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# Scheduling tribes: A view from inside India's ethnographic state

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*Abstract:* Venturing into an ethnography of government anthropologists themselves, this article interrogates the bureaucratic inner workings and actual agents of today's "ethnographic state". By engaging with the civil servants who verify India's Scheduled Tribes, I explore the politics of "tribal" recognition from the inside out. This perspective lends timely insight into the logistical, political, and epistemological difficulties integral to the functioning—and current crisis—of India's affirmative action system. Weighing the demands of "tribal" recognition through those that arguably know them best—government anthropologists themselves—this study examines the human dimension (and dilemmas) of the Indian state and its affirmative action system for Scheduled Tribes.

*Keywords:* affirmative action, ethnology, identity, India, recognition, state

Across India, the politics of tribal recognition are escalating in volume and volatility. Violent outbreaks in Rajasthan and Assam in 2007 punctuated the rising demands for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status. Already, there are over seven hundred Scheduled Tribes in India. With an estimated one thousand more communities vying for recognition, the category of the "tribe" has assumed a place at the fore of affirmative action debates. The viability of ST status derives not only from the advantages that the designation offers, but also from the pliability of the "tribal" category itself. Established by the Lokur Committee in 1965, the official criteria for ST status are: (a) indication of primitive traits, (b) distinctive culture, (c) geographical isolation, (d) shyness of contact with the community at large, and (e) backwardness (Government of India 2005). The problems with these official criteria notwithstanding, the category carries a range of unofficial connotations as well, which continue to inform "tribal" identification and recognition inside and outside the government.

Minorities' mobilizations for ST status have garnered deserved scholarly attention (Bisht 1994; Kapila 2008; Maaker & Schletter 2010; Middleton 2011a, 2011b; Middleton and Shneiderman 2008; Shneiderman 2009a, 2009b; Shneiderman and Turin 2006; Xaxa 2008, 2010). Less has been said of the government's side of things. Studies of the "ethnographic state" (Dirks 2001) have shed important light on the origins of ethnological governance in India (see, e.g., Cohn 1987, 1996; Dudley-Jenkins 2003, Pels

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and Salemink 2000). Yet the operations of the postcolonial ethnographic state remain underexplored, especially with regard to affirmative action. This inattention obviates crucial considerations of the policies, politics, and actual people that shape "tribal" recognition *within* the Indian government. Turning attention there—that is, to the agents and inner workings of today's ethnographic state—this article asks what those who work on the front lines of India's reservation system might teach us about affirmative action in India and beyond.

I focus on a team of government anthropologists from the Cultural Research Institute (CRI) of West Bengal.[1] Drawing from fieldwork in 2006–2007 and 2010, my analysis follows this team as they conducted an official ethnographic survey in 2006 to verify the "tribal" identities of a number of communities in Darjeeling seeking ST status. From this classificatory moment, I then chronicle the production and checkered fate of ethnological knowledge as it circulates through the Indian government. Interrogating positive discrimination from the inside out, I accordingly question the practices of "tribal" recognition through those that arguably know them best—government anthropologists themselves.

As adjudicators of normative community forms, government anthropologists clearly serve as operatives of ethnological governmentality (Foucault 1979; cf. Béteille 1998; Clifford 1988; Hale 2002; Li 2000; Povinelli 2002; Shah 2010; Taylor 1992). Yet they also are part of a much larger governmental apparatus, shot through with contending political agendas, epistemological dispensations, and bureaucratic constraints. These conditions introduce a number of difficulties into the scheduling of tribes, which impact government anthropologists and their "tribal" subjects. Indeed, these conditions often translate into one community's success and another's failure in attaining ST status. With this in mind, this article questions the people and politics that—for better or for worse—animate this particular system of affirmative action (see also the articles by Karlsson, Shneiderman, and Moodie in this special section). In question are the variegated agencies and constraints of the civil servants who man this system. Heeding recent calls for more direct ethnographic engagement with government workers (Abrams 1988; Blom Hansen and Stepputat 2001; Fuller and Bénéï 2000; Gupta and Sharma 2006), I hope to contribute to a more humanized understanding of the Indian state as an arbiter of social justice.

First, however, a note on the rising demands for "tribal" recognition.

## Darjeeling: A case study in the currency of category

Over the past decade, notions of the "tribe" have captured the popular imagination in Darjeeling. As of 2006–2007, "tribal" identification was organizing on two fronts. First, numerous ethnic groups of the hills were mobilizing for ST status. Second, the then ruling Gorkhaland National Liberation Front (GNLF) was maneuvering to make the region a "tribal area" as per the Sixth Schedule of the Indian constitution (see Articles 244: 2 and 275: 1). Under the Sixth Schedule, Darjeeling would remain within West Bengal, but would attain the rights to incorporate "tribal" political institutions into autonomous District Councils with powers to regulate forest and property rights, social customs, and local administrative structures. It thus promised a degree of desperately sought autonomy. However, since only 32 percent of the region's population was ST, these respective fronts bore on one another; it was believed that more communities needed to become ST to give Darjeeling the "tribal" majority thought necessary for the Sixth Schedule.

These "tribal" turns emerged from decades of marginalization and its attendant politics. From 1986 to 1988, Darjeeling hosted a violent subnationalist agitation for a separate state of Gorkhaland for the Nepali-speaking (Gorkha) peoples of Darjeeling. The movement aimed to free the Gorkha-dominated hills from the state of West Bengal. By opting *out* of West Bengal and *in* to the broader nation-state frameworks, Gorkhaland was to be the antidote to the polit-

ical and economic marginalization and georacial discriminations suffered by these groups. The movement failed, however. In its wake, many of the individual ethnicities that comprised the composite Gorkha community began exploring alternative routes to rights and recognition in the nation-state. Although many applied for and received the designation of Other Backward Classes (OBCs), eventually ST status emerged as the designation of choice.

There were local precedents. Four ethnicities in Darjeeling (the Bhutia, Lepcha, Sherpa, and Yolmo) have enjoyed ST status since 1950. Noting these groups' relative advantage, the Tamangs began mobilizing for ST status in the 1980s. Others followed suit throughout the 1990s and 2000s (Middleton 2011a; Shneiderman 2009b; Shneiderman and Turin 2006). Accentuating the urgency was the Sixth Schedule. The nascent bill looked to double the advantage of STs (by way of reserved seats in a newly constituted "tribal" council, special land and inheritance rights, and a range of other benefits). Non-ST communities accordingly feared being left out of a soon to be "tribal" Darjeeling. 2005 and 2006 subsequently saw a flurry of applications for ST status as OBC groups, and even three Scheduled Caste (SC) communities, submitted for ST recognition. By 2006, every major non-ST group within the greater Gorkha community had filed ST applications.

In Darjeeling, then, the "return of the native" (Kuper 2003) came to organize predominantly under the banner of the "tribe". Acting in concert with the exigencies of ST recognition, groups increasingly took up and took on ethnological paradigms to recuperate, reshape, and represent their long-lost "tribal" identities (Middleton 2011a, 2011b; Shneiderman 2009a, 2009b). Indeed, ethnologies of the self would be integral when the time came for these groups to prove their "tribal" identities to the Indian government.

## The classificatory moment

In July 2006, the government of West Bengal announced that the Cultural Research Institute (CRI)—a subsidiary of the Backward Class Welfare Department—would soon travel to Darjeeling to conduct an official ethnographic survey to determine the eligibility of ten communities seeking ST status (see Middleton 2011a). Upon the CRI's arrival, the eight-member team notified the applicant communities that they would each have one day of study, during which they were to take the team to a "model village". There, the community would be given the chance to demonstrate their "tribal" traits as they saw fit. The researchers would, in turn, investigate the communities through protocols designed by the CRI. What these protocols entailed was unclear.

There is, of course, a long history of governmental surveys of India's peoples, cursory though they may be (Dirks 2001; Dudley-Jenkins 2003). It is notable then that there remain no standardized procedures for certifying "tribal" communities. The formal Modality for Scheduling Tribes (est. 1999) states only that the criteria are to be ethnographically verified (Government of India 2005). Yet, how exactly traits like "isolation," "distinctive culture," "primitiveness," "shyness," and "backwardness" are to be measured is unspecified. Therefore, the CRI drew up fourteen ethnographic guidelines to structure their study. These included queries into "food habits," "rites of birth, marriage, and death," "magico-religious beliefs," and "socio-religious ceremonies"—the latter seemingly contradicting the policy that "religion is no bar to becoming tribal" (Government of India 2005: 12.1.1iv).

The ethnographic survey went off as a markedly stilted affair. Ethnic associations chose their most "isolated" and "backward" locales for investigation, coaching the locals to perform their most "primitive", "savage", and "animistic" rituals, while concealing those aspects that might hamper their attainment of ST status (for instance, signs of modernization and/or Hindu influence, which were thought to be antithetical to "tribal" identity). As villagers sang folk songs, danced, and performed their rites of spirit possession, exorcism, and blood drinking, elite ethnic leaders did their best to control who was spoken to, what was said, and what was seen.

These leaders translated between the Bengali of the CRI and the Nepali of the locals, often interjecting explanations where and when necessary.

Despite the chaos and obvious pandering of their subjects, the government anthropologists worked diligently to document the demonstrations. No strangers to the tactics of ethnographic mediation at hand (Middleton 2011a), the team members tried to access the realities of daily life, but there was only so much they could do. As they quipped on several occasions, "Nothing was raw. Everything was cooked."

Throughout the survey, the director of the CRI courted significant attention from ethnic leaders eager to win his approval. These distractions removed him from the kind of ethnographic engagement for which he was trained (he held a PhD in anthropology from the University of Calcutta). Yet, he also realized that by absorbing the attentions of interloping ethnic leaders, he could enable his research team—what he called his "boys"—to work more efficiently. Sacrificing his own ethnographic practice frustrated the director greatly. As he explained months later from the CRI offices in Kolkata, "I am not an administrator. I am here for the research. It is part of my blend." State anthropology, he further lamented, simply did not allow the time and resources enjoyed by classical ethnographers like Malinowski and Mead (who he cited as exemplars of the method). What the job did provide, however, was a comfortable existence following one's intellectual calling. As he noted with a chuckle and wry grin, "Anthropology in India is a colonial product. And we are its subjects. But we don't mind."

The director was not alone in his passion for ethnography. While certain members of the CRI performed their bureaucratic duties and little more, others proved committed fieldworkers. In time, I came to appreciate a particular correlation between the latter's ethnographic and social worker sensibilities. The director and his fellow ethnographers spoke of themselves as "advocates" for the disadvantaged. That said, their abilities to help their subjects were necessarily contingent on the communities' fulfillment of the ST criteria. Ethnological requisites aside, these civil servants frequently framed their work in the affective idioms of care and responsibility for the downtrodden. Care, in this sense, functioned as an integral, if underappreciated, aspect of governmentality—one which informed researcher-subject relations at and beyond the ethnographic interface itself.

Fieldwork proved as rewarding as it was trying. Being transported to the most remote corners of Darjeeling made for long working days. Once at their field site, the team had to navigate treacherous terrain and equally slippery informants. With the press catching wind of the study, cameras, felicitations, and covert politicking became part of the daily routine. The desperate pleas of community members played upon the emotions of the researchers. As the pressures, fatigue, and frustrations mounted, tempers often flared. In the end, and despite their earnest efforts to access the "realities" of the field, the CRI members had to accept much of the data presented to them, no matter how compromised it may have been. Such were the logistical and epistemological constraints of verifying "tribes".

## Producing state ethnology

In the months after the survey, I frequently visited the CRI offices in Kolkata. There, I chronicled how the researchers wrote up the official ethnographic report that would be the basis of these communities' ST applications. Having observed the ethnographic survey, I was keen to know the processes through which these anthropologists reconstructed the "truths" after the ostensible "facts" of the event itself (Blom Hansen 2000: 43).

Soon after the survey, the CRI sent forms to the ethnic associations of these groups demanding extensive demographic information. The "census form", as it came to be known, engendered difficulty and opportunity for the aspiring "tribes". On the one hand, it called for data that neither governmental records nor local knowledge could provide. On the other hand, it transferred the onus of enumeration onto the groups themselves—effectively enabling them

to tailor their demographic profile to meet what they guessed to be that of a proper "tribe".

Postfield correspondence took more social forms as well. Ethnic delegations made numerous trips to the CRI's Kolkata offices, bringing books, essays, memorandums, and other persuasions to bolster their cases. The CRI anthropologists were wary of these lobbying tactics, but also reliant on the information provided. With only one day of fieldwork per community, the CRI's ethnographic findings were limited—as were the available secondary source literatures. The ethnological materials furnished by the groups, though questionable in veracity, thus enabled the writing of a more robust report.

The ethnographic report, once complete, was a sprawling document, over two hundred pages long, comprised of both qualitative and quantitative data. Because there is no template for these reports, the CRI was left largely to its own designs in presenting its findings. A short introduction described the nature of the study. Each community was subsequently allotted one chapter. The descriptions borrowed heavily from the ethnological materials written and submitted by the communities. The chapters contained discussions of classic ethnological topics (e.g., rites of birth, marriage, death; religious belief and practice; dress; material artifacts; language; etc.). Appended to these descriptions were tables compiled by the statistical division of the CRI enumerating metrics such as population, average income, education levels, and literacy rates. Much of this quantitative data was gleaned from the aforementioned "census forms".

The report took nearly a year to complete. In the fall of 2007, it was finally sent to the Writer's Building, the state capital, for processing. Now that it was a "policy matter," as the CRI members liked to say, the file was "out of their hands." The institutional life of these cases was just beginning, however. From the CRI to the government of West Bengal and on to the Centre in Delhi, the report would embark upon a convoluted bureaucratic journey. Figure 1 maps the typical path of a successful ST application.

Ethnologically speaking, the case faces its largest test in the Social Sciences Wing of the

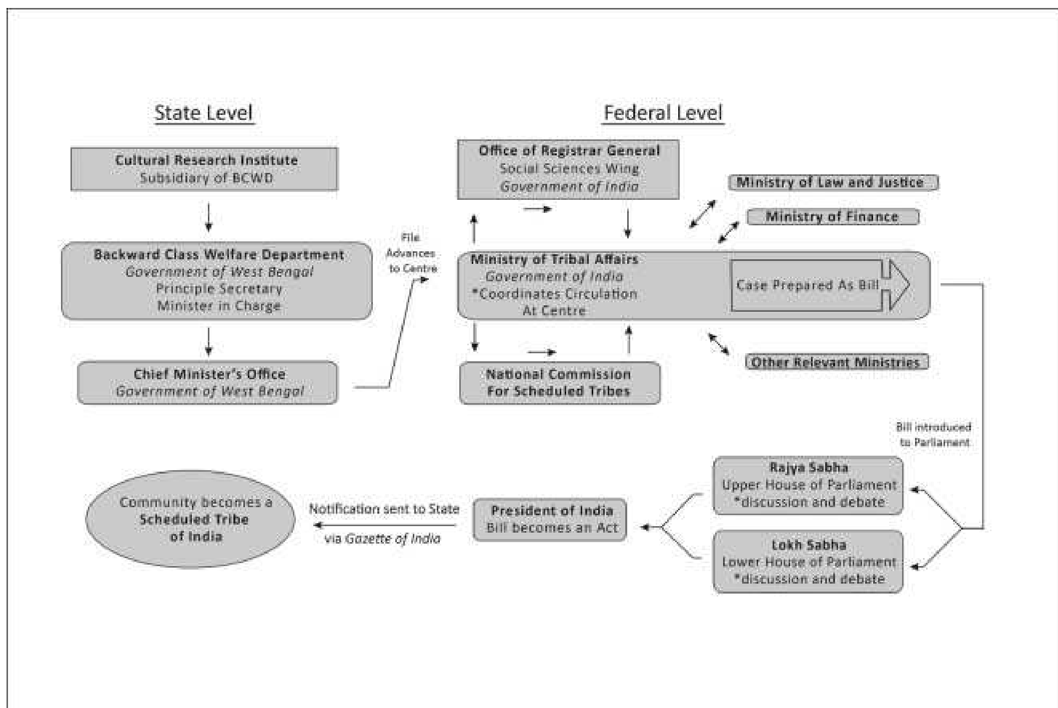


FIGURE 1. The bureaucratic path of an ST application.

Office of the Registrar General of India (RGI), where social scientists cross-check the findings against available literatures (many of them dating back to colonial ethnologies and census reports). Should the RGI or any other department find problems, the file may be returned to the state level, at which point the CRI/TRI will conduct further inquiries and/or revise their earlier work. The file is then circulated through the system again. If it fails for a second time, the case will be terminated. From start to finish, the process takes years, often decades. Lost, found, shelved, scrutinized, passed over, and passed on, the bureaucratic life of these files bespeaks the state's technocratic complexity and its seemingly interminable temporality.

The process requires exceptional patience and political agility on the part of applicant communities—in realms from which these groups have typically been marginalized. Take, for instance, the Tamangs of West Bengal, who achieved ST status in 2003. Spearheaded by the All India Tamang Buddhist Association headquartered in Darjeeling, the Tamangs relied on extensive autoethnological research to bolster their case. Tamang leaders and CRI members alike spoke of the excellent rapport and outstanding ethnographic performances during the application process. Still, the Tamangs realized that more was required. Throughout their twenty-two-year struggle for ST status, the Tamangs sent seventy-seven delegations to Delhi alone, augmenting these efforts with hunger strikes, underground political networking, and the lobbying of multiple agencies at the central and state levels. Despite their perseverance, it took a final push from the Chief Minister of Sikkim to bring ST recognition to the Tamangs of neighboring West Bengal. These tactics illustrate the political wherewithal necessary to attain ST status. Performing the "tribal" slot (Li 2000: 153), in short, is not enough.

Other struggles have been less successful. The Gujjars of Rajasthan offer a useful counterexample. As discussed in the contribution by Moodie in this volume, the long history and recent (2007) violence of the Gujjars' agitation put the politics of "tribal" recognition firmly on the national radar. Given the visibility and volatility of the Gujjars' case, the state of Rajasthan appointed a special commission to resolve the dispute. Headed by Justice Jasraj Chopra, the Chopra Commission conducted extensive field studies of Gujjar communities. After examining 147 villages, surveying 450 more, recording 2,000 statements, and receiving 14,632 memorandums, the Chopra Commission released its highly anticipated report on 17 December 2007. The report recommended *against* including Gujjars on the list of Scheduled Tribes.

The contrasts between the Tamang and Gujjar cases suggest significant inconsistencies in the scheduling of tribes. If the Tamangs combined compelling ethnographic performances with overt and covert politicking to achieve ST status, the notoriety of the Gujjars' case precluded any such backdoor passages. The Gujjars therefore suffered a paradox. While the visibility of their agitation brought national attention, the attention itself largely compromised their chances of ST status. In this sense, their case exemplifies the politics and problems of ST recognition.

The government officials I interviewed see the system to be already overburdened and saturated. They expressed a growing reluctance to admit more communities to the list of Scheduled Tribes. That said, declassifying existing ST communities who have reaped their due advantage in order to make room for others continues to prove difficult. And so the system grows increasingly backed up as the demands of/for ST recognition mount.

## The politics within

Government anthropologists and ST cases move in a realm crosscut by contending governmental orientations. Late in 2007 I found myself whiling away a Kolkata afternoon at the CRI when the director updated me on the cases from the 2006 ethnographic survey: "These policy makers have their own political issues. So [the ethnographic report] is in their hands now. They have not done anything with it. It is diffi-

cult because all these associations come here and pressurize us … But it is the bureaucrats at the Writer's Building that have it."

"Yes," Amit, another CRI anthropologist concurred, "the local bureaucrats have their own political games they are playing."

This was fifteen months after the ethnographic survey. Why had the report not been sent from the Writer's Building to the Centre? Everyone assumed the delay was tied to the possibility of Darjeeling becoming a "tribal area" as per the Sixth Schedule of the Indian constitution. With the bill nearing Parliament in 2007, questions were being raised over the Sixth Schedule's suitability for a dubiously "tribal" Darjeeling. Since Darjeeling was only 32 percent ST, conferring ST recognition on the groups surveyed in 2006 had the potential, so it was thought, to make or break the deal. With the report inexplicably held up at the Writer's Building, the CRI members assumed the cases to be ensnared in other forms of multicultural governance, in other kinds of politics and policies.

Being removed from the actual decision-making processes of scheduling tribes pained the CRI team. Typically, they directed their ire at the "policy makers" in the Writer's Building, who made behind-closed-doors decisions with little understanding of the groups in question (nor the challenges of state ethnography). Noting further incursions upon their expertise, Amit explained, "You see the real problems arise when they [the policy makers in the Writer's Building] want us to create data to fit their decisions. Because that is what they do! They want us to go up there and take our surveys and they want us to provide reports that fit their politics."

I pushed Amit and the director for a more specific example. They spoke of a superior within the government of West Bengal who had recently won his post despite lacking any formal training as a social scientist. Aping this figure of technocratic otherness, the director explained:

He even said so himself: "This anthropology is not like aviation. It is not a skill." So he goes up there and visits a community and within ten minutes just by looking at someone says, "Yes he is a tribal … so make the report and make them tribal. What's the problem? It's as easy as that." That really happened! He really did that … So they just want us to provide the data for their policies, so actually this whole process is just a hoax!

To serve under a "bureaucrat" who so clearly lacked appreciation of the nuances of ethnographic knowledge production, who could chide, "This anthropology is not like aviation. It is not a skill," was an affront to the CRI's jurisdiction and the director's expert identity. Indeed, as soon as the word "hoax" had left the director's lips, Amit cried out, "This is an identity crisis for us. An identity crisis!"

The director simply closed his eyes and began rubbing his temples in agony. "I am just so scared for the discipline these days. Because all the bureaucrats [long pause, eyes still closed] … To be quite frank with you, at this point I am just counting down the days until my retirement."

Having served the government of West Bengal for thirty-two years, the director was slated to retire in March 2011. Knowing he had a sick wife at home and had recently been passed over for promotion, I sensed the anguish in his words. With the conversation exhausted of emotion, we called it a day and began gathering our things. As several of the CRI members and I began our bus journeys to various corners of Kolkata, the director, like he did every day, began his long commute home. A jam-packed bus ride across town, then a forty-five-minute train ride, and finally a five-kilometer bicycle ride would take him from the offices of the CRI to the village he called home.

## Rethinking the system

In the years I have worked with the CRI team, they have expressed perennial frustration with the system of recognition they implement. Their grievances range from the difficulties of their fieldwork (the logistical constraints, the outdated criteria, the stilted nature of their data, etc.) to the entanglements of policy and politics,

and onward to more sweeping critiques of Indian affirmative action writ large.

Similar concerns are gaining ground at the national level. In 2006, a draft of "The National Tribal Policy for the Scheduled Tribes of India" was circulated to government officials and related civil society bodies inviting comment. The draft openly acknowledged the burdens put upon the state for ST recognition. Point 21 reads, "There is an increasing clamor from many communities to get included as STs … Adding new communities to the list reduces the benefits that can go to existing STs and is therefore to be resorted to, only if there is no room for doubt." Finally and crucially, the draft opined, "The criteria laid down by the Lokur Committee are hardly relevant today … Other more accurate criteria need to be fixed." The draft, in this regard, offered much needed reflexivity, but it many ways it retained the problematic epistemic tendencies of its colonial and postcolonial antecedents. It said nothing of what such "fixed" criteria would entail, but presumably they would remain of a similar ethnological register.

More radical changes were suggested by the Chopra Commission in its ruling on the Gujjar case of 2007. The commission opined "that a national debate should be initiated on the existing norms for according ST status to any community. It should impress upon the Centre that certain criteria should be abrogated as they had become outdated." It further suggested that "[c]urrent norms should be replaced by quantifiable criteria which will be relevant in the present context. The new criteria must withstand judicial scrutiny, thereby enabling future commissions or committees appointed by the government to examine the issue with exactness and reliability" (as cited in *Hindustan Times,* 18 December 2007).

In light of the difficulties experienced by the Chopra Commission and government anthropologists, one might ask: if the endgame of positive discrimination is socioeconomic and political equality, why then does the Indian government continue to rely on ethnological criteria that are, by all counts, dated, problematic, and impossible to fulfill and/or verify with empirical integrity? Certainly, there are causal justifications for the classically ethnological nature of affirmative action rubrics. That current inequalities stem from negative discriminations of racial, cultural, and/or religious difference is beyond reproach. Unfortunately, these causal arguments typically do not provide governments with solid paradigms for actually verifying the community forms eligible for positive discrimination. Especially when disadvantage is defined in classically ethnological terms—such as is the case with India's Scheduled Tribes—governmental epistemologies of identity are inherently prone to the kinds of difficulties and political incursions experienced by the CRI. As these government anthropologists would be the first to attest, the question of what kinds of communities are to be positively discriminated cannot—and should not—be divorced from the actual practices and politics through which one minority is deemed eligible for affirmative action and another is not.

To date, no changes have been made to the criteria of ST recognition. Amending the procedures or undergoing a more radical overhaul of the system will be difficult. The strongest resistance may well come from existing STs, and those who aspire to this status. The quests for "tribal" recognition, it is worth remembering, are imbued with potent senses of hope, entitlement, and "identity". Shifting the terms of positive discrimination will inevitably unsettle a host of vested interests. Calls and causes for a timely rethinking of ST are nevertheless at hand.

Toward that end, engaging with government anthropologists may teach us a great deal about the problems and politics of "tribal" recognition in India. Through their trials and tribulations, we may begin to appreciate the immense demands that "tribal" recognition puts on the Indian state and those who people it. Studied accordingly—that is, from the inside out—the politics of "tribal" recognition prove to be a problem both outside and inside the walls of government. In this sense, an ethnography of the ethnographic state offers a fresh—and I hope, more humanized—understanding of the peo-

ple, policy, and politics that constitute affirmative action in India today.

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## Notes

1. The CRI is West Bengal's version of a Tribal Research Institute (TRI).

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