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The Dark Side of Indigeneity?: Indigenous People, Rights and Development in India

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Abstract

In the last two decades transnational concerns over indigenous people, indigenous rights and indigenous development has reignited a history of heated debate shrouding indigeneity. This article analyses these debates in the context of the anthropology and historiography of indigeneity in India. From the production of 'tribes of mind' to the policies that have encouraged people to identify themselves as 'Scheduled Tribes', or 'adivasis', the article reviews the context that gave rise to the tensions between claims for protection and assimilation of India's indigenous peoples. Today these debates are shown to persist through the arguments of those that seek to build a support base from an adivasi constituency and are most acute with on the one hand, the work of the Marxists and indigenous activists, and on the other hand, the Hindu right-wing. Inviting serious scholarly examination of the unintended effects of well meaning indigenous protection and development measures, the article seeks to move the debate beyond both the arguments that consider the concept of indigenous people anthropologically and historically problematic and those that consider indigeneity a useful political tool. In so doing, the article warns against a 'dark side of indigeneity' which might reveal how local appropriation and experiences of global discourses can maintain a class system that further marginalises the poorest.

To many indigenous rights activists globally, 29 June 2006 was a day for some celebration as the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council adopted the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and recommended its adoption by the UN General Assembly.[1] Part of a wider move to provide a universal system of protecting indigenous rights that gained global prominence since the 1980s, the Declaration, while not binding, is an internationally sanctioned legal instrument that aims to advance the codification of indigenous rights in national constitutions and legal systems. The Declaration was preceded by the formation of the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations (WGIP) in 1982, a Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in 2000, and the 2001 appointment of a UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights and Fundamental Freedoms of Indigenous People. The first international legal mechanism for protection

of indigenous peoples came in 1989 in the form of the International Labour Organisation Convention 169. More generally a global interest in the protection of indigenous rights has been promoted by the UN International Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples (1995 and 2004). The overall argument is that indigenous people across the world have been marginalised for centuries. Various settler populations have stolen their lands and colonised them. Their numbers are in decline, their cultures are threatened, and they live in states that protect the values of the non-indigenous over the indigenous. Indigenous people thus need special protection under international human rights law.

The global spotlight on indigenous issues has gone hand in hand with an increasing interest in environmentalism and people-centred non-governmental organisations (NGOs). As Beth Conklin and Laura Graham point out, a host of NGOs such as the Environmental Defence Fund, the Forest People's Movement, Survival International, Cultural Survival and Rainforest Action Network, have joined forces with indigenous communities defending native rights to land and resources. Conklin and Graham also argue that media reporting on global warming, declining bio-diversity, and deforestation brought, for example, the plight of local Amazon Indians and their conflict over natural resources to the attention of a broader international audience. Indigenous people have been increasingly seen as natural partners to produce a global eco-community because of – not in spite of – their cultural difference. The argument is that the West has much to learn from them – including indigenous notions of alternative medicine, spirituality, shamanism – which are all sold in various forms in Western markets. The general perception is that poor, marginalised, colonised, exploited, indigenous populations must be protected, their cultures must be preserved, and their rights must be enshrined in UN Human Rights legislation.

These are controversial moves in the name of protection of indigenous rights and globally they have produced renewed and heated debates amongst historians and anthropologists. This article explores some of these debates in the context of indigeneity in India, a country which some say has the second largest indigenous population in the world.[2] The official position of the Indian State is that there are no indigenous people in India since its complex migration patterns mean that, unlike some countries such as Australia or Canada, it is impossible to establish who the original settlers in a particular region are. However, from 1985 Indian delegates began to participate in the UNWGIP meetings. These delegates sought to claim indigenous status for peoples previously known as tribals – mainly those who are recognised by the government as Scheduled Tribes (ST). In 1987 the delegates represented a newly founded Indian Council of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples (ICITP). Its leading members were from what is now the state of Jharkhand and it was affiliated to the World Council of Indigenous Peoples. They claimed that India's Scheduled Tribe

(ST) populations qualified for the new transnational term 'indigenous peoples' as they are culturally different from mainstream Indian society and especially because they had been internally colonised and dominated by a systems of values and institutions maintained by the ruling groups of the country. They argued the need to secure 'the collective right of self-determination' in order to restore 'land and forest rights' to India's indigenous people[3] – something that they felt might be possible through negotiation via internationally approved rights and safe-guards.

As in many other countries, in India debates central to indigeneity, indigenous rights and indigenous development have a longer history than these recent transnational concerns. Colonial and postcolonial history resulted in a series of positive discrimination policies and special administrative and territorial concessions for India's constitutionally recognised ST populations, who today number over 84 million, making up 8.2% of India's total population – until recently the category more frequently used for indigenous people was either, the official ST, tribe, *adivasis* or sometimes aboriginal. It is to these debates, that I now turn.

'Tribes of Mind' and the Production of Adivasis

The contested issue of tribal status in India goes at least as far back as the period of colonial anthropological constructions of the country's aboriginals as 'primitive tribes'. In his fine essay on colonial anthropology in the 'laboratory of mankind', Chris Pinney shows how the need to order Indian society was at the heart of nineteenth century anthropology in India.[4] At first sight a confusing kaleidoscope, India presented the administrator and anthropologist with the challenge of determining a meaningful ordering of a hierarchical society in which caste embodied racial and cultural difference. Race and racial ideology, as Crispin Bates describes, were the norms of a broader political order at the time and affected the categorisation and classification of India's primitive tribes.[5] For one of India's most influential administrator's, H. H. Risley, who from 1890 conducted the ethnographic survey of Bengal for 20 years, and who directed the 1901 Census, caste status was inscribed on the permanent physical exteriors of Indian bodies. In particular, Risley saw the 'nasal index' as a guide to the status of its owner. Those with the finest noses (and lightest complexions closest to Europeans) were descendants of the Aryan invader upper castes such as Brahmans, Rajputs and Sikhs, and those with snub noses (and dark complexions approaching the African blacks) were the aboriginal primitive tribes, the forest and hill dwellers, occupying the oldest and lowest strata in India. Spacemaking, as shown by Sivaramakrishnan, was an important dimension of this colonial statemaking, producing 'zones of anomaly' where certain areas were to have a distinctive regime of administration because they were, for instance, seen as 'impenetrable hilly jungle', and with a cultural geography of

'extraordinarily primitive' people different from the river valleys and the plains.[6] Not only were India's tribes the lowest on this scale of civilisation but, as Ajay Skaria argues, a distinctive politics of gender and anachronistic thought made them the living remnants of Europe's evolutionary past.[7] While some of India's castes were made effeminate, crucial to the masculine project of colonial domination, India's tribes as the childlike antecedents of Britain's own masculinity, were in Skaria's words, treated like 'public school boys' who could not quite grow up but who nevertheless had to be protected. This gendered and most importantly racial anthropology was, as argued by Sumit Guha, conveniently appropriated by some Indian elites seeking to both justify local hierarchy and assert parity with upper class Europeans.[8] Others, such as Vinita Damodaran, would like to pursue more clearly the agency of Indians in colonial constructions of the tribe than Guha allows.[9] Nevertheless, one conclusion is that members of the Indian elite and colonial administrator-anthropologists together created a stereotype of the forest folk as living in a timeless harmony with nature, disturbed only in recent times by the market and the state – an image that has a powerful effect on society and politics in India today. In this argument, twentieth-century isolation of 'remote jungle tribes' is not some survival of a remote epoch but a product of the 'tribes of mind' of both colonial rulers and Indian elites.

Nineteenth-century India, did indeed, in many ways see the 'invention of the primitive', to borrow Adam Kuper's phrase.[10] However, colonial policies of dominance and subordination through expansion of state control over land and forests and revenue collection also structurally united a wide variety of communities living in India's forests and hills that had previously remained relatively free from such influence. This does not mean that there were isolated self-contained tribes, but colonial expansion into these areas was enabled and accompanied by a new influx of outside and exploitative state officials, moneylenders/traders and landlords to form the trinity of '*sarkar*, *sahukar* and *zamindar*'. The reaction of these dominated and subordinated communities was multivarious. When they could not hide or flee from officialdom, one particular reaction was the mobilisation of 'peasant consciousness' through a religiously inspired purifying struggle espousing upper caste norms. This is beautifully shown in David Hardiman's 'The Coming of the Devi' in Western India in the 1920s, where several thousand people followed the commands of a new goddess.[11] Salabai, the Devi goddess, spoke through mediums, and asked people to give up liquor, toddy, fish and meat, and bathe twice a day. Hardiman importantly points out that such movements should not be equated with M. N. Srinivas's description of *sanskritisation*[12] because a challenge to the upper castes was also a necessary feature of them. The Devi stressed that people should have nothing to do with exploitative upper castes, in particular the Parsis who had monopolised the liquor distilling market. In other areas, most notably in the Chotanagpur region

of Eastern India (now Jharkhand state), there were a series of more violent rebellions, which mark what Ranajit Guha in a bench mark work of subaltern studies has called 'Elementary Aspects of a Peasant Insurgency'.[13] Some such insurgencies were also concerned with a reformist purificatory project. For instance in Kumar Suresh Singh's account of Birsa Munda and his movement we learn that the famous revolutionary hero of Jharkhand, most often depicted with a bow and arrow, also tried to free Munda society of vices and practices such as drinking, spirit worship and witchcraft.[14] However, it is likely that other insurgencies invoked the positive conceptions of wildness that Ajay Skaria outlines in his fascinatingly narrated account of Western India.[15] Here in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, wildness was associated with pleasure, for example, the freedom to hunt or migrate or to drink. Wildness stood for not only a way of life with a difference, but also a different and desired ideal of both pleasure and power which gave marginalised 'tribes' a certain edge in power politics. Expansion of state control in many forested and hilly tracts created a shared experience of domination and subordination to which there were multiple reactions. But this shared experience perhaps united a wide range of people and is one reason Skaria says that central to the whole notion of being *adivasi* has been a perception of subalternity: the word *adivasi* perhaps points to both subalternity and a refusal to accept that subalternity.[16]

Another important factor that served to produce a distinct category of people as *adivasi* or tribal, especially in the Chotanagpur Plateau, was the reaction of the colonial administration to the nineteenth-century resistance movements. The government made some effort to provide a range of protectionary measures for the people based on a codification of customary rights over land. For instance, following the 1830s Kol rebellion, the Wilkinson Rule made provision for self-rule in present Singhbhum. Here, tribal village councils were given authority to function on their own. After the 1855–56 Santhal Insurrection, the Santhal Pargana Regulation Act made provisions for the non-transferability of land in Santhal Parganas. Similarly the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny and the 1859–65 Sardar Movement led to the protectionary measures of the 1869 Chotanagpur Land Tenures Act. This Act recognised *bhuinhari* tenures (special common ownership rights over lands of the original settlers in Oraon areas) and set up a system to demarcate such lands in a Bhuinhari Survey. This was followed by the 1908 Chotanagpur Tenancy Act which prohibited transfers of land to non-tribals, and ensured community ownership and management of the rights of forest communities over *khuntkatti* areas (where descendants of original settlers held common ownership over certain lands in Munda areas). The Birsa Rebellion of the 1890s also preceded the 1908 Act. Thus, as Vinita Damodaran argues in her critique of Sumit Guha's work, colonial rulers were not just conjuring up tribes as 'isolated', 'difficult' and 'different' but a set of humanitarian concerns to protect people in the area were also at play.[17] Damodaran's argument is

in line with a broader project that seeks to break away from an essentialist Saidian orientalist prejudice to argue for a variety of imperial agents, interests and aims which were often sympathetic to local populations.[18] The point is that along with *adivasi* rebellion, and colonial imagery of isolated tribes, more humanitarian colonial measures also encouraged the institutionalisation of tribal autonomy. This relationship between *adivasi* rebellion and the production of tribal autonomy through colonial state policy was not just confined to the Chotanagpur Plateau but also played out in other forested and hilly areas of India. Nandini Sundar, for example, provides a rich account of the way in which the material struggles and ritual events of popular rebellions in Bastar, Central India, served a dual purpose. The rebellions were not only forms of resistance to colonial policies but also the means through which the British (and later the Indian government) reframed the politics of tradition and custom.[19]

An important role in creating *adivasi* autonomy was played by Christian missionaries in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – although today India's indigenous activists, in their quest to institutionalise an *adivasi* religion, often ignore this history. In his much-quoted introduction, David Hardiman speculates that the term *adivasi* appears to have originated in the Chotanagpur region of Bihar in the 1930s.[20] Indeed, it was the Christian missionaries who played a large role in the production of this term. Since the first missionaries arrived in 1845 in Jharkhand's current capital, Ranchi, the German Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church, Anglicans, Roman Catholics and in particular Jesuit missionaries have played an important role in what Susanne Devalle calls a 'reformist ethnicist' project.[21] Here, efforts were made to generate a greater social consciousness and organise the peasantry against exploitative economic relations along ethnic lines. An important means for this project was the introduction of Western education, and with it a new system of values, to the population. Thus while Jesuit Fathers such as Hoffman[22] were busy helping to draft special laws for the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act that would protect the areas peasants, a new class of *adivasi* elite was also developing. Educated, urban based, and usually Christian, this new elite contributed to the emergence of the so-called 'Jharkhand'. They met the Simon Commission in 1928 to put forward what was probably the first demand for a separate *adivasi* state, and thus also led to the universal promotion of the *adivasi* category.

The educated Christian tribal youth that formed the emerging *adivasi* elite in Chotanagpur organised themselves in a range of societies. Their aim was to demand better educational facilities, economic avenues and job opportunities for tribals, and more generally remove 'backwardness' in the region – efforts to socially, economically and politically advance the area. In 1910, Anglican missionaries formed the Dacca Students Union (later renamed the Chotanagpur Improvement Society) while in the 1920s the Catholics formed the Chotanagpur Catholic Sabha which won two seats

in the first Indian provincial assembly elections in 1937.[23] In 1938 all these Christian Sabhas and non Christian tribal groups merged to form the Chotanagpur Adivasi Mahasabha (which in the 1950s formed a political wing, the Jharkhand Party). This was a significant move which aimed to unite *adivasis* by fighting an outsider rule, or a *diku raj*, in order to improve the socio-economic and political conditions of *adivasis* and further popularised the struggle of *adivasis* in Chotanagpur to a wider all India audience.

The late 1930s were of course a time of heightening nationalist struggle in India. However, the Indian Nationalist Movement had little support from the Chotanagpur Adivasi Mahasabha. The Congress party had swept the 1937 polls and the Adivasi Mahasabha felt that Congress did not represent the interests of the *adivasis*. Interesting short term alliances were formed, for instance between the Adivasi Mahasabha and the Muslim League in the 1940s who wanted to secure a corridor to connect East and West Pakistan via the tribal areas of south Bihar.[24] In 1939, the Oxford educated, hockey blues player, Munda Jaipal Singh, became the Chairman of the Adivasi Mahasabha, backed the British in the war and recruited *adivasis* for the army. Uninvolved in the Indian Nationalist Movement, the Mahasabha launched a struggle not against the British raj, but against the *diku raj*.

Protection versus Assimilation

It is against this backdrop that we have to consider the production of one of the earliest detailed critiques of the concept of the tribe in India. In 1943, four years before Indian independence, G. S. Ghurye, a nationalist and a promoter of assimilation policies, wrote a book whose aim was to show that India's 'so-called aboriginals', who have been designated as STs and practising animism, were best described as backward Hindus.[25] In his book, Ghurye gives evidence of different tribes to show how the distinction between animism and Hinduism is very blurred, how the so-called aboriginals had always embraced Hinduism, had Hinduised sections, had intimate connections with Hindus for a long time and often saw themselves as Hindus. As a puritan and a reformer, Ghurye concluded that the proper description of these people must refer to their place in or near Hindu society and not their supposed autochthonism.[26] This was an argument in line with Gandhian activists and other nationalists who at the time were committed to incorporating tribals into the 'mainstream' of Indian society, and who felt that the colonial policy of divide and rule, nowhere evidenced better than in Chotanagpur, had played a significant role in isolating India's tribes.

In stark contrast to Ghurye, others sought to protect India's tribes from aggressive and insensitive outsiders. The most prominent voice in this line of thinking was Verrier Elwin, a man some accuse of romanticising tribal society and seeking an anti-modern agenda.[27] A self proclaimed

anthropologist, who initially went to India from Britain as a missionary but resigned from the Church after living for some years with the Gonds in Central India (and getting married to an *adivasi* wife), Elwin took the utilitarian view of anthropology that it must lead to administrative reform and improve the living conditions of the people. Unlike his most vehement critic, the armchair sociologist G. S. Ghurye who charged Elwin with wanting to put the Baiga in a 'zoo', Elwin's writings were based on living with and loving India's tribal populations.[28] In his sensitive and beautifully written biography, Ramchandra Guha, shows us the many faces of Verrier Elwin.[29] Elwin was deeply involved in the lives of the tribals he lived with and he influenced the policies of the new state towards its tribals. He had a double-edged relationship with Gandhi who he both admired but whose puritanism he could not quite agree with. And his moves to protect tribals, not in a zoo as Ghurye had charged, but to deal with the onslaught of modernity at their own pace had a significant effect on Nehruvian tribal protection policies.

The Constituent Assembly Debates which began in 1946 saw supporters for modernisation as assimilation passionately fighting it out with those who demanded protection for India's tribals. Replicating some of the provisions of the Colonial Government Acts, the Constitution provided special protection for what it called India's Backward Classes (BCs), its Scheduled Castes (SCs) and STs (about 15 and 7.5 per cent of the population, respectively). The BCs were to have privileges of reservation of fixed quota of vacancies and promotions in government employment, reserved seats in Parliament and the state assemblies, reserved places in state-run educational institutions with scholarships for its students, and preferential loans for Backward Classes in order to start businesses. In 1970 the Mandal Commission reviewed the quota system and recommended that it be extended to other lower castes as well, classified as Other Backward Castes (OBCs). These recommendations were controversially put into place in 1990 under V. P. Singh's populist government, leading to 49.5% of all jobs in central government services and public undertakings being reserved for SCs, STs and OBCs.

Whilst offering them similar privileges, the attitude towards the SCs and STs employed by the makers of India's Constitution, were nonetheless quite different. SC economic deprivation was seen to be linked to their low ritual status and an erasure of difference was the long term goal for them. ST's, however, were both exoticised and patronised and seen as requiring longer term protection and development. Thus, besides, affirmative action policies, tribal areas (called 'Scheduled Areas') further benefited from being treated as separate administrative categories in order to protect the rights of STs over their land, forests and water. The Constitution's Fifth Schedule and Sixth Schedule, carried over the principles of the Scheduled Districts Act of 1874 which excluded these 'Scheduled Areas' from the operation of ordinary laws in British India. Since its

formation, however, like many of the special tenancy acts in *adivasi* areas, the Fifth Schedule has been under constant threat of amendment in order to enable transfers of tribal lands to non-tribals and corporate bodies. Much of India's mineral resources are located in protected 'Scheduled Areas', in Jharkhand, Orissa and Chhatisgarh, and in recent years the alliances of neo-liberal state policies and multinational corporate interests have sought to harvest these riches to fulfil the dream of 'India Shining' (the developmental slogan of the BJP-led government of 2000–04). The latest threat to the Scheduled Areas has been the formation of Special Economic Zones (SEZ) which gives special legal rights to allow private companies to buy up land. These threats have given rise to a wide range of NGOs alongside activists forming alliances with those whose lands are targeted for acquisition. As I write the guns in Nandigram, in West Bengal, are probably still smoking in the aftermath of violent protests against attempts to establish an SEZ in their locality, and protestors are blocking roads on Orissa's main North-South Highway after last year's massacre of their companions by police at another projected SEZ site in Kalinganagar.

Fighting for Adivasis

The debate between protection and assimilation has incessantly marked the development of discussions around indigeneity in India in which complex political agendas, often but not always to secure an *adivasi* constituency, have been central. On the one hand there are those varied groups who have sought to reassert a separate tribal identity and/or sought to reclaim rights to resources around a shared subaltern experience of dispossession and resistance – for example the neo-Marxist or the indigenous rights activists. And on the other hand there are those who have tried to assimilate *adivasis* in a broader project of nationalism, most notably of the extreme right wing Hindu militant variety, where *adivasis* are merely backward people to be brought into the fold of mainstream Hindu society. Here the legitimate indigenous Indians are the Hindus (and not of course the Christians and Muslims).

The issue of the relationship between *adivasis* and the Hindu right was brought to the centre of public attention in India after the recent bloody Gujarat violence in Western India. In 2002, about two thousand Muslims were killed, several thousands displaced after their homes were destroyed and many women raped and mutilated, by a family of organisations known collectively as the Sangh Parivar. The Sangh Parivar seek to replace India's version of constitutional secularism with the ideology of Hindutva (Hindu domination of Bharat India and the subordination of Muslims, Christians and other minorities[30]). Whereas support for the Hindu right was previously thought to emanate from middle class Indians, in the Gujarat violence, *adivasis* actively participated in attacks against Muslims. Research into how *adivasis* are being recruited to the Sangh

Parivar, that moves beyond the classic arguments of attributing *adivasi* participation to false consciousness or because of their poverty, is slowly emerging. Some, such as Peggy Froerer, following Paul Brass, outline the deployment of instrumentalist strategies in Chhatisgarh, Central India, whereby powerful outsiders, proponents of the Sangh Parivar use their positions to communalise social identities and relations by actively promoting the idea of the 'threatening Christian Other'.[31] However, it is also clear that in other regions the success of the Sangh Parivar is based on the provision of health and education in areas where such facilities are poor. Nandini Sundar has analysed the pedagogy of such schools in *adivasi* dominated areas of Southern Chhatisgarh.[32] Education also plays an important role in the spread of the Hindu right in other, perhaps more subtle, ways. For instance, Amita Baviskar shows how Hinduisation coincides with the rise of a new generation of educated *adivasi* youth.[33] In contrast to their parents, these youth are fluent in Hindi, dress in shirts and trousers (instead of loincloths), hang out in the market towns or bazaars, and are fluent in the bazaaria culture that was previously dominated by a Hindu majority elite. To this new generation of *adivasi* youth, seeking government jobs and entering the bazaaria lifestyle, the Sangh Parivar offers to incorporate *adivasis*, not on the basis of their cultural difference, but on their cultural and religious similarity with a hegemonic Hindu majority in a Hindu nation.

From the late nineties in Eastern India, the threat of Hindu Nationalists gaining the support of the rural poor has meant a reinvigorated campaign amongst *adivasis* indigenous rights activists to stress their cultural autonomy from the Hindu mainstream. In the 1950s, the political wing of the Chotanagpur Adivasi Mahasabha, the Jharkhand Party, demanded a separate state of Jharkhand within the federal union, and developed one of the oldest post-Indian-independence autonomy movements. The Jharkhand Party had become Congress's chief opposition in the State of Bihar after taking the majority of South Bihar seats in the 1952 State Assembly elections. Initially the struggle was professed around the idea that the culturally autonomous *adivasis* of the region should have the right to a separate state. However, as scholars showed, there was a 'myth of the tribe' being produced in Jharkhand.[34] In an important article, Stuart Corbridge, for example, critically deconstructs the ideology of tribal economy and society that presents the tribals of South Bihar as an undifferentiated mass of simple cultivators exploited by non-tribals.[35] Moreover, as Corbridge argues, as early as 1891, the population of the Chotanagpur was only one third Scheduled Tribe. Economic transformation (especially industrialisation) created further immigration which changed the ethnic composition of Jharkhand.

Thus, given that the demographic reality of the region meant that a significant population did not count as tribal, at least according to the census (the 2001 census shows 26.3% of Jharkhand to be ST), the

independence promoters became more inclusive. Non-tribals with a long history of living in Jharkhand, *sadans*, were also incorporated under the broad umbrella of indigenous Jharkhandis. Scholars and activists of Jharkhand came to represent the area as colonised by non-tribal exploitative outsiders, *dikus*. These foreigners were accused of establishing economic, political and cultural hegemony over the region, especially by ruling from Patna (Bihar's capital), and were blamed for degrading its natural environment. The new rhetoric also claimed that Jharkhand was an internal colony of Bihar State: while on the one hand the development machinery of Bihar performed disproportionately poorly in Jharkhand, on the other, Bihar was reaping the benefits of Jharkhand's mineral, land and especially forest resources. The demand for Jharkhand thus evolved into a regional movement enjoying the support of a range of people but with the common consent that the area's identity derived from the exploitation of its population and its distinct cultural heritage.[36] This view formed one basis of the struggle for Jharkhand's independence from Bihar within the Indian federal union – that the region should be restored to those that rightfully owned it and could best manage it – its true 'sons of the soil'.[37]

Alongside the bifurcation of Chhatisgarh from Madhya Pradesh and Uttaranchal (now called Uttarakhand) from Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand finally separated from Bihar in November 2000, less than two years before the Gujarat violence. The separation was led by the Hindu nationalist government, the Bharatya Janata Party (BJP), considered by many as the party of the outsiders, rather than the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM or Jharkhand Liberation Front) that had run the fight for independence since 1972. Granting the region separation from Bihar had been on the BJP agenda since 1988 but its proposition had been that the new state would be called Vananchal[38] and its citizens, *vanavasi* (rather than *adivasi*). Although both mean land of the forests, unlike Jharkhand, Vananchal has Sanskritic Aryan connotations. As Emma Mawdsley argues, neo-traditional discourses of the environment can be actively mobilised by the Sangh Parivar.[39] Jharkhandi indigenous rights activists claimed that renaming would enable the BJP to divorce the region from the JMM and incorporate it into the Hindu fold.

Although the new state was ultimately called Jharkhand, indigenous rights activists were mobilised to prove the historical basis for Jharkhand rather than Vananchal.[40] They led a renewed and reinvigorated campaign focusing on a separate identity of indigenous communities, mobilised around protection of their '*jungle*, *jamin* and *jal*' (forest, land and water). Fearful of Hindu nationalists incorporating *adivasis* into mainstream Hinduism, Jharkhandi activists have been promoting a separate indigenous religion comparable to Christianity, Islam and Hinduism that is sometimes called *Sarna* and other times, *Adi-dharam*. The latter literally means the beginnings of the religious beliefs of the *adivasis* and the former, a sacred grove of trees. Jharkhandi activists argue that central to the concept of

Sarna dharam, is the worship of nature, showing the naturalistic base of Jharkhand's indigenous communities.[41] While the cultural identity of Jharkhand's indigenous populations was thought to emanate from various sources – their 'simplicity, truthfulness, mythical life, simple rituals, equality, freedom, hunting, dance and music'[42] – the forests, ingrained in its name, became one of the most important Jharkhandi nationalist symbol. The forests were argued to be an expression of the spirit of Jharkhand's exploited indigenous communities, inherently in tune and in love with nature.[43] Indigenous people's relationship with the forest was stressed as one of the most important unique dimensions of Jharkhand, not present in the same way in neighbouring Bihar.

The claims to cultural uniqueness advanced by Jharkhand activists were indirectly supported by a wide range of literature growing in the eighties from environmental historians and eco-feminists, writing especially on forest resistance. The best known of this work focused, in particular, on the Chipko Movement. Emerging in the 1970s in what is now Uttarakhand, the Chipko Movement arrested the international imagination because of the captivating imagery that came to be seen as its symbol of resistance – poor tribal peasant women hugging trees. Although, as Haripriya Rangan and others argue, the struggle was probably more concerned with articulating policies and conditions for generating local employment opportunities and fostering regional economic development,[44] Chipko became celebrated as an eco-feminist environmental movement recovering tradition. The women of Chipko were said to be protesting against the development trajectory of the modernising Indian State, which destroyed local ecologies and ways of life, and calling for environmental protection and alternative paths to development.

Vandana Shiva is one of the key public intellectuals who promoted the narration of the Chipko story as evidence of rural Indian women being natures' true custodians.[45] But it was the writings, in particular, of Ramchandra Guha and Madhav Gadgil that sparked off an important set of debates in environmental history.[46] Their overarching argument depicted a Golden Age in the pre-colonial period when traditional indigenous communities were 'natural conservationists' and lived in socially harmonious and environmentally sensitive ways. This was an Age destroyed with the onslaught of colonialism, science and development. Much important work criticises these arguments as somewhat romanticised and producing a 'neotraditional' discourse that is deeply problematic.[47] However, the Golden Age arguments appeal to both the current transnational rhetoric of indigenous people as 'natural conservationists' and to the political project of indigenous rights activists who seek to protect *adivasis* as the last remaining indigenous Indians who still live in harmony with nature. India's most prominent indigenous rights activist, who has a Ph.D. in Linguistics from Chicago, was once Vice Chancellor of Ranchi University, and who now represents the country in the UN forums while living in

Jharkhand's capital Ranchi, heavily promotes this imagery by, amongst other things leading the campaign to revive what he calls the religion of nature worship, Sarna Dharam.

In the rural areas of Jharkhand, however, such ideas still have little hold on the population.[48] There are other competing forces that are seducing the new generations of educated *adivasi* youth involved in bazaaria culture. Rather than supporting the globe-trotting indigenous rights activists, or the Hindu Nationalists as is the case in Western India, this new generation of *adivasi* youth is being increasingly recruited into the Marxist fold in the form of the spread of the Marx-, Mao- and Lenin-inspired Naxalite Insurgency. Seeing *adivasis* as a potential revolutionary force, as harbourers of 'elementary aspects of peasant insurgency', whose class consciousness no doubt needs to be developed, *adivasi* areas are seen by the Naxalites as the ideal bases for a radical politics to create a Maoist belt from Nepal to Andhra Pradesh. Even more so than work on the spread of the Sangh Parivar, there is still very little in-depth research into how and why the Maoist movement is spreading in rural *adivasi* dominated areas of India. The conventional assumption is that given the Naxalite's anti-elite, anti-state approach, their main support base is the poorest rural *adivasis*.[49] However, my own ethnographic work in rural Jharkhand shows that the Maoist movement is actually spreading through educated young men from the wealthiest village families in the rural areas.[50] These include both high caste landlord descendants as well as newer educated ST elite. And moreover, contesting the boundary between the state and the Naxalites, I show that the movement is spreading through greater control over a market of protection controlling the informal economy of state resources, conventionally called the systems of corruption.

Indigeneity: For? Against? Or the Middle Ground?

So the tension between assimilation and protection persists today and is most acute among on the one hand, the work of the Marxists and indigenous activists, and on the other hand, the Hindu right. In the face of these debates, an important body of scholarly work continues to warn against the dangers of constructing an 'autonomous' indigenous community. The Indian debates reflect developments within anthropology more broadly where a range of monumental studies show that the communities described as tribes can not be defined independently of the state systems with which they were associated.[51] Claims to tribal isolation and ancient heritage may be externally defined and enforced as a result of European quests and colonisation.[52] Moreover, the idea of an essential indigenous culture is seen to be problematic because culture is not a static entity but is a constantly changing process. Thus, the very concept of indigeneity relies on obsolete Victorian anthropological notions and on a romantic and false ethnographic vision.[53]

In India, following Ghurye's account, Andre Beteille, one of India's most respected intellectuals, argues against the idea of indigenous people. In an early essay on 'Tribe and Peasantry' he states that the country's tribal populations were like peasants anywhere in India.[54] Taking each of the four criteria that is usually used to differentiate tribes: size, isolation, religion and means of livelihood, Beteille shows that there is no distinction between tribe and peasantry in India. In line with the development of his later work where Beteille controversially shows the problems of positive discrimination or affirmative action policies in India,[55] Beteille returns to the indigenous people debate in an essay for *Current Anthropology* in 1998. Here he shows how the words native and tribe have been replaced by the term indigenous as allegedly more politically correct and with the moral signification of the term reversed to some extent.[56] He reiterates some of his earlier arguments about the complex interaction between tribals and non-tribals, pointing out that in India (as opposed to Australia and the New World) no given population can claim indigeneity because there are no other populations that can reasonably be described as settlers or aliens. In some ways his argument mirrors that of Crispin Bates who proposes that the term adivasi is a colonial invention and that we need to admit that in one sense all Indians are adivasis.[57] But there is also a more serious warning about the potential dangers of the idea of the indigenous in Beteille's writing. Beteille asks,

> Is there now such an essentialist view of indigenous people in which they carry their identity with them wherever they go and whatever they do? Has the crude anthropological association of race and culture acquired a more refined form in the concept of the indigenous people?[58]

He cautions that the growing purchase of the idea of the indigenous provides ideological ammunition to those who would reorder the world according to the claims of blood and soil. This is a line of thought reiterated by Sumit Guha's environmental history of forest communities that impressively goes as far back as 1200.[59] Guha shows that identities and ethnicities in the past were more fluid than has been supposed and that the primitivisation of people, that remains a powerful identity in late twentieth century India, is a recent consequence of the breakdown of the political systems and strategies of differentiation, dominance and exploitation. Guha warns that today's attempts to organise public life around claims to authentic indigeneity and to protect equality as ratio, according to the length of your genealogy, rather than equality of right can only lead to explosive consequences of ethnic conflict. Adam Kuper has more forcefully articulated Beteille and Guha's concerns about the undemocratic and even fascist arguments underpinning this recent appropriation of indigeneity.[60] Kuper argues that in the recent 'return of the native' culture has become a euphemism for race. It might lead to ethnic conflict, and has meant defending positions, for example that descendants of the

original inhabitants of a country should have privileged rights to its resources, which are similar to ones made by extreme right wing parties in Europe.

Such attacks on the concept of indigeneity central to the indigenous people's movements and to the work of many human rights organisations has caused heated controversy from those who feel morally obliged to protect the world's indigenous populations. In *Anthropology Today*, for example, Justin Kenrick and Jerome Lewis wrote back against Kuper. Amongst their arguments, they took issue with juxtaposing indigenous movements with Nazi or apartheid ideology because this polemic ignores the context of extreme discrimination faced by indigenous peoples and their many experiences of dispossession by more powerful groups.[61] What is essentially a peaceful movement should not be made to look aggressive. Moreover, they argued that the concept of indigeneity is not some Victorian notion but has been appropriated by diverse people across the world to draw attention to their marginalisation, dispossession and the positive resilience of their social, economic and religious practices. Thus perhaps we need a relational approach to indigeneity – one that takes seriously how the people concerned experience the term.

A middle ground, proposed by Alan Barnard, is that while anthropologically/historically the concept of indigeneity may be problematic, politically and legally it might be a very useful tool for oppressed people who need special rights and this might mark a move towards equality rather than away from it.[62] The political use of an essentialised notion of indigenous culture is merely a reflection of the strategic invocation of a reductionist rights based language of the law rather than any pre-existing ontological 'culture'.[63] Rather than exposing the paucity of the concept of indigeneity perhaps, as scholars, we should then explore how particular groups position themselves as indigenous through what Tania Li, drawing on Stuart Hall, argues is the cultural and political work of articulation.[64] For, indigenous groups might be merely following a logic of what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls, a 'politics unlimited', that is 'the idea that the poor or the oppressed, in pursuit of their rights, have to adopt every means at hand in order to fight the system that puts them down'.[65] Indigeneity then is like ethnicity, a political concept. And who are we to deny the ethnic identity or the indigenous identity of others, however unscientific such a claim may seem to us?

In India, this approach was called for by several scholars who argued that not only has the term indigenous peoples come to have a real and lived relevance for people in the country but has also become an important tool of articulation for empowerment.[66] Whether one may disagree over the precise meanings and characteristics of the terms, '*adivasis*' and 'indigeneity' in India are social facts.[67] Moreover, being indigenous is a new way of placing oneself in the world and as such pursuing a new type of politics, a cultural politics. In this new form of politics, the term

indigenous is useful to a whole set of marginalised and dispossessed people precisely because it is difficult to pin down, because it has become a powerful rhetorical device. And perhaps as anthropologists and historians, as Bengt Karlsson says, we need to move beyond the sterile debate of whether or not the concept of indigenous people is relevant.[68] One way forward is that we should be interested in how this new kind of cultural politics emerges, its processes and shifts – we should treat it as an object of ethnographic and historiographic study. And this is indeed the approach that Karlsson usefully pursues in exploring the transnational politics of how indigenous delegates from India have participated in the UNWGIP annual sessions in Geneva. We can not say that the concept of indigeneity is fabricated because it is out there, it is being used by people across the world and it means certain things to them in the present. In taking the most extreme version of this line of argument, some scholars, such as Vinita Damodaran argue that to bring critical attention to indigeneity in India is to undermine the struggle of such marginalised groups.[69]

So where does this leave us? We might agree with Beteille and Guha that an essentialist notion of indigenous peoples is philosophically/anthropologically/historically problematic. However, do we disagree with the implication of this for the political strategies of those who are seeking to regain rights for the lands of their ancestors or to link their causes with that of others on different continents in similar positions? As scholars, should we aim to understand the complexities of local situations or should we join the enterprise of a 'politics unlimited'? Our scholarly endeavours require a degree of objectivity and detachment. However, sometimes, our activist positions beg us to put this back on the shelves in case we weaken our advocacy. But should we subordinate our scholarly priorities to those of our activist inclinations? Should we be prepared to hide certain observations and censor our reports in order to support a political programme?

The Dark Side of Indigeneity?

The current debates around indigeneity in India must be understood in the context of a rich history that goes back much further than the recent transnational indigenous rights concerns. Ajay Skaria writes, however laudable our politics surely we also need to pay attention to the weapons and images we fight with and the profound disrespect and violence that might be involved in our strategies.[70] And Crispin Bates suggests that rather ask 'who were the adivasis', it might be better to ask 'who wants to define them?'[71] Bates wonders whether by thinking of 'indigenous peoples' in less romantic and more practical terms, we may be able to move towards policy options that in the long term are more likely to be in the interests of marginalsied groups. There is reason to be astute to these views as is shown by Kaushik Ghosh's recent article on indigeneity in India.[72] Ghosh questions Arjun Appadurai's celebration of increasing

transnationalisation as a space of liberation beyond the nation-state for state citizens, arguing that the transnationalism introduced by the UNWGIP undermines the struggles through which indigenous people have historically attained certain autonomies from the modern state.[73]

Using the specific example of the struggle against the Koel Karo Dam, Ghosh asks why the transnationalised indigenous leadership is absent from the multiple sites of resistance to displacement precisely at a time when the displacement of indigenous populations has gained new intensity under neoliberal state policies in India.[74] He juxtaposes the ideals of a UNWGIP Indian representative, founding member of the ICITP (a Ranchi based highly educated leader) with a local leader living in the Koel Karo area, Soma Munda. While the WGIP academic/activist/politician imagines displacing the villagers into Swiss style villages in the Saranda Forest, Soma Munda, reflecting his position as a subsistence adivasi farmer, says that in the affected villages no one would dare sell any land. For Ghosh, Soma Munda's attitude and politics are a space of resistance that reflect a long history of struggle (especially around land rights) to achieve autonomy from the state that are also a product of the special protectionary measures of the Indian state towards its tribal areas. But Ghosh worries that we are seeing a slow death of such spaces of resistance and with it the demise of a hope of achieving a democratic tribal polity as if the new indigenous leadership does not like what a Soma Munda might say, then they can just ignore him and return to the safe-net of the transnational indigenous space.

In an argument similar to that made by Karlsson, Ghosh shows that the new transnational discourse of indigeneity has generated a set of political leaders who are distant from a grassroots base and grassroots concern.[75] There is an impossible distance between middle class *adivasi* leaders and Jharkhand's subaltern classes. This broader point is pertinent but Ghosh's ethnography is curiously lacking the voices of the masses, the ordinary poor people who will be affected by the proposed dam. Soma Munda, after all remains a local leader, a village headman who has spent 15 years in the Indian army even serving the UN in the Congo for two years. It is true that he is not part of the international elite but he is part of a rural elite. In Jharkhand, men like him are crucial to building forces with outside academics, journalists, NGOs and activists that are rapidly making the Koel Karo region/dam/project a site of international adivasis resistance. They are the first point of call for the grassroots mobilisation of the transnational leaders. As is clear in Ghosh's description, mediators like Soma Munda are well acquainted with such local leaders and can appropriate the discourse of indigeneity when it suits them. In this case Soma Munda stresses the fact that the patrilineal clan can not be broken both because of the protectionary measures of the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act (1908) and because this would violate Munda customs. Anyone who transgresses these customs and sells land, risks being hacked to death. But

Jharkhand's subaltern populations are class divided and Soma clearly represents a village elite well versed in the discourses of indigeneity, and especially around claims to adivasi attitudes to their land. Not far from the Koel Karo region, my own research shows that it is clear that village elite such as Soma dominate and reproduce a local political economy by mediating, and to some extent blocking, the access of the poorest to outside agencies and actors.[76] This enables one particular understanding of rural Jharkhand to be produced, while suppressing many others. It is crucial that we also hear the voices of the masses, the rural poor who have neither access to the transnational discourses and their national leaders, nor to the journalists and drop-in-academics. For we might find that these well-intentioned transnational discourses around indigenous rights might unwittingly be reappropriated within a rural class structure that further marginalises the poorest.

The dilemmas are clearly to be seen in another internationally famous anti-dam movement depicted in Amita Baviskar's ethnography 'In the Belly of the River'.[77] The activists, through whom Baviskar was introduced to the Narmada River, used the hill tribes as the representational front of a fight against the building of the Narmada Dam. The imagery of the threat of displacement affecting the poor dispossessed 'sons of the soil', the ecologically noble primitives, was globally emotive. But, as we find out in the postscript to the second edition of Baviskar's book,[78] when the dam was built, the main supporters of the anti-dam movement – the wealthy middle caste landowners and a class of educated *adivasis* who had the resources to look after their own relocation – were cared for. However, there was nobody to support the poor hill tribes. When the fight against the dam was lost, the activists moved on to other issues leaving the poor hill tribes to their own devices with little knowledge about their relocation entitlements. Baviskar does not make this explicit but, on the banks of the Narmada, as in the Jharkhand case, there is an important class dimension to how the main supporters of the anti-dam movement, middle class landowners and urban educated activists, used the globally resonating poor marginalised indigenous imagery for a cause through which the poorest *adivasis* perhaps made further losses. Losing the Narmada case, the anti-dam activists shifted their attention to other locations in India, in particular the Koel Karo in Jharkhand. It is very likely that a rural elite like Soma Munda will be their entry point into the area. As Ghosh shows us Soma is an astute fellow who clearly knows how to mediate the relationship between the activists and the villagers.[79] The question is, will we ever hear the multiple voices of the masses, the poorest in the rural areas whose concerns and opinions might very well contradict and even subvert the ideas of both the well-meaning activists and their rural counterparts, such as Soma? The odds are stacked against them, even as far as scholarly work is concerned. As Tania Li protests, while we should pay more attention to people like the Lauje in Indonesia,

a rather dull folk who practice swidden agriculture and who have attracted very little outside attention, it was the dramas of the more prosperous and internationally savvy Lindy who were articulating the indigenous slot and protesting against a Hydro-electric plant, that captured the imagination of reviewers of the early drafts of her paper submitted to *Comparative Studies in Society and History*.[80]

But scholarly democracy is not my only concern here. There is reason to be wary that the well-intentioned actions of indigenous rights activists might be further marginalising the rural poor. This is certainly the case as far as attitudes to seasonal labour migration are concerned. As Amita Baviskar points out the activist attention to ecological sustainability and cultural dignity are far fetched concerns for the masses of the rural poor who are struggling to make ends meet by tilling their fields and through migrating in search of wage labour.[81] But as is the case in Jharkhand, the issue of migration is ignored by the activists who have no place for it in their vision of creating sustainable communities, close to nature and their land, in tribal areas. In Jharkhand, I show the implications are disheartening for in many ways seasonal migration to brick factories in other states provides the poorest *adivasis* not only with the ability to cope with everyday livelihood struggles but also with a means to liberate themselves from domestic social constraints.[82] Many who migrate see the brick kilns as a temporary space of freedom to escape problems back at home; explore a new country; and live out prohibited amorous relationships. Jharkhandi indigenous rights activists' construction of such migration as a 'problem' is as much about their ethnoregionalist vision of how the new tribal state ought to be as it is about exploitation and poverty. Activists see migration to the kilns as both a threat to the idea of the connection with the land *adivasis* allegedly have and a threat to the purity and regulation of the social and sexual tribal citizen. This puritanical perspective creates a moral climate that paradoxically encourages many young people to flee to the brick kilns where they can live 'freely'. In this way, the new Puritanism at home helps to reproduce the conditions for capitalist exploitation and the extraction of surplus value, further marginalising the rural poor.

Another common point of mobilisation of indigenous rights activists used time and again that is worth warning against, is the imagery of indigenous people as representing the core values of the eco-community. This imagery says far more about a generic stereotype that is currently the vogue in the international public sphere than it does about the diversity and complexity of indigenous people's relationship with their environment. Its potential dangers have been outlined with clarity and wit by Beth Conklin and Laura Graham in the Brazilian context where eco-conscious celebrities like Sting joined hands with the Kayapo. However, once the Kayapo acquired some success in claims over land rights, they, perhaps understandably, rushed straight into the arms of the market economy by granting timber companies contracts to cut down hardwoods.[83]

In India, in Madhya Pradesh, Baviskar shows a similar emerging gap between the higher caste middle class activists who seek to preserve the purist model of *adivasis* as practising sustainable eco-development, protecting their natural resources, and the emerging tribal leadership who, like the Kayapo, want a share of state benefits of resource intensive industrialisation.[84]

In Jharkhand, ecologically harmonious ideals are costing lives.[85] Urban educated middle class indigenous rights activists revive a Sarna religion as the emblem of *adivasis* inherent love of nature. The new state government makes the elephant its national symbol, showing how in Jharkhand, a land 'unchanged by man or time', man and animal live in harmony with each other. Meanwhile, as my own research shows, in the rural areas poor *adivasis* spend night after night chasing away elephants that are killing people, destroying their homes and consuming their crops. These poor rural villagers are in despair as they are neither allowed to kill the elephants nor cut the forests which have brought the elephants into their villages. Is there space to hear these voices in the current climate, where there is a dedicated and rising tide of opinion to put use and abuse of the environment under close surveillance? Elephants bring to the surface rural people's complex relationship with and ideas of their environment that threaten the myth of their love for and worship of nature. When their livelihoods are thought to be at risk because of and not in spite of the forest, environmental protection and ecological romanticism are remote concerns for Jharkhand's rural poor. The nature loving-worshipping indigenous Jharkhandi community is currently successful imagery because it resonates with both the developmentalists and indigenous rights concerns of marginalised indigenous people and international environmentalist agendas for the protection of nature. But it can be dangerous because one dominant version of Jharkhand's reality is reproduced while many others are silenced.

My point is that there is a 'dark side to indigeneity' that it is well worth highlighting to those who urge us to shelve critical scholarship in case we weaken the advocacy of well-meaning promoters of indigenous rights and development. While there might be some reasons to celebrate the recent global success of indigenous rights activism, the implications of these transnational developments for targeted people in specific localities are far from clear and have received very little in-depth scrutiny. The 'dark side of indigeneity' might show that the local appropriation and experiences of global discourses of indigeneity can maintain a class system that further marginalises the poorest. This does not necessarily mean that we have to 'expose' indigenous rights activism. We don't have to 'show up', or be reduced to arguing that indigenous identity is created strategically and made an invented tradition of sorts by maximising goal-oriented actors who are pursuing their own ends. But we should pursue with our careful and committed scholarship and highlight the need to pay attention to the voices that are not usually heard in transnational, or even national, forums

and the processes which lead to their marginalisation. So as scholars and political actors we should not hesitate to ask the questions: Who is representing whom, how and why? Who and what are left out? And what are the unintended consequences?

Short Biography

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Notes

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