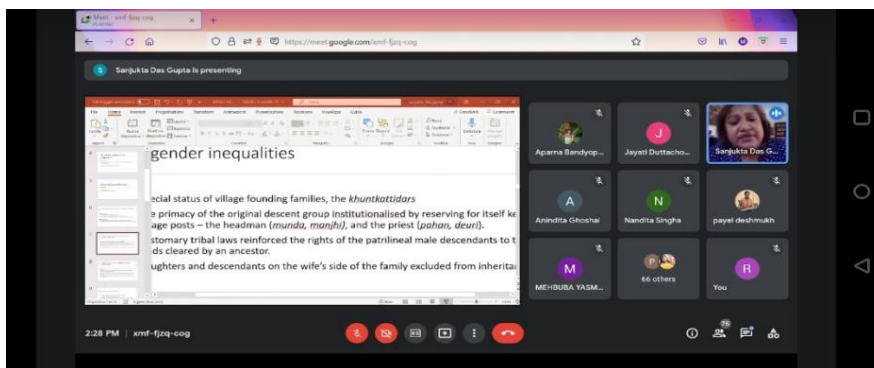
A special lecture for the students of the Department of History, DHWU was organized on “*Customs, Rights, and Identity: Adivasi Women in Jharkhand*”, delivered by Dr. Sanjukta Das Gupta, Associate Professor of Indian History, Dipartimento Istituto Italiano di Studi Orientali, Sapienza University of Rome, Italy, which was held on 24 September 2021.



This lecture titled “*Customs, Rights, and Identity: Adivasi Women in Jharkhand*”, delivered by Dr. Sanjukta Das Gupta, Associate Professor of Indian History, Dipartimento Istituto Italiano di Studi Orientali, Sapienza University of Rome, Italy, was held on 24 September 2021. She tried to trace the trajectory of the changing lives of Adivasi women of eastern and central India, i.e., the erstwhile Chotanagpur Division and the Santal Parganas of the Bengal Presidency under colonial times, which is today incorporated largely within the state of Jharkhand. She argues that in India, Adivasi women are among some of the most deprived people living on the margins, much of their vulnerability arising from unequal access to resources, particularly their right to inherit paternal property, and rooted in their socio-economic norms. Colonial rule witnessed the increasing marginalization of tribal women with the weakening of the communal indigenous organizations which left them exposed to exploitation of the market forces. It also enabled the empowerment of a section of Adivasi women who asserted their right to inherit ancestral property. In contrast, the politics of indigeneity in contemporary India have imposed restrictions on Adivasi women’s bid to claim land rights. The Adivasi pattern of land inheritance in Jharkhand, particularly among the larger land-owning groups, as depicted in the studies of the colonial administrators’ ethnographers, and anthropologists of the 19th and 20th centuries, was discriminatory against women in various ways. Her observation comes as Adivasi communities were deeply attached to their village, membership to which conferred upon them a distinct social and cultural identity. Survival in hostile surroundings requires security, economic sustainability, social cohesion, and cooperation. The village ensured all of

these requirements, and very importantly, by housing the ancestral spirits, it conferred upon its residents a sense of continuity and belonging across generations. Thus, to the Hos, the Mundas, the Santals, and the Oraons, the village did not merely signify a geographical space that they occupied. It was a religiously defined boundary, a cultural space, blessed both by village spirits and by ancestors and it determined the nature of their relationships both within and outside their community.

According to Dr. Dasgupta, Women's subalternity in Adivasi society is related particularly to taboos on participation in the ritual life of the people. The ritual domain, both familial and collective, was severely restricted for women. Among Santals, a significant family-centered ritual was ancestor worship in the sacred closet or the guitar within the dwelling place. Women had only limited entry to this sacred place. These traditions persisted even today, despite the many changes that the village society had undergone. Dr. Dasgupta described that new brides similarly had to undergo numerous rituals before being formally admitted to the family. Among the Hos, for instance, the bride's formal admittance to the clan group, or kill, required participation in certain ceremonial gatherings and tribal feasts. As long as she was not formally admitted to the killing, she had certain disabilities in the family, the clan, and the village. She would not be allowed to enter into the family's sacred enclosure, the adding, the abode of the sacred spirits, the Oa Bongas. Nor could she perform the traditionally prescribed daily rites, otherwise it was feared that the family spirits would become enraged harm the members concerned. During the time of the Maghe and Baha festivals when the whole village took part in the ceremonial feasting, the bride could be formally admitted to the clan through the ceremonial worship of the village deity, Dessauli, and Sing Bonga (the Supreme Spirit) by the village priest or through worship done by the family itself. Only then would she be allowed to enter the family adding. Another striking discrimination against women was in respect of the practice of erecting stone slabs or sasandiri over burial places.



Dr. Dasgupta argues that the issue of women's land rights as a form of empowerment is significant today and is likely to become more so in the future. India's agrarian transition has had serious gendered inequalities embedded within the process arising particularly from unequal land distribution. Land rights could indeed make a notable difference to women's bargaining power within the home and community and enable them to better negotiate the wage labor market and she notes that empowerment has emerged wherever rural women have gained access to land. Women's land rights deserve policy attention even if women themselves do not identify this as a priority. It is critically important to recognize that the deprived may have incomplete information about the options available to them. Yet, the dangers of intervention are revealed in Madhu Kishwar's own experience when as the editor of *Manushi* she filed a petition in the Supreme Court in 1981 on behalf of a Ho woman Maki Bui, and her daughter, Sonamuni, who lived in Lonjo village in Singhbhum District whereby they challenged the denial of equal inheritance rights to women of the Ho tribe. The upshot of this move was the constant harassment of Maki Bui from her male agnates and the non-availability of assistance on the part of the local administration. Finally, she was forced to move from Lonjo village and a few years later died in mysterious circumstances. This tragic tale outlines the dangers of intervention from outside without adequate support within the community. Thus, she thinks, perhaps the need of the day is to develop a new social consensus in favour of Adivasi women's land rights within the community and family.

