



JHARKHAND

UTTAR PRADESH

BIHAR

WEST BENGAL

CHHATTISGARH

ODISHA (ORISSA)



LEGEND

- National Highway
- Major Road
- Railway
- District Boundary
- State Boundary
- River
- District HQ
- State Capital

Map not to Scale

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Introduction

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The demographic groups, variously designated in social sciences as tribe, aborigine, autochthon, indigene and Adivasi, have been subjected to the 'politics of representation' (Cooper 1994: 1526) in India and abroad. Furthermore, in India, this is done mostly by the other (non-Adivasis) and not by the self (Adivasis). Therefore, this representation is fraught with different historiographical problems. First, basically fragmentary, this does not generally contain their voice. Second, being appropriated with an ethnocentric mindset, this is often pejorative. This becomes clear when we surf the entire range of representations spanning between ancient Sanskrit texts belonging to the Vedic period and ethnographic writings during British rule. These, more or less, denote them as primitive, savage and wild, to borrow Skaria's expression, 'anachronistic' group of people.

Another problem centres round the exact nomenclature to be used for these groups, which has led to contesting claims by scholars, activists and concerned communities. A recent study on the indigenous communities in India observes, 'The three related terms "tribals", "Adivasis" and "indigenous peoples" have come into use at different points of time and for different reasons' (Karlsson and Subba 2006: 2). It is, therefore, necessary to contextualise the deployment of different terminologies (Karlsson and Subba 2006: 2-9; Rycroft and Dasgupta 2011: 1-13; Bates and Shah 2014: 1-34). As early as the 1770s, tribals were designated as either 'race' or 'people' in colonial ethnography. But since the 1860s, the use of tribe came in fashion to distinguish them from caste groups. However, other such terms in vogue were autochthon and aboriginal.¹ The task for the colonial ethnographers and officials was to collate administratively useful information. This was deployed as a tool for efficient governance in India which, they believed, reflected British benevolence.² Not only in India,

character of western imperialism and were 'propelled by the imperatives of the creed of the "white man's burden"' (Ekeh 1990: 670). Naturally, therefore, the term tribe was infected with a derogatory and evolutionary connotation. But colonial conceptualisation accompanied within it the inherent tension between the notions of 'noble savage' and 'violent savage', followed by an oscillation between paternalistic and military solutions (Bates and Shah 2014: 2-3).

During the postcolonial period, scholarly and administrative mediations became more complex and contentious at the global level. In Africa, this assumed the character of an intellectual movement led by the *Ibadan School of History*, based at the University of Ibadan, against ethnocentric representation of tribal communities. This movement strove to reconstruct a new African social history by decolonising the study of the African past (Ekeh 1990: 660-70). In India, till recently, sociologist-anthropologists more or less accepted the colonial designation of the tribe as a 'universal category' (Rycroft and Dasgupta 2011:5). Karlsson and Subba remark that 'tribal is nevertheless the most commonly used term in India and not as such with pejorative connotations' (2006: 4). Interestingly, the term tribe received a fresh lease of life, when the Indian Constitution which came into effect from 26 January 1950, designated these communities as Scheduled Tribe (ST). Since then, this has come to denote generally those peoples who had earlier been classified as tribe in colonial ethnography. Besides recognition of their distinct status, their importance was underlined through affirmative constitutional actions. They were entitled to reservation in government employment, higher education and representation of seats in the state assemblies and central parliament. The Fifth Schedule of the Constitution demarcated areas with sizeable tribal population as Scheduled Areas (SA) and formed Tribes Advisory Council (TAC) to promote their welfare and oversee the prohibition and restriction of transfer of tribal lands. Moreover, the Indian Parliament passed the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA) in 1996, to set up a mechanism of self-government with the aim of preserving their traditions, customs and cultural identity. Furthermore, the Act extended the power of implementing plans, programmes and projects for social and economic development to the village Panchayats. Though the amendments between 2001 and 2010 diluted much of the gains (elaborated in Chapter 5), the protection of ethnic identity and lifestyle came to be constitutionally affirmed.

In postcolonial India, the above academic and state trajectories have faced serious scrutiny and challenge – the communities and a section of scholars have raised objections against the designation of tribe. This

resulted in the onset of adverse terminologies. In Africa, scholars argue that the term tribe is incoherent; it 'promotes a myth of primitive African timelessness, obscuring history'; and it 'hide(s) the modern character of African ethnicity, including ethnic conflict' (*Africa Action* 2008: 1-13). The term ethnic got currency in South Africa as an alternate to 'race' during the late 1930s-1940s, and ever since gradually entered political and academic discourse (Dubow 1994: 355-70; Ekeh 1990: 661). This set the stage for the advent of the competing nomenclature of ethnic in academic domain. Some scholars, therefore, proposed that the term 'ethnic' rather than tribe/indigene/Adivasi should be considered more appropriate and less problematic. They argue that ethnicity (Vail 1991: 1-20) acknowledges the demographic and cultural specificity of this group. Moreover, this is also bereft of the stigma and humiliation associated with the term tribe.

Similarly, members of the ethnic communities in India advocated for the acceptance of the term Adivasi, meaning the natives of India (Hardiman 1987: 13). By this, they not only rejected the colonial designation of tribe, but also put forth their claims for certain rights (Kuper 2003: 389-95). Chota Nagpur is generally known as the birthplace of this idea. It was here that Adivasi intellectuals formed *Adivasi Mahasabha* in 1938 to put forth the claim for special political status. Ever since, the claim for Adivasihood has become more fashionable both among the communities themselves and a section of scholars, with the latter clearly stating that the terms tribe should necessarily be replaced by Adivasi so that tribal studies may become Adivasi studies (Rycroft and Dasgupta 2011: 1-13). Their position was strengthened with the escalation of 'indigenous politics' to the global arena since the 1990s.³ This surfaced as a movement to formulate and socialise a 'universal concept' for self-identification 'as the essential solution to the problem of definition'. Proponents of this movement also advocated for special safeguards and policies, besides claiming their right of self-determination generally within the nation state (Karlsson 2003: 403-23; Bowen 2000: 12-16).

However, the academic world stands divided on this political and polemical issue. Scholars like B.K. Roy Burman and Andre Beteille (cited in Karlsson and Subba 2006: 7 and Sumit Guha 1999: 4) do not support the appellation of 'indigenous' and 'Adivasi'. They observe that this has largely been impacted by colonial racial classification of Indians into Dravidians as original and Aryans as invaders (Bayly 1997: 189-90). Moreover, Virginius Xaxa argues that notions of racial purity and spatial originality become highly questionable because of large-scale mixture of population and migrations into and across

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the country for several centuries (1999a: 3591–2). Against this grain, Hardiman and Damodaran defend the term indigenous on the ground of self-identification. Hardiman views that since they prefer to 'describe themselves' as Adivasi, they should be called so and not tribe which they reject as 'insulting' (1987: 16). Damodaran argues that assertion of territorial selfhood by the Munda, Oraon and Ho communities against the encroachment by outsiders was based in fact on the claim of nativity (2005: 118–43).

The onset of the terms tribe, Adivasi and indigene simultaneously in response to the historicity and contemporaneity of the terminologies is in academic practice,⁴ despite the fact that such a conflation of terms is considered contentious (Rycroft and Dasgupta 2011: 3). However, what is crucial is to respond to the sensitivity of the ethnic groups, who assert that they should be addressed as Adivasi and not tribe. Therefore, this study invokes such terms as Adivasi and indigene along with ethnic to represent them. But at places when the term tribe is in use, this refers to, as Nandini Sundar underlines about Bastar, the 'administrative perceptions' rather than 'any particular mode of existence' (2008: 16).

The nomenclatural confusion is confounded by the tendency to deny the ethnic groups an autonomous ontological status. The dominant trend among colonial ethnographers including a section of Indian intelligentsia of the 18th and 19th centuries was to variously construct their otherness from the mainstream social groups. First, ecological distinction was the basis of postulating the difference between the tribals as the dwellers of the forested and hilly regions and those who inhabited the plains, as James Cleveland did in the case of Bhagalpur.⁵ In the nationalist press, Bengali intelligentsia underlined the difference of the Santals – the 'hill people' – and the plains-dwelling Bengali landlords and moneylenders (Sen 1992: 19, 23). Second, their otherness was assessed on an evolutionary scale. As such, they were categorised as uncivilised, as against the civilised mainstream. The argument was that due to this lack, their 'ways are different' from those of the 'respectable people'. On this count, as the Bhils indulged in raid and plunder, they were considered different from 'respectable' Marathas. However, there was much distinction between the caste and tribe where the former was considered civilised and the latter as primitive (Skaria 1998: 193). As we entered the postcolonial period, instead of recognising their distinct identity, G. S. Ghurye represents the tribe as either backward Hindu and N.K. Bose moots the idea that they were in a state of progressive absorption into the Hindu fold (1995: 1–22; 1949: 32, 50–1; 2004: 4–28). F.G. Bailey and Surajit Sinha supported

this view, when they observed that after adopting settled cultivation, tribal communities surrendered their tribalism and entered the fold of casteism (1961: 1-18; 1965: 60-1).

Autonomous status of the ethnic groups is denied also by those who identify them as colonial creation (Devalle 1992; Skaria 1997: 727).⁶ They argue that the notion of ethnicity had more or less been invented by the colonial administrator-ethnographers and Christian missionaries. Consequently, in the case of the tribe, the 'sense of identity was imposed over him (them) by those who had power over him by virtue of their class, caste and official standing' (Guha 1983: 18). There is yet another trajectory that defines ethnic groups within the binaries of domination/subordination. Accordingly, they have generally been portrayed as subordinate/vulnerable rather marginal group of people, being subjected to various exploitations by more dominant groups. To elaborate, they were deemed as prehistoric people; so, their past was considered unworthy of recording. But when this was done, they were largely portrayed as a low group of people as done by the ancient Sanskrit texts and colonial writings. The pastoralist tribal groups were socio-economically marginalised by the agrarian communities. Finally, after systematically displacing them from power and material resources, they were brought under military and political subjection by the outsiders (Haimendorf 1989: 323-6; Skaria 1999: 281; Damodaran 2000).

As we engage with the assertion of identity by the Adivasis, we cannot forget that the notion of identity on racial, political, cultural and religious grounds is a 'political and debatable' issue. But as Parker and Rathbone aver in the context of Africa, we cannot also deny that this assertion is the 'product of historical processes' largely 'constructed by human agency' (2007: 38-40). In order to focus on the historical process and the role of human agency, this study seeks to investigate the function of two issues. First, self-representation by Adivasi intellectuals in India derives from colonial era studies. Second, on the platforms of the UNO, World Bank and the International Work Group of Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA), they articulated their historic and contemporary marginality due to the exploitative policies practised by the ruling state and dominant people (Karlsson 2003: 403-16). Their national and global movements since the 1990s, therefore, defined themselves as a minority as well as sub-nationalist and subdued category bereft of basic human rights (Bowen 2000: 12).

The issues that we need to address are whether ethnic communities should always be viewed as the other of the dominant groups and whether the dominant/other representation should continue

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to hold centrestage. This leads us to the complementary but significant question – whether portrayal by the self is possible and if so, what should be its strategy? The exercise should begin with a critical and creative engagement with oral sources.⁷ But the task is not easy because of scholarly prejudice at the global level against oral tradition. This prejudice, as Skaria underlines, is rooted in the representation of the tribal communities as the other of the mainstream, besides representing orality as the other of history (1999: 4–12). Ekeh observed, ‘The advocates of the new African social history battled to include oral tradition as legitimate material for historiography’ (1990: 670). Despite this, we should draw inspiration from the nuanced accounts at the global level.⁸ Skaria affirms, ‘It is to this Other, memory, that we need to turn’ (1999: 7). The author asserts that this might provide the solution to the problem of nomenclature (Kingsbury 1998: 440) and erasure of their history and agency.⁹

Furthermore, writing intimate Adivasi history only with the help of archival sources is not possible as these are mostly sketchy.¹⁰ In many cases, these also ‘distorted history’, as Cooper observes in the context of Africa (1994: 1528). Therefore, we have no other way but to invoke oral tradition as a substantive source. This has aptly been remarked that in order to ‘expand the idea of historical production well beyond the limits of academic history-writing’ we ‘must include all the ways in which a sense of the past is constructed in our society. These do not necessarily take a written or literary form’ (Johnson and Dawson 1982: 207). In the context of the Adivasis, these sources can conveniently be their myth, folklore as well as collective memory,¹¹ as recorded in the Village Papers relating to the Hos of Kolhan.¹² Conventional historiography, however, cautions us against their deployment by pointing to their achronologicality, instability, narrow spatial coverage, fragmentariness and cultural bias (Vansina 1985: 94–102, 120; Prins 1991: 114–15; Graham 1987: 14–17).¹³ Bengt Karlsson adds two more caveats – it is not very easy to ‘locate “authentic” tribal spokesperson’ because indigenous discourse does not reach ‘us straight from the mud-hut’, and having ‘emerged and developed in dialogue with various social movements and non-indigenous actors’ is not available to us in the exact form (2003: 406).

The question is how much of these flaws are relevant when we reconstruct Adivasi history in Bihar and Jharkhand? Later, we discuss that creation myths were internally reconstructed when the like of Lt. S.R. Tickell, W.W. Hunter and Rev. L.O. Skrefsurd recorded them. Similarly, Santal folklore (Bompas 2001; Bodding 1994) and Ho folk tales and stories (Majumdar 1950: 325–59) are available to us only

in their recorded forms. These create two palpable problems: (a) the recording of traditions and institutions as we find in *Horkoren Mare Hapramko Reak Katha*, for instance, lacks specified details about space and time; and (b) recordings of village memories were officially commissioned and collected through questionnaire. So, these were more or less responses to the questions rather than full and uninhabited flow of data from the native informants.

Keeping in mind the inadequacies of both the genres of historical materials, this study seeks to juxtapose both archival and oral sources. Besides official correspondences and reports, this invokes myths, folklores and colonial recording of memories with the idea that only these are capable of illuminating many grey areas not only of precolonial era, but also of the colonial era. The 'hybrid' sources and viewpoints facilitated the making of a more composite history. This served another important purpose – the fructification and articulation of ethnic selfhood – more relevant for this study. In the context of the indigenes of Tswana in South Africa, Comaroffs depicted that consciousness of ethnic selfhood had fructified during colonial era, in which Christian missionaries acted as 'a medium for its construction and representation' (1991: 287–8). This made it necessary for us to examine whether this is true about the Adivasis of Bihar/Jharkhand also. A critical reading of these sources, however, reveals the precolonial origin and growth of ethnic self-consciousness. Also, different chapters in this volume make an attempt to dissolve the myth of the disappearance of native voice in the construction of their history by drawing on the Village Papers, in which indigenous informants had a major role. On the one hand, this study seeks to cross the barrier of conventional history writing, and on the other reconstruct a substantive Adivasi history. The author argues that this can be done only by allotting much greater space to the nuances of Adivasi life rather than tethering it to pan-Indian and global narratives, which has become the standard scholarly practice at the global level. We should yet focus on another strategy, and this is to set up a dialogue between the present and the past. This informs how Adivasis, more so their intelligentsia, fashion their self today and how in doing so they appropriate history as a powerful tool of identity assertion.

Concentrating on Bihar and Jharkhand, *Indigeneity, Landscape and History: Adivasi Self-fashioning in India* opens a dialogue between the region and nation and beyond by incorporating the pan-Indian and global experiences about them, in order to grapple with the basic and transcendental character of ethnic assertions in India. The study also sets up a dialogue between the past and present, and in doing so, selects

a long time frame that spans between precolonial and the lived present. This seeks to underline the salience of historical insight into the problem of identity. Parker and Rathbone observe that 'to think about Africa as a place, we must think historically' (2007: 4). However, the author adds that in order to grapple with the content and complexities of Adivasi self-fashioning and assertion in India and abroad, the long temporal time frame is extremely necessary. Ekeh makes a strong case for such a continuous and consistent dialogue, which besides acting as 'an active arm of decolonization', should help design a new history of the marginalised communities (1990: 670-2). This may also serve to relocate Adivasi studies as a historical discourse in place of its previous anthropological bias, a fact rued by Hardiman (1987: 6).

Divided in two parts, the first part of the book explains the representation of tribe/aborigine in Sanskritic texts and colonial ethnography. The purpose is to embody and examine the other construction of tribe and examine how colonial writings, on which postcolonial Adivasi studies depend, represent colonial discourse itself. The second part is about Adivasi imaging of the self-centring around their institutions and imagery of the landscape.

In historical and contemporary Adivasi identity assertion, Chapter 2 seeks to understand how self and landscape have been conceptualised in social science and in what sense these terms have been deployed. This also closely examines the ongoing dynamics of Adivasi self-fashioning and the way they make a conscious attempt to resolve the conflict. The emergence of a notion of a 'bounded, distinctive and solidary' group of people as distinguished from other demographic elements is a precolonial phenomenon. The third chapter depicts the origin of consciousness of collective identity as distinct from the comity of ethnic and non-ethnic neighbours. It also refers to the ethnic strategy to codify and consign the conjunctures of their past, both primeval and historic, in their creation myths. The sense of self as 'we' (Adivasis) as different from 'they' (non-Adivasis or Dikus) was gradually configured spatially. Therefore, the fourth chapter moves from myth to both literary and oral reconstruction of the story of the emergence of a distinct politico-cultural space. This is the idea of an idyllic landscape where the disparate Adivasi groups originated and learnt to draw and consolidate the politico-cultural boundaries. Chapter 5 details how around this landscape, they constructed a material and moral culture, which as Adivasi activists and intelligentsia underline today has/had been basically rural. Here, ethnic groups wove a homogenous and egalitarian lifeway that distinguished them from antonymic ethos characterising non-ethnic societies. To reinforce and conduct the management of their villages, they developed a distinct

mode of social governance. The norms and mode of self-governance have been studied in Chapter 6. In tandem, there was another shift from hunting-foraging and shifting cultivation to settled cultivation. This crucial change in landscape and consequent change in Adivasi socio-economy forms the theme of the next chapter. The governance of lived and acquired space not only involved the management of land, but also natural resources such as water and forest. How governance of these resources was impacted by distinct Adivasi ethos, how this was reshaped after the advent of colonial rule and how this emerged as a site for conflict and collaboration have been examined in the last two chapters. Chapter 10 tells the story of self-fashioning around the landscape during post-independence decades. While summing up the historic process of construction of indigeneity, the concluding chapter revisits the ever-present debate over the ideal norms and changing practices as well as indigenous attempts to reinvent itself. In sum, this work seeks to reconstruct the story of Adivasi assertion built around the famous triad of *jal*, jungle and *jameen*, spanning precolonial, colonial and contemporary periods.

The above details explore change and continuity in Adivasi consciousness of identity as a political discourse that spells their sense of material and moral distinctiveness as well as gradual marginalisation. This study also unfolds the changing salience of three natural elements – land, forest and water – in configuring their sense of self. But no study on Adivasi construction of identity in India can perhaps ignore that sense of ethnicity, and marginality is not simply a historical and political enquiry; it is also, and no less importantly, an ecological anthropological one. This underlines the symbiosis between environmentalism and indigeneity, a linkage that had gained scholarly attention since the 1960s. It is why Vinita Damodaran insists that ethnicity is irrevocably ‘constructed around images of the land and the changing meanings of the landscape’ (2002: 77–110). This study will, therefore, investigate and examine the meanings of landscape, social and physical, and how this has been progressively defined in the past and the lived present. This will take this work beyond the conventional ecological anthropological approach of engaging with stable relationships rather than historical change.

Notes

- 1 See Chapter 1 on Colonial representation as tribe/aborigine for details.
- 2 This benevolence was deemed necessary to promote the colonial ‘civilizing mission’ (Bates 1995b: 8–15; Skaria 1997: 727–39; Skaria 1998: 193–4, 213–14; Cederlof 2013: 394).
- 3 See Chapter 4 for further details.

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- 4 For the simultaneous invocation of tribe, indigene and Adivasi, see Padel 2014: 73–91. For the use of both tribe and Adivasi, see Nandini Sundar 2008: 10–11, 16; Tanika Sarkar 2011: 65–81.
- 5 James Cleveland identified them as hill and forest communities as against the people inhabiting the plains (Skaria 1997: 728–9).
- 6 However, some scholars plead for a more intimate understanding of the category (Van Schendel 1992: 95–128; Nandini Sundar 2008; Guha 1999; Van Schendel 2011: 19–43).
- 7 The process, however, is more extensive than mere deployment of oral sources. For the logistics of reconstructing ethnohistorical accounts, see Dirks 1989: 10–16.
- 8 I would like to particularly refer *Beita* (gossip) and *tadek* (stories) (Rosaldo 1980: 15–17); tales and stories narrated specially by old men (Rappaport 1994: 1–23); rich stock of *vadilcha goth* (stories) (Skaria 1999: 1); and true stories (Gyan Prakash 1990: 34–81).
- 9 Bates notes the emergence of state among the Gonds, social difference of ‘more and less civilized among them’, and particularly appreciates ‘the previous history of the rise and fall of tribal kingdoms in a period when they were much more largely masters of their own fate’ (1995b: 16, 33). Stray reference to their precolonial state of powerfulness is highlighted in the case of the Bhils (Skaria 1998: 197–201).
- 10 For a comment on the general absence of recording, see Bates 1995a: 117.
- 11 Collective memory stands for recognised social traditions, even though the source is either individual or familial (Olick and Robbin 1998: 106–12).
- 12 For the usefulness of the ‘local record office with land records and new files’, see Dirks 1989: 14.
- 13 About the lack of chronology, Vansina, however, adds that the genealogies may ‘form a basis for local chronology’ (1985: 24). The list will grow with my input from Ho history. One such was the unavailability of information due to amnesia when memory fumbled and faltered largely beyond two/three generations. Next was a break in the link in generational transmission due to father’s premature death (TSKP, Jamjoi, 3–5, VN 70). Another was distortion and faking of traditions due to existentialist reasons. Here, I particularly refer to forged genealogies to prove the ancientness of families.