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Chai for change? The narrative industry of Adivasi indigeneities in South India

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Abstract:

This article presents a case study of Adivasi (tribal and/or indigenous peoples in India) activism, Adivasi self-reliance and Adivasi indigeneities. Specifically, it analyses activist imaginaries of Adivasi indigeneities in South India.

The indigenisation of Adivasis fulfils different objectives in the field of development practice and international aid processes. The development activists in this case study attempt to achieve these objectives through the narrativisation of Adivasi indigeneity. The activists' goal is to create a new, fairer and more sustainable economic system on the basis of supposedly indigenous/tribal/Adivasi values, enabling Adivasis to achieve economic self-reliance through planting tea. The different actors involved in these self-reliance efforts are connected with each other through narratives of Adivasi indigeneity. The activists manage to enlist the large group of these different development actors and their financial support necessary for such a 'just' shift in economic relations through the harnessing of a particular brand of Adivasi indigeneity in their stories of Adivasis.

Through identifying the dominant elements of these Adivasi indigeneity narratives and analysing the activist imaginaries behind them, the inconsistencies between activist-imagined Adivasi indigeneities and the multiplicity of conflicting identities of Adivasi peoples produced by the complex intermeshing of ethnicity, caste and religion in India are brought to light.

This article focuses on activist imaginaries of Adivasi[1] indigeneities in South India, one aspect of a larger investigation whose aim was fourfold: Firstly, to analyse, on the one hand, the influence of global indigeneity discourses on Adivasis, and in particular (tribal and non-tribal) Adivasi activists in India; and, on the other, the production of Adivasi indigeneities in the global arena and the resulting emergence of the 'cosmopolitan Adivasi'. Secondly, to trace the development of Adivasi indigeneities in India, both on the national and regional level. Thirdly, to examine how these

[1] Tribal and/or indigenous peoples in India.

different Adivasi and other indigeneity story threads met in a particular Adivasi-NGO in South India (with affiliations to organisations in the UK and Germany), and to demonstrate how development activists there hybridised these diverse (and often divergent) indigeneity narratives in order to harness them for various social movement and development ends. Fourthly, to identify the dominant activist narratives of Adivasi indigeneity prevalent in this NGO and the activists' narrative strategies.

Indigenous peoples (IP) face multiple marginalisations and minoritisations, both being, and being represented as on the margins of the state and of modernity, and thus on the periphery of the periphery of dominant societal processes. As Nair (2008: 6) writes, '[i]ndigenous communities, which are inherently linked to the process of modernization, are placed outside the sphere of modernization'. At the same time, one has to move beyond entrenched dichotomies, such as tradition vs. modernity, state vs. IP/rural peasants (see Bates 1995: 117), to take into account IP's own alternative contemporary modernities. This touches on issues of indigenous self-representation and self-determination, sovereignty, self-government, autonomy, and on issues of loss and subsequent resurgence of indigenous identities. This is influenced by the global spread of indigeneity narratives, and the concomitant rise of indigenism as a political mobilisation strategy in various localities – often proving to be a double-edged sword for IP. This produces local, global, and glocal indigeneity narratives and positionalities, testifying to the multidimensionality and conceptual fluidity of the concept of indigeneity in the twenty-first century, arising out of the complex political and economic projects it is harnessed to and for. On the part of the scholar, this necessitates the conceptual weighing of the strengths and weaknesses of a concept hinged on un-tethered and fluid indigenous identity constructions, i.e. to gauge its conceptual resilience by analysing the social reality and impact of the idea of indigeneity. This encompasses an analysis of the indigenist narrative strategies of deconstructionism vs. strategic essentialism, the deconstruction of essentialising dichotomies between tribal/indigenous/Adivasi and non-tribal/indigenous/Adivasi, and the exposure of claims to racial purity, and neo-traditionalist and ethno-nationalist tendencies

that indigenism often harbours. Also, the specific imaginations of indigenous peoples held by alter-globalisation activists, and issues of re/presentation in connection with decolonisation and postcolonialism, i.e. decolonisation through critique of external representations and reappropriation of self-representation, have to be taken into account. Issues of authenticity and its production, and the specificities of Asian/Indian/Adivasi indigeneities play an equally important role in this discussion.

NGO and activist cultures, and the relationship between activist ideology and everyday, post-indigenous Adivasi lifeworlds in India are often fraught with dissonances. The disjunctures in the conceptualisations of Adivasis, on the one hand, between Adivasis and non-Adivasis, and, on the other, between local actors (in this case a movement for land and against economic exploitation), and international allies (adhering largely to the ideology of eco-romanticism) manifest in the following dominant narratives about Adivasis recorded during several research periods between 2003 and 2011 in South India, the UK, and Germany: indigeneity, environmental stewardship, cultural unity, community/family, Adivasi glorification, and the narrative of 'the story' itself (i.e. the origin story or 'founding myth' of this particular NGO representing several different Adivasi communities).

In this article I scrutinise these dominant narratives' origins in the Adivasi activists' imaginaries of Adivasi personhood, to which I now turn, and their incompatibility with post-indigenous Adivasi life realities. Consequently, I call for Adivasis to reclaim self-representation.

Activist imaginaries of Adivasi indigeneities and their problems

The activists' central Adivasi indigeneity imaginaries analysed in this article are: the Adivasi as 1) the culture hero(ine), 2) the indigenous paragon, 3) the eco-activist ambassador, 4) the organic intellectual, 5) the anti-secular, postmodern Adivasi, and 6) the Christian Adivasi.

This is the activist imaginary that produces the activist narrative of Adivasi glorification and Adivasi superiority. The central motif around which this imaginary revolves is that of the 'hero(ine)'s journey', i.e. the portrayal of Adivasis as culture hero(in)es in the activists' narrative of tribal ownership. Activist narratives about Adivasis make use of the classic narrative device of the 'hero's (or heroine's) journey', or monomyth, as Campbell (1949) termed it. Sachs (2012) describes this motif as follows:

> Acting much in the way myths have for millennia, this approach builds stories that point out the possibility for human growth and even transcendence. […] They inspire action by painting a picture of an imperfect world that can be repaired through heroic action.

Activist stories such as the story about an Adivasi standing up to a powerful landowner, one of the central founding stories of the movement's land rights 'revolution', are an example of activists' narrativisation of events spearheaded by Adivasi 'hero(ine)s'.

Often, however, heroic positionings of Adivasis turn out to be imagined revolutionary agency. The contradiction in the representation of Adivasis as protagonists in 'hero(ine)'s journeys' is that it often casts Adivasis in roles previously hardly prevalent in their societies. Firstly, as revolutionaries spearheading a movement to reclaim land; secondly, as claimants and therefore owners of 'their' land they previously had a non-materialistic relationship with and did not have titles for; and, thirdly, as individual claimants of such land rights – an idea at odds with the collective ethos of many tribal societies. As a result, activists' telos of tribal ownership – i.e. for Adivasis to become both land owners and to eventually completely take over the running of 'their' movement and organisations – at the end and as a result of Adivasis' 'hero(ine)s' journeys' – exhibited certain inconsistencies in this organisation.

The narrative of tribal ownership

The central incongruity surrounding the narrative of tribal ownership in this movement revolved around the gap between, on the one hand, some of the non-tribal activists' aspirations for Adivasis

to eventually be able to take over all aspects of the NGO, and thus claim ownership of 'their' organisation, and, on the other, the reality that this was not the case and that other non-tribal activists continued to hire 'outsiders', on the basis of what the latter deemed to be their more 'realistic' assessment that the Adivasis were 'not yet ready for it'. Tribal ownership had taken on the nature of a mythical ideal. Bumiller (1990: 143) identifies a similar problem for SEWA (India's Self-employed Women's Association):

> After much internal debate and some resistance, SEWA had brought in committed professionals from the outside, all of them women, to manage the cooperatives, the bank and the union activities. This ran counter to the organisation's philosophy of bringing people up from the bottom.

Flynn (2013: 11) describes a notion among MST (Movimento Dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra, Brazil) activists similar to the one some of the non-tribal activists held about Adivasis – that they first needed to be 'educated' in the 'proper' way to fulfil the NGO's targets that would lead to greater Adivasi economic self-reliance.

Two conflicting notions concerning tribal ownership could thus be found in this Adivasi-NGO – often held by the same person: on the one hand, that the Adivasis should take over, but, on the other, that they were not (yet) able to do so. These were two sides of the same coin of an – even if well-intentioned – patronising view of Adivasis specific to NGOs. Much of NGO culture is an exercise in and of power over others – the more emphatically this is denied by NGOs, the more this appears to be the case. Wanting to 'protect' Adivasis from the 'outside world', to 'help' them 'enter the mainstream on their own terms', 'with heads held high', can point to a patronising attitude pervasive in NGO cultures. The 'on their own terms' rhetoric championed by this NGO helped cover up the fact that it was in reality not the Adivasis themselves who were doing everything on their own, but were in most cases facilitated by non-Adivasi NGO staff – no matter how invisible a presence the latter would like to have maintained. Ideally, the NGO founders wanted to strike the first 'match' to incite a movement, to produce the first 'spark' that set Adivasi consciousnesses 'afire', then anticipated the fire to spread, and have Adivasis keep it burning thereafter. Instead, after 27 years of involvement (in 2011) of this NGO with the Adivasis, it turned out to be a constant

cycle of periodical reignition by the activists themselves. Their vision of their withdrawal after ten years and of the complete handover to the Adivasis had not yet materialised. This shows the actual impossibility of setting a time after which to 'withdraw' because there is no withdrawal from a movement that by definition is a 'revolution' that continuously needs to reinvent itself. The NGO founders' idealistic notion of the serial 'planting of a seed of a revolution', and their subsequent moving on to the next project, did not pan out in the way they had intended it to. Consequently, the rationale and usefulness of the activists' casting of Adivasis as imagined revolutionary hero(ine)s is questionable.

Imagined revolutionaries?

> *[I]f development was the God that failed, it was never an adivasi God. People were never enchanted by the myth of development; how could they be when they only experienced its crushing exploitation? There could be no disillusionment when people had no illusions in the first place. The assimilation of adivasi struggles into an anti-development agenda neglects history – that people have always fought against outside oppression, on their own terms. Their history of resistance long precedes the advent of development.* (Baviskar 1995: 241)

Banerjee (2009) writes that 'the expectation seemed to have taken hold that at the end of the day, the Adivasi would come through as the final, radical agency in contemporary politics'. Key to understanding the activist renderings of Adivasis as original revolutionary heroes and heroines, in the stories they wove about them, is a Marxist analysis of the Adivasi as the original radical. It is the appeal of the latter that the activists used as narrative currency in their endeavours to connect anti-capitalist and environmentalist activists, for their mutual, and hence for the NGO's benefit. It can be called into question, however, whether the international indigenous peoples narrative is actually a useful one for Adivasis. Instead, it can be a straightjacket because it forces those subscribed to it (whether of their own or other's accord) to adhere to certain cultural stereotypes – in the activists' case, for instance, the Adivasi as the original eco-revolutionary fighting corporate power, or as the class struggle hero(ine) of leftist groups in Kerala.

Problems arose, for instance, when Adivasis did not live up to the heroic ideals painted of them in the narratives about them, such as in the case of one Adivasi's alcoholism, or one tribe's deceitful

behaviour that led to their disenfranchisement from the NGO. Baviskar (1995: 234) poignantly expresses the discrepancies between revolutionary ideal and the exigencies of present(-day) concerns in Adivasi activism:

> It [the Andolan] tries to repudiate dominant political values through the moral pressure of passive resistance. […] While the Andolan asserts the establishment of an alternative state structure – village self-rule – based on participation and decentralized power, the need to achieve rapid results has compelled the activists to temporarily set aside these stances for more pragmatic action.

In reality, the activists' refined, esoteric, (radical) Christian, Liberation Theology, partly Buddhist, and partly religious, spiritual, non-materialist/environmentalist views of Adivasis they tried to realise in their development work were often at odds with Adivasis' own modern, present-day conceptions and realities of life, partly brought about by this organisation's development interventions since the 1980s. Ironically, the activists themselves sabotaged their development efforts with a certain type of tribal romanticism.

Baviskar (1995: 232) observes that 'Adivasi politics does not always embody the principles of progressive thought. These frequent conflicts show that the Adivasi community is not an idyll of harmony and co-operation, but is lived as much through dissent and friction'. These concerns, however, tend to be ignored by scholars and activists alike. As Baviskar (1995: 241) writes,

> however noble the cause, appropriation leads to the mediation of the adivasi consciousness by that of the scholar. The discourse of the general theory of development does not allow people to speak for themselves; it tends to be deaf to people's own understanding of their predicament. […] These areas of politics which are autonomous from development tend to be marginalized, even though, ironically, they come closest to constituting truly 'indigenous' 'alternative political culture'.

The NGO activists were prone to treating slightly less positive Adivasi attributes as vestiges of a former 'traditional' Adivasi culture that was deemed unsuitable for their notion of 'modern' tribal culture. For, ideally, the combination of positive tribal cultural attributes and modern vocational skills[2] should enable both Adivasis' future cultural survival, as well as economic prosperity. This, however, was jeopardised by the underlying tension between activists' idealised versions of Adivasi culture and the Adivasis' lived realities, punctuated by alcoholism, domestic violence, disease, malnutrition, debt, etc., even after 27 years of 'development'. The activists themselves were fully

[2] Such as IT and tea cultivation, hence the article's title question, 'chai for change?'

aware of these contradictions, i.e. both the contradiction between their conceptualisation of Adivasi indigeneity and tribal reality, and that some of the 'negative' Adivasi cultural traits (such as alcoholism) had intensified as a result of increased cash flow thanks to their 'development' efforts. The activists' reaction to the perceived gap between ideal and reality (deemed pernicious to Adivasi development), inevitably consisted of an intensification of previous efforts, such as the stepping up of anti-alcohol campaigns. While these intensified efforts did have an effect, it tended to be short-lived, often because of renewed economic difficulties brought on by macroeconomic changes. Culture, depending on how it was conceptualised and realised, served both as a tool and constituted a hindrance to development.

A reason for the dissonance between activist ideology and everyday Adivasi experience, and why much of activist rhetoric often felt contrived, may be that 'we cannot automatically "read off", or read into, the everyday experiences of adivasi an ideology that is derived from an external critique of development' (Baviskar 1995: 238). Baviskar (1995: 240) goes on to say that 'in trying to demonstrate that the critique of development actually exists in the lives of adivasis, intellectuals end up creating caricatures'. Romantic idealisation can therefore be counterproductive:

> Idealization overstates the transformatory potential of adivasis acting in small, localized movements. It tends to downplay the power of dominant classes. It also underestimates the help and co-operation that is needed to challenge domination […] Idealization ignores the role of the outside activists, whose presence empowers local peoples' struggles and transforms their consciousness. (Baviskar 1995: 242)

Van Schendel (2011: 28) writes that '[a] romantic celebration of indigeneity (or autochthony) may lead to disturbing or paradoxical results. It may produce an intensification of the "politics of belonging"'. The activists' idealised versions of Adivasi culture in their stories, no matter how well-intended, often ended up being counterproductive and sometimes even harmful for Adivasis' own self-directed development. Ultimately, they chiefly served the purpose of attracting and securing external support from non-Adivasi audiences receptive to such idealised stories of Adivasi life, and thus only marginally represented real Adivasis' daily lives on the local level.

It is a fallacy to summarily equate Adivasi peoples all across India with 'original rebels', considering they have different regionally and ethnically disparate histories. As Baviskar (1995:

241) observes, '[g]lossing over the contradictions of people's lives is a tactic that prevents action towards their possible resolution'. What kind of representational practice could then truly enable such action? In fact, only the reclaiming of Adivasi self-representation by as broad an Adivasi base as possible would be a truly emancipatory form of representation. This, of course, does not guarantee the prevention of exclusions among such an Adivasi base, in terms of socio-economic status, gender, class, and caste (which – contrary to popular representation – does exist in certain forms in certain sections of the tribal population). It is such representational exclusion, on the basis of differential power relations, that any form of activism constantly needs to be mindful of.

Moving on from imagined revolutionary Adivasi heroism, the next activist imaginary to be analysed adds a 'special' identity marker to the Adivasi hero(ine) – indigeneity.

The imaginary of the Adivasi as an indigenous paragon

The imaginary of indigeneity is characterised by several problematic notions: the notion of indigenous purity, elusive authenticity, the invention of tradition, the insider/outsider dichotomy, exclusive and excluding identities, and reverse orientalism.

The notion of indigeneity plays a central role in how indigenous activist organisations select the tribal/indigenous peoples 'worthy' of their patronage, protection, and campaigning clout. The criteria/characteristics IP have to fulfil thus come to determine how people have to present themselves to be recognised as indigenous/tribal. The degrees of suffering they have gone through, for instance, contribute to determining whether they 'deserve' championship by (international) activist organisations, such as the Dongria Kondh by Survival International. Accordingly, Adivasis, as a result of these representational power hierarchies, reconceptualise themselves in outsiders' terms, in order to acquire the 'fruits' of development (Mosse 2005: 78). Who determines who is indigenous (enough) is largely decided by non-indigenous people. The criteria of the concept of indigeneity determined by non-indigenous people are in turn highly problematic – not least because many of them turn out to be fictional.

Indigenous fictions and the invention of tradition

Fieldwork diary, 17 November 2009
Activist: 'They [the Adivasis] did not know about this Adivasi thing before we came here.' So in how far is 'the Adivasi' contrived? Imposed?

Fieldwork diary, 28 November 2009
Addendum to the 'production of the indigenous Adivasi' debate: an activist from another organisation today commented about how this NGO introduced the term 'Adivasi'. Also, the name of the indigenous cultural centre is not being decided by the Adivasis themselves, but by the lead activist.

Many of the activists' stories demonstrate that fictionalisation is at work in many different directions – Adivasis creating fiction for non-Adivasis, Adivasis unintentionally creating non-fiction for other Adivasis (e.g. in one case an Adivasi of one tribe believing the 'tall stories' of sylvan mastery of the narratively gifted member of another tribe deemed the 'masters' of the forest), activists in turn fictionalising Adivasis' fiction for non-Adivasis, anthropologists retelling (and in turn fictionalising) activists' fiction of Adivasis' fiction for non-Adivasis, and so on.

Activist stories about Adivasi indigeneity represented Adivasis in a particular way and for particular purposes. They appeared 'true' because certain elements contained therein, and the way these were presented by the activists, corresponded to certain audiences' expectations of what stories about Adivasis should be about. As Mosse (2005: 230) argues for development policy,

> [p]olicy discourse generates mobilising metaphors ('participation', 'partnership', 'governance') whose vagueness, ambiguity and lack of conceptual precision is required to conceal ideological differences so as to allow compromise and the enrolment of different interests, to distribute agency and to multiply the criteria of success within project systems. […] Good policy is unimplementable.

One of the activists, for example, when we were collating and editing stories as told by Adivasis themselves and recorded earlier by other NGO staff, commented on how 'odd' a particular Adivasi phrasing sounded, and the need to change it to make it intelligible for a non-Adivasi audience such as ours. These modifications added up to refashioning Adivasi characters in the likeness of the activists' imaginaries of what Adivasis (should) look like. The activists' pictures of idealised Adivasis had over the years been influenced by their contact with international audiences' expectations of cultural stereotypes Adivasis should adhere to. This was a two-way process –

Adivasi cultural traits influenced audiences' perceptions of 'indigenous' peoples, and Adivasis came to be recast (or redefined themselves) in audiences' terms of what it meant to be 'indigenous'.

Indigeneity, as an extremely malleable and equivocal category, lends itself well to the invention of tradition. Its ambiguity is its strength. Adivasi identity was not something that was innate to these tribal people. The bow and arrow symbol chosen for the Adivasi sangam, for instance, was supposed to represent the political unity of the different tribes. The bow and arrow, however, was chiefly the symbol of only one of the tribes. Steur (2011: 61) observes similar mixing and matching of Adivasi identity elements for the AGMS (Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha) in Kerala:

> Adivasi identity was thus not something that was always already organic to AGMS participants. Those people most active in the movement, namely adivasis from agricultural workers' communities, often had to borrow symbols of dominant ''adivasi-ness'' that they had absolutely no affiliation with, such as the Kurichia bow and arrow represented in the AGMS flag.

Tilche (2011: 35) reminds us that the past traumas IP have experienced may engender the abandonment of certain past cultural traditions and a search for or 'fictive production' of new cultural identities (often more honourable/'better' than previous identities). This is not to say, however, that these new identities are less 'authentic'. Despite the friction between activists' and non-activists' understandings of indigeneity, 'native people […] have become not victims but inventive agents of a tangled, open-ended modernity – their returns to the land, performances of heritage, and diasporic ties are strategies for moving toward "traditional futures"' (Clifford 2013). It has to be questioned, however, who creates these 'traditional futures'– the IP/Adivasis themselves or those who claim to represent them. After all, whatever the origin of indigenous fictions, '[t]he romantic celebration of the 'indigenous' tells us more about the celebrator than about the celebrated' (van Schendel 2011: 28). In the NGO activists' case, these were celebrators considerably concerned with Adivasi cultural purity – another central element of the imaginary of the indigenous Adivasi ideal.

Notions of indigenous purity and problematic naturalness

Fieldwork diary, 20 April 2010

One of the activists told me about a fight between the 'modern' and the more 'traditional' side of one of the tribes. According to this activist, the modern side have for some time (15 years back) been quite 'modernised'. Their side, however, prefer to hang on to traditions. The activist is of the opinion that they should do their rituals properly, for instance, the men should not wear shirts when dancing, but only the mundu [garment worn by men similar to the dhoti].

The NGO's activists displayed an overriding concern with tribal cultural purity. One of the activists, for instance, told me that vicinity to the city was devastating for tribal villages, stating that 'they would go to the cinema and drink, things like that'. For the activists, the difference between Adivasis 'worthy' and 'unworthy' of their patronage was crucial. Their assessment of Adivasis' 'worthiness' was based largely on the tribal peoples' adherence to the activists' notions of typical tribal cultural traits. One of the tribes, for instance, no longer conformed to their stereotypical conception of an authentically indigenous Adivasi after they had cheated on the organisation. Tilche (2011: 55) identifies a similar concern, i.e. of who was considered less and purer an Adivasi, at the Adivasi Academy in Gujarat. Such concerns with preserving, or rather constructing indigenous purity, were also visible in the selective masking of 'uncomfortable' elements of indigenous cultures in school materials on IP produced by an affiliated organisation in Germany.

In this context, Shah (2007: 1824) notes that for many young Jharkhandi Adivasis, seasonal labour migration to the brick kilns has become preferable to the puritanical indigenous identity politics at home, which conceptualises this type of migration as 'a threat to the purity and regulation of the social and sexual tribal citizen'. There, young Adivasis try to escape what Sissons (2005) terms 'oppressive authenticity'. This demonstrates that the demand for the elusively 'authentic' can quickly turn oppressive for its bearers.

Elusive and oppressive authenticity

Central to indigeneity is the performance of authenticity. As Conklin (1997) demonstrates for the 'authentically indigenous' Kayapo, authenticity equals rhetorical power and therefore political influence. The performance of authenticity is central to the performance of Adivasi indigeneity. Examples for this were the tribal dances performed by the tribal school children as well as the

adults for visitors to the organisation. This had become part of the particular kind of 'development tourism', which was an integral part of NGO life, containing elements of 'staged authenticity' (MacClancy 2002: 428).

The related concerns of purity and authenticity in turn form the basis for indigeneity's 'exclusiveness'.

The insider/outsider dichotomy and exclusive and excluding identity representations

Indigeneity produces dichotomies along the lines of 'indigenous/non-indigenous' and 'Adivasi/non-Adivasi'. This can quickly engender processes of exclusion, on the basis of exclusive identity constructions. As van Schendel (2011: 30) warns,

> political entrepreneurs […] create ideologies and practices of belonging that point to claims of *exclusive* rights and to strategies of purification that may result in ethnic cleansing. […] In the current global conjuncture, progressive ideas about 'indigenous people' may therefore fuse with xenophobic ideologies of belonging.

Tilche (2011: 27), in her work on the Adivasi Academy in Gujarat, writes that 'in order to be recognised they also need to be 'distinguished' (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2006: 186), comply with human rights standards, be sustainable and positive, and possibly folk or indigenous (Kurin 2004: 69)'. She further identifies 'community and identity as a prerequisite to demands for funding and recognition'. This, however, she suggests, 'in turn clears the way for a series of exclusions – of those identities that are not 'pure' or 'indigenous' enough, often according to external evaluations' (Tilche 2011: 28). Most often, the criteria determining more or less 'indigenousness' are thus externally ascribed and exclusive criteria.

It is this exclusiveness of Adivasi identities propounded by NGOs such as the one in this case study that is one of my points of criticism. Such excluding exclusiveness often amounted to a distortion of local tribal people's lives, in terms of the realpolitik of their daily lives, e.g. the cultural, socio-economic, linguistic, and religious differences between the different tribes, and the conflicts and fault lines between them predating the NGO's involvement. These betrayed the activists' idealised picture of tribal cultural unity for development purposes.

It is equally objectionable and contributes to an exclusive conception of Adivasis that stories of and about Adivasis were told in non-Adivasi terms, specifically in activist, environmentalist/eco-romanticist terms. Despite the fact that the activist narrators of Adivasi lives claimed to use 'indigenous' terminology and emic concepts, they fell short of their own aspirations. Even though the activist storytellers of Adivasi stories did not do so purposefully, they often constructed Adivasis as a wholly different ethnic category (and even race) – a people whose lifestyle and culture was not compatible with those of non-Adivasis. They created an aura of exclusivity around Adivasis and their cultures, barring access to the uninitiated, implying that the understanding of Adivasi cultures took a lifetime's commitment (such as their own). They also constructed Adivasi lifeworlds as a cultural utopia that was simultaneously lost in the past and unattainable in the future unless the measures prescribed by the activists to prevent cultural erosion were taken.

Possibly young Adivasis' perceived lack of interest in their own history stemmed not only from a generational disconnect, but also from a lack of opportunity to create their own history, or to form their own understanding of their parents' history, independent from the constant re-enactment of their parents' original struggle encouraged by the NGO. In the face of such powerful representational monopolies on Adivasi narrativity, it may appear futile to call for Adivasis to reclaim their own storytelling. Specifically, since tribal peoples in India often either do not lay 'claim', in proprietary non-Adivasi terms, to such representation to the non-Adivasi world, or have less desire to represent themselves than non-Adivasis have of representing them.

It is too simplistic a view though to regard the different Indian/local depictions of Adivasis as merely another form of someone else writing history about and for Adivasis, in the vein of colonial literature on tribal peoples. Rather, this is a complex interplay between activist representations, tribal stereotypes held by intended and unintended audiences, and Adivasis' frequent reluctance at self-representation.

Not only is indigeneity an excluding, but also – related to this – an orientalising discourse, through which claims to Adivasis are articulated.

Claims to Adivasis by way of orientalising discourses

Demmer (2008) notes that Adivasis are known to use subterfuge/cunning and feigned ignorance when interacting with people perceived to be outsiders to their community, even after years. One of the activists once commented that he will never fully understand tribal peoples. The purpose such (unintended) othering serves is questionable. This approach created the appearance that Adivasis are 'wholly different' cultures, and thus worth championing and preserving. This represented classic orientalism on the part of the activists, in that '[t]he assimilation of adivasis into different ideological projects parallels the way in which the East came to be defined in different Orientalist constructions' (Baviskar 1995: 240). By subscribing to the classically orientalist trope that Adivasis cannot be left behind on the path to modernity, the activists indirectly deny agency and reason to Adivasis. This is a way of positioning the locus of agency firmly in the activists' camp.

Such an orientalising discourse in part serves to justify the NGO's continued presence and intervention as development workers, and thus their life's work. The boundaries between Adivasis and non-Adivasis had become blurred, to the extent that the originally envisaged withdrawal had in fact become highly unlikely. Continually, circumstances and events seemed to conspire against such a withdrawal, e.g. the sangam secretary's death, increasing funding exigencies, obligations, and workloads, or the difficulty of obtaining funding for Adivasis to train as higher qualified staff such as accountants and nurses.

A different reading is offered by Ferguson's (1994) 'anti-politics' governmentality perspective on NGOs forming part of the development apparatus. As he argues, development's main effect has been to de-politicise questions of how resources should be distributed through reinforcing bureaucratic processes and therefore power. On the NGO's relative lack of political involvement (save for occasional demonstrations and petitions to district-level officials) on the regional as well as national level two of its activists explained to me that NGOs were banned from engaging in political activity in the state. At the same time as depriving NGOs such as them of a legitimate political voice in the public arena (which they had nonetheless, through other channels

and by virtue of their powerful brokerage position enabled by external financial backing), this state-enforced political ban enabled NGOs to position themselves as relatively a-political actors seeking merely 'development' solutions (e.g. conflict mediation in the management of human-wildlife co-existence, biodiversity conservation, introduction of or promotion of supposedly more sustainable indigenous land use practices). These, however, concerned very political decisions - i.e. the allocation of scarce resources such as land, water and minor forest produce such as honey in a resource-rich environmental context characterised by population pressure and over-exploitation. At the same time, it was this 'logic of scarcity' and its mitigation and management for the benefit of its rightful claimants (i.e. the Adivasis) that contributed to the NGOs' ideological justification of their presence.

Taking orientalism into account, I have so far suggested that the activist imaginaries of the Adivasi culture hero(ine) and the indigenous paragon can represent fundamentally othering discourses – especially if such imaginaries originate not in Adivasis' own, but the activists' thinking. I now turn to another problematic and equally orientalising imaginary, in which the culture hero(ine) and the indigenous paragon join forces to save the world from environmental destruction. This is the activist imaginary of the Adivasi as environmental ambassador.

The imaginary of the Adivasi as an eco-activist ambassador

This is the activist imaginary that helps create the narrative of environmental stewardship. In this imaginary, Adivasis are turned into eco-activist ambassadors, who help the non-indigenous world indigenise. Central to this imaginary are the two activist-originated attributes of sustainability and anti-capitalism, which activists project onto tribal cultures. This is a notion developed by the activists on the basis of their experience of Adivasis' adherence to and rejection of certain livelihood practices.

Ecological sustainability and anti-capitalism: 'indigenising' the non-indigenous world

Our attitude should be one of learning from them as, unlike us, they lead a need-based and not a greed-based life. (Santhanam 2002)

The NGO activists widely employed rhetoric loaned from international eco-romanticist indigenous discourses. For instance, in an exchange of messages between Germans and Adivasis via a German volunteer in 2013, the recurring environmentalist theme of curbing resource use to increase personal happiness and wellbeing and to ensure the future sustainability of resources was prominent:

She also took the [paper] 'tea leaves' collected at the Church Day with her. On them visitors to the Church Day had written that they had too little time, moments of quiet, calmness, and tolerance, too little solidarity, joy, renouncement, gratitude, and social cohesion. There is too much stress, consumption, food, and waste. They do, however, have sufficient food, money, and freedom in their lives. Many other things were mentioned and may inspire the Adivasi to further think about what they want to fight for, what they do not necessarily need, and what is worth preserving. (Newsletter Aug. 2013, my translation from German)

The NGO's (comparatively speaking, elite) activists portrayed Adivasis (and other disadvantaged communities) as a source of moral and environmental conscience – when it was in fact non-Adivasis projecting idealised and supposedly lost moral consciences on to Adivasis.

An interesting case of the origins of the landscape belonging elsewhere (Varma 2003: 224) was that of the NGO's furniture production from the 'highly pernicious' weed lantana, and its concomitant resignification by the organisation, i.e. as the weed's defeat at the creative hands of Adivasis. The activists construed this to signify postcolonial victory over foreign forces. This was testimony not only to the inventive conceptual inclusionism of the activists' Adivasi identity constructions, but also another case of the NGO's marriage of anti-capitalist rhetoric and the capitalist income practices it encouraged and helped Adivasis to develop.

Campbell (2007: 107) asks, 'why it might be politically expedient for indigenous peoples to present themselves as "responsible guardians of the Earth's resources" and ally themselves with environmentalists'. It is indeed legitimate to ask why it might be rhetorically expedient for environmental activists to latch their causes onto so-called IP, and, specifically, why this NGO

chose to work with tribal peoples. Indeed, it was this line of argumentation – that a 'special relationship' to land entailed a 'more' legitimate right to it – that the development activists used as a clincher to argue their self-reliance strategy on the basis of indigeneity. Indigenist-environmentalist arguments speak so strongly, and activists preferred to avail themselves of these kinds of narratives because of their connection to powerful issues:

> Indigenous people living in environments declared threatened have got the hang of the reasoning behind the pre-eminence of universal interest over local interests and how they can make the best of it. Accordingly they have begun to present themselves as the keepers of nature – an abstract notion which does not appear in their languages or cultures – to whom the international community should entrust the mission to keep watch at their level on environments which it is becoming clearer everyday have been shaped by their practices. (Descola 2008)

Even though the link between the protection of the environment by local IP, on the basis of environmentalist motives, is often a spurious one, and even though the eco-indigenist activists in this NGO were partly aware of this, they were fond of citing examples of local efforts of environmental protection and resistance against environmental degradation in India, such as Bishnoi/Rajasthan and the Chipko Movement in Uttarakhand. This was the case even though the activists were aware that, in the case of Chipko, people's motivation stemmed less from notions of Western environmentalism, and more from the protection of livelihoods dependent on access to forest produce (Guha 1990). As Baviskar (1995: 241), in this context, writes about past tribal livelihood practices,

> [t]heir low-impact use of nature in earlier time was probably as much adventitious as it may have been deliberate; adivasis were limited by demography and technology from using resources destructively. Therefore it becomes hard to say whether their 'traditions' can be uncritically extolled as epitomizing sustainability, and what potential they hold as an ideal in the present, vastly changed, context.

The use of such environmentalist narratives, despite their well-known conceptual flaws, was a rhetorical tactic of the activists, mostly aimed at disarming anti-Adivasi propaganda. Again, the exclusiveness of the category of the indigenous Adivasi, on the basis of which activists argued the latter's more legitimate right to land was, however, the main Achilles heel in their argumentation, since indigeneity is a concept not exclusively claimed by Adivasis.

Significantly, the rhetorical coup of turning anti-Adivasi rhetoric on its head was not claimed exclusively by non-Adivasi activists. C.K. Janu, Kerala's Adiya tribal AGMS leader, at the time

expressed her non-acceptance of the tribal backwardness narrative by stating that 'now we say in fact everybody should follow Adivasi culture, for the good of the world' (Steur 2011: 70).

The critique of putting words reminiscent of Rousseau's idealism into tribal people's mouths and the exposure of myths about 'primitive ecological wisdom' as environmentalist fantasies and escapism are by now widely known. More often than not they lead to the burden and subsequent non-fulfillment of such expectations, which may actually disadvantage the people thus idolized. Tsing (2007: 57) observes on the rise of ecological Marxism (see also Baviskar 1997: 195), with its dual concern of social justice and ecological sustainability, that,

> the network around 'environmental stewardship' [is] most problematic as it can lead to a 'natural resource tug-of-war' and that the real issue that always undermines environmentalist conceptions of indigenous utopias is the fact that capitalist resource use structures even the most oppositional design for people and nature in indigenous zones.

The NGO's representation of Adivasis as environmentalist paragons often achieved the opposite of its intended outcome, being limiting and possibly even damaging because of its privileging of a particular view of Adivasis, especially when Adivasis did not adhere to environmentalist stereotypes. Balancing representation for different audiences is a perilous tightrope walk and considering the two-way process that representation always is, authors are never in control of the reception of their texts. Activists campaigning/writing on behalf of Adivasis/IP would therefore do well to choose their language and representational strategies more carefully, so as both not to sabotage their own work and, more importantly, avoid possible damage to the lives of those they write about, as a result of unsound and tendentious representation. What 'proper' representation may consist of is a debate that will most likely never be settled. What it is not, is possible to point out though, such as Stephen Corry (director of Survival International at the time) referring to the Yanomami shaman and indigenous rights activist Davi Kopenawa as a '"child" of the forest' (Corry 2014). This infantilising designation supports stereotypes of and tendentiousness in the representation of indigenous and/or tribal peoples. Such examples serve to remind us of the perils of (mis-)representation – in particular, that the noble savage myth can be as dangerous as the brutal savage myth. It is for this reason that attempts by activists and/or anthropologists to reclaim and

resignify such loaded terms as 'cannibalism' and worn-out concepts such as 'harmonious relationship with "nature"' often backfire. To take the eco-indigenist concept of IP 'living in harmony with nature' as an example – its popular connotations include voluntary simplicity, responsible and sustainable resource use, and the nurturing of human/non-human relationships. Such a lifestyle, however, is essentially a luxury, which most IP cannot afford today because they lack land. Most Adivasis do not have access to the resources that would allow them to develop a harmonious relationship with their environment(s). Instead, sheer survival often necessitates exploitative environmental practices, thus, ironically, rendering these people non-indigenous and hence less worthy of protection. In this case, environmentalist and eco-romanticist ascriptions and Adivasis' lived realities are starkly at odds with ground realities, and, above all, too one-dimensional. Often, this discrepancy in the politics of Adivasi representation has more to do with the needs and desires of nature-deprived urban audiences than with Adivasis themselves.

Connected to the heroic, indigenous, and eco-ambassadorial imaginaries of Adivasis is the activist imaginary of the tribal as an organic intellectual.

The imaginary of the Adivasi as an organic intellectual

The activists tried to position and develop Adivasis into 'organic intellectuals', a term coined by Gramsci in his endeavour to distinguish between politically disinterested 'traditional' intellectuals and politically active 'organic' intellectuals who speak on behalf of a certain class or group of people (Hoare and Nowell-Smith 1998 [1971]: 10). The way the NGO tried to do this was through their 'culture' efforts.

In contrast to the managerial world of development, Adivasi/tribal cultures tend not to draw modernity's clear line between the secular and the sacred. Clearly, the activists' attempts at restorifying development, and thereby not just foregrounding the requisites of Adivasi cultures in their development work, but also infusing development with tribal culture, was an attempt at breaking down the boundaries between the sacred and the secular, and the material and non-

material/ideal. Such a dichotomisation is again a non-Adivasi concept, however. The promotion of *kaavus* (sacred groves) by the NGO can be seen as an attempt to revive the sacred as a promising field of resistance. While the designation or resignification/reinvention of the tribal sacred as a site and means of Adivasi resistance by the activists may not always have been sustainable (as evidenced by the rituals' financial dependence on the organisation and their dependence in turn on external funding), the reintegration of the spiritual aspects of tribal cultures into Adivasis' daily lives provided an ideological means for political expression and action/resistance. The expression of the political (demand for land/education/health etc. rights) was facilitated by the unification not only of different tribal identities under one common umbrella Adivasi identity, but also by the reunification of different spheres of tribal life, previously rent apart by land dispossession and cultural disintegration. In addition to the revival of *kaavus* other such endeavours were the faithful observance of the singing of tribal songs and the playing of tribal games in school every day, in an attempt to instil in tribal children from an early age the suffusion of everyday life with tribalness/Adivasiness, as imagined by the activists to have previously been the case in bygone times (see the Golden Age problematic below), in their desire to return to the pre-modern. Tribal dances, songs, rituals, etc. – expressions of tribal culture in short – metonymically became 'Adivasi education'. This was expressly designed by the activists to foster new forms of tribalness, by the melding of previously distinct (and even caste-like separated) tribal cultures, e.g. through having the children in the NGO's school sing each other's different tribal songs.

To what extent such 'prescribed' culture, as exemplified by the NGO's culture centre activities, tribal culture in the school's curriculum, or the tribal dancing out of context at a cultural event, resembles 'real' (if there is such a thing at all) Adivasi culture ultimately remains a matter of speculation. The boundaries between 'real' and 'artificial' culture were always fluid, and culture was always a field of contestation, accommodation, adoption, adaptation, and ultimately circumstantially contingent creative fabrication. Undoubtedly, the encouragement of the 'revitalisation' of tribal cultures by the activists was a form of contesting the status quo of Adivasi

life realities in the region, by not accepting them as they were, but imagining how they might be. As Marcuse (1978) argues – that the aesthetic can function as an indirect catalytic for social change – tribal culture, in this context, was intended by the activists to serve as a means of subversion, in their effort to bring about social change. Through imagining an ideal(ised) version of a unified Adivasi culture, the activists tried to bring about the material realisation of this culture hitherto denied by reality.

All of the above points to the activists' positioning of Adivasis as 'organic intellectuals'. The rationale of the NGO's cultural camps for Adivasi youngsters, for instance, was the 'inculcation' of activist notions of Adivasi indigeneity in tribal youth. This was intended as a counter-initiative both to the camps organised by right-wing Hindutva organisations (such as the Sangh Parivar), and to what the activists perceived to be economic ideology threats, such as capitalism and concomitant consumerism, and its symptoms, such as addiction to alcohol and consumer goods. These camps were supposed to strengthen Adivasi adolescents' cultural grounding, so as to be able to withstand cultural conversion.

Nevertheless, by 2011 the positing of Adivasis as organic intellectuals had not yet yielded the results intended by the NGO. The activists' efforts to 'inoculate' tribal youngsters against the threats described above and to incentivise tribal culture in an environment increasingly suffused with tendencies opposed to traditional tribal cultures had proven not as successful as they had hoped. Possibly the task of rendering tribal culture more attractive than baazaria culture (Baviskar 2006, Baviskar 2007) was complicated by the activists' adherence to an anti-secular, postmodern Adivasi imaginary.

The imaginary of the anti-secular, postmodern Adivasi

Nanda (2003), in her study of Hindu supremacist ideologues' misuse of postmodern scholars' call for non-Western societies to develop their own decolonised science(s), raises the important criticism that the postmodernist Left has unwittingly aided the growth of reactionary modernism in

India. Equally, Kiely (1999) launched an attack against post-development, criticising it for empowering anti-modern fundamentalists and traditionalists, who may hold non-progressive and oppressive values. In this NGO's case, non-Adivasi social activists, in their attempt to establish claims to resources (such as land), based on indigenist rhetorical strategies, walked a perilous tightrope between successful indigenist assertion and potentially detrimental (even though inadvertent) cultural relativism, by positing 1) 'indigenous' as fundamentally different from surrounding non-indigenous mainstream societies, and 2) Adivasi cultures as operating according to such a fundamentally other, 'different' indigenous cultural logic.

While the adoption of indigenist rhetoric by the activists was a way of laying claim to their involvement with 'their tribals', it was this kind of indigenist cultural relativism that could be hijacked by reactionary social forces, such as the right-wing Hindu RSS. They twisted it to rhetorically serve their own claims to Adivasis, since – under RSS logic – tribal peoples needed to be co-opted 'back' into the Hindu fold and redefined as Hindu because assimilationist Hindu nationalism does not allow other groups' historical primacy on Indian soil. Adivasis' 'indigeneity' could thus be claimed for very sinister ends, turning the indigenous – as a fundamentally exclusive and excluding identity category – into a trap for Adivasis. Van Schendel's (2011: 28) warnings regarding the dangers of belonging, and the dark side of indigenist activists' alternative modernity constructions (argued for ethnic warfare-torn North-East India, but applicable elsewhere), are arguments the activists ignored at their own peril.

Equally, the re-spiritualisation of tribal cultures or introduction of new forms of spirituality by the NGO, e.g. in the form of the revival of traditional religious rituals such as the *kaavu* ritual, was not always an engagement with modernity 'on their own terms'. The anachronistic elements of the activists' eco-spiritualism prevented a truly culturally self-reliant twenty-first century Adivasi secularism from developing. The activists' motives underpinning such religious revival were too rooted in an imagined golden tribal past to allow a viable, modern, politically emancipated Adivasi identity to emerge from it. The demonisation of modernity, as the death knell for tribal cultures,

instead of a constructively critical engagement with modernity, and the failure of the activists' efforts to prevent cultural erosion and instil tribal youngsters with past tribal culture, were testament to the backfiring of reactionary postmodernism.

Notwithstanding the validity of 'indigenous' critiques, it is the danger of such cultural relativism being reinstrumentalised by interest groups ideologically diametrically opposed to Adivasi subaltern interests, such as the RSS described above, that is often underestimated. While the activists' hope for Adivasis' political emancipation and cultural empowerment is genuine, the particular rhetorical strategies of eco-romanticism, and cultural and territorial ancestralisation they had chosen, among others, were prone to being co-opted by ideologues of very different colour, whether fascist, Maoist, Hindu-fundamentalist, or from elsewhere on the religious and political extremist spectrum. The activists' indigeneity narratives may have unwittingly played into the hands of right-wing Hindu demagogues and furthered their Hinduisation drives of Adivasis. Unfortunately, Adivasis have not been exempted from indigenism as a reactionary, anti-secular force.

This points to deep-seated problems with the activists' imaginary of the anti-secular, postmodern Adivasi. This is the case not least because of problematic Christian influences in the NGO.

The imaginary of the Christian Adivasi

This imaginary formed the basis of the activists' narratives of community and family, and of cultural unity. These were – in line with the core activists' Christian belief – Christian-influenced ideas that the activists situated in and represented as if arising out of Adivasis' own cultural ethos. Activists' emphatic denial of the influence of their Christian roots on their work with Adivasis was a result of Christianity's problematic standing in India, and the history of Hindu right-wing reprisals against Christian-based organisations. The narrative of the religiously syncretic Adivasi that the activists liked to promote, whose cultural ethos supposedly revolved around traditional values such as family and ethnic unity had its roots simultaneously in the negation of, and the inevitable

influence of some of the activists' Christian-influenced belief system.

Christian influences

> *[T]heir first tactic was not to share their knowledge but to discern the motivation of outsiders that, in this case, appeared deviously clothed in the rhetoric of participation, facilitation or handing over control to local people. There were accusations that project workers were proselytising Christian missionaries, which had become a pervasive idiom of mistrust in the region.* (Mosse 2011: 159)

In India, Adivasis' relationship with Christianity, as with other dominant faiths, is both problematic and contested. This is partly because both Christian missionaries and Hindu nationalists indulge in cultural imposition. Christian-based and Hindu far-right-based movements, in their respective bids for Adivasi allegiance, are locked in a violent battle for Adivasi allegiance. In nationalist Hindu rhetoric, Christian-based organisations are portrayed as anti-nationalist because of their alleged inculcation of a demand for a separate state in Adivasis (Prasad 2003: 94). Also, the issue of foreign funding of Indian churches is a thorn in Hindu nationalists' side (Prasad 2003: 96). For Adivasis it is mostly economic necessity that is the paramount reason for their conversion to Christianity (Prasad 2003: 97).

In India, religiosity and ostensibly liberal, enlightened rationalism share an uneasy closeness. This is reflected in the role faith, and Christianity, in particular, played in the activists' work. Significantly, the activists strenuously claimed to separate their personal faith from their work, to the extent of defaming Christian missionary organisations and their activities. Yet they themselves failed in this endeavour because their personal Christian socialisations inevitably influenced their development agenda and practice. The NGO's Christian activists held contradictory views on the influence of their faith on their work. In the same breath they decried the influence of rampant proselytising Christian missions on Adivasis and eulogised the religious syncretism practiced in the NGO's Adivasi school, which celebrated every major Hindu, Christian, and tribal (but not Muslim) festival. As a result of accusations of converting Adivasis to Christianity levelled against the NGO from different camps, including radical Marxists and Hindutva extremists, they were defensive

about their Christian origins and averred that they were not engaged in the conversion of Adivasis.

At the same time, Christianity's influence in the organisation manifested itself in significant ways. The activists unquestioningly condoned Christian cultural practices (such as when I was asked to teach Adivasi children English Christmas carols in the run-up to Christmas), and widely used Christian narratology in their development work. For instance, they metaphorised tribal ways of thinking with loan narratives from Christian mythology. This was epitomised by the similarities of the recurring activist theme of David against Goliath to the activists' 'Adivasi against Unilever' story. Activists drew analogies between biblical and tribal stories, i.e. there was a correlation between the type of narrativisation in the bible and the activists' storifying of Adivasi life. Activists' stories exhibited a biblical-style narrative teleology. There was a strong 'liberation' current to the activists' development philosophy, stemming from their early activist socialisation in Liberation Theology (Gutierrez 1973) and radical Christianity during their student days. In this context, it has been argued that Christian and Gandhian development activists continued where missionaries left off. Indeed, to some extent the activists practiced a form of Elwinian cultural primitivism (see Guha 1999, Prasad 2003, Subba and Som 2005). Prominent was also the link between Christianity and a certain type of self-reliance, i.e. the Christian goal to develop an austere and self-sufficient daily routine. Activities such as craft education were supposed to provide material and spiritual sustenance (see also Prasad 2003: 85). Tribal 'self-reliance', however, is different to the Christian version, as Prasad (2003: 79) argues. The link between Christianity and the temperance movement provided the foundation for the NGO's zealous anti-alcohol campaigning. The activists' inculcation in Adivasis to aspire to a higher than the former tribal lifestyle was linked to activist notions of what it meant to be a 'good' person (Prasad 2003: 79).

Above all though, it was the (Christian) idea of what it meant to live a good life that was a recurring theme guiding the activists' moral compass in their efforts to influence public opinion on Adivasis. Prasad (2003: xix) notes that 'ecological romanticism and religious fundamentalism relate so well to each other because they both rely on a theory of a 'Golden Age' or past and humankind's

fall from the pristine stage of perfection'. In this respect, Christian theology and ecological romanticism share certain theoretical characteristics. Accordingly, there were three components to the activists' Golden age stories about Adivasis: a 'golden' tribal past (paradise), the loss of paradise, and the return to paradise. Examples for stories about a 'golden age' in the tribal past were, for instance:

In those days we used to eat fresh meat three to four times a week. What we couldn't eat we dried. Every family had a bamboo platform over the fire. The surplus meat was placed on this in strips and smoked. There was always a supply of dried meat for guests who turned up unexpectantly. Food was good in those days. The women went fishing. The ponds were full of fish. No one ever came back empty-handed. (Cromar 2010)

In olden days the Adivasi people lived together on small plots of land. They did not bother about land and education. They went for coolie work and lived peacefully. (Kumar 2014)

Examples for stories about the loss of and expulsion from paradise were:

I remember as a boy, my father owned enough land for us to live comfortably. Then a landlord came from another state. He set up a tea shop near us. My father worked on his land sometimes. Soon we were in debt. It started with small sums of money. Twenty, thirty rupees. I didn't know how much my father owed him finally. But the scene that is indelibly burnt into my brain is of us being thrown off our own land. My mother was clutching my sister's hand. I followed. The landlord seized our cooking pots even. My father had to leave his shirt and mund behind. And we left weeping with the landlord's insults and abuses ringing in our ears. (Cromar 2010)

In those days we didn't know the meaning of the term forest department. We took whatever we needed from the forest. Firewood, thatch for our houses, fruits, leaves, bamboo for building. For centuries this is the way our people lived. We loved the forest. And the forest loved us! Now it is protected. Even women are harassed if they pick up dead wood, twigs to cook their evening meal. But go and stand at the check posts. You'll see truckloads of timber going out. Huge trees which our grandmothers would never have dreamed of cutting. That's what protection means. (Cromar 2010)

My heart is sorely troubled. After leading these people of mine for the last 30, 40 years, through all kinds of troubles, through difficult journeys, it has come to this – I must leave them and go in search of a new place to live. In matters pertaining to my people, their lives, their traditions, customs and practices, I am the leader.... The old times have gone. Now they do not care for the chiefs or the gods even. The Forest Officers, the Ranger, the Warden and the Conservator are the new gods... But can this new education teach a man about life? Can he create the essentials – the soil; the water; fire? For those things we must still respect the Gods. And the ones chosen to lead the way. Must we not? (Cromar 2010)

An example for the fight for the return to paradise, was, for instance:

The story of B. – he earlier talked of being forced off his land. He became a fervent animator and fired up the emotions of others to stand together against change: Why are you poor? Why is it when we had all the land, we've been allowed it to slip into the hands of outsiders? Why is it we work for them day in and day out? They become richer and richer and we become poorer and poorer? Even

a dog has its own territory. When another dog enters it barks. Puts up a fight. Chases away the other dog. We welcomed everyone. Laughed when they built fences. Now we're worse than the neighbourhood dogs. They've got their territory. We've lost ours. (Cromar 2010)

The activists wanted – ideally – to resurrect what, in their reckoning, amounted to a glorious tribal past. This stemmed, inter alia, from imagining Adivasis as original Christians. There is a faulty logic, however, to activists' interpretation of attributes as conforming to a particular type of indigeneity – in this case a Christian-influenced indigeneity – if tribal peoples consider these attributes perfectly commonplace aspects of their cultures, such as the aspect of sharing food with strangers. Even in environments where Adivasi indigenist sentiments are fairly widespread – as in South India with its dense NGO presence – the adoption and performance of external identity constructions, such as indigeneity, by the people thus designated, were by default limited if these were not naturally part of tribal people's emic self-conseptualisations. This is emblematic of the wider disconnect between originally middle-class non-Adivasi activists and the subaltern majority of Adivasi peoples. It is questionable whether the activist imaginaries described above leave room for self-defined, post-indigenous Adivasi identities devoid of historically sedimented stereotypes.

From this discussion of some of the problems with activists' imaginary representations of Adivasi indigeneity, I now move on to how, on the one hand, selected aspects of post-indigenous Adivasi realities in the region where the NGO is active, and in India in general, and how, on the other hand, Adivasis may create the space necessary to reclaim self-representation.

Post-indigenous Adivasi realities

Sissons (2005: 152) writes of the 'post-indigenous', i.e. 'indigenous' peoples who do not want to be identified as 'indigenous' any more. One can elaborate this concept by defining its two aspects – on the one hand, the post-indigenous life realities IP face independent of their choosing or influence, as a result of which IP may reject the indigeneity label; and, on the other, an actively crafted, self-determined post-indigenous identity. It is to both the former, and to a self-defined, post-indigenous conceptualisation of Adivasis *by* Adivasis, that activists, Adivasi studies, and all parties interested

in Adivasis' wellbeing, need to pay closer attention and incorporate into their future work.

One element of the first aspect of post-indigenous Adivasi realities I observed during my fieldwork is the generational disconnect between the younger generations now perceived as 'educated' (a highly problematic term in its own right) and the less 'educated' older generations.

Intergenerational gaps

A lament I often heard an activist express is that it was their development interventions that had created not only the cultural erosion they had tried to battle right from the beginning, but also the kind of previously non-existent intergenerational hierarchies that existed nowadays between, for instance, a young and inexperienced Adivasi BA graduate and the 'wiser' older Adivasi generation of 'walking encyclopaedias'. This is echoed by Tilche (2011: 57) who observes that 'while trying to erode existing divisions, the Academy was also creating new hierarchies of its own'.

Intergenerational divisions in Adivasi societies are one aspect of post-indigenous life realities that are characterised by a 'politics unlimited'.

'Politics unlimited'

Chakrabarty (2006: 242) writes of the 'politics unlimited' Adivasis are having to follow in their struggle for survival:

> The real-life politics of those groups in India who are actual or potential claimants to the 'indigenous' identity, on the other hand, follow the logic of what I […] have called 'politics unlimited' [or the 'politics of desperation', my addition]. This 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. […] [I]t implies […] a construction of the political that, in principle, has no limits. It does not submit itself to the procedures of academic knowledge.

As part of following a 'politics unlimited', Adivasis strategically make use of postmodern political strategies in a hyperpostmodern age. Opportunistic, context-dependent movement tactics reflect and have to be extremely flexible and adaptive to the highly unstable environments they emerge from. The total conflation and active mixing of different movement ideologies (Liberation Theology, environmentalism, indigenism, anti-capitalism, etc.) and strategies (direct action,

fundraising, participative capital investment strategy, etc.) in this Adivasi NGO spoke for such a 'politics unlimited'.

The craftiness and ingenuity of the use of Adivasi indigeneities (whether by the Dongria Kondhs in Niyamgiri or the tribal peoples displaced by the Narmada dams) as tools to garner international and other support, and to form alliances by appealing to the imagination of those who might be forthcoming with support on the basis of indigenous rhetoric, is undeniable. Notwithstanding arguments about the commodification of indigenous cultures, and the instrumentalisation of indigenous knowledge for inevitably politicized campaigns, Adivasis often have no choice but to position themselves as the (understandably and justifiably) resourceful and resilient political actors they have to become when faced with the threat of the destruction of their livelihoods and environment.

Ironically, it is through having to resort to such 'politics unlimited' that Adivasis are in fact reclaiming self-representation unmediated by either the state, political parties, or NGOs.

Adivasis reclaiming Adivasi self-representation

In popular discourse, Adivasis emerge as the location of a fundamental critique of modernity itself. The question though is from whose point of view – disillusioned activists or Adivasis themselves? The NGO activists in this case study undermined their own indigenist utopia by negating post-indigenous Adivasi life realities and instead fashioned Adivasis according to their own idealised imaginaries. The activists' postmodern project of helping Adivasis enter into a dialogue with modernity, 'on their own terms', by aiding in the creation of alternative tribal modernities supposedly true to the innate ethos of Adivasi cultures, often became entangled in its own contradictions.

The emptying of the Adivasi category of self-directed content allowed turning it into a category to be filled by non-Adivasis with whatever ideological content was expedient for different causes, whether development, political mobilisation, or victimisation. Adivasis may make similar rhetorical

moves, however, they mostly do not have the political or material clout to do so. What is often left out of the analysis are the real-life consequences of such ideological co-optation. Whether Adivasis are denied or over-ascribed different external identities, this inhibits independent contemporary emic tribal identity formation processes and thus, ironically, the very process such external efforts purport to 'save' or 'support' – that of context-sensitive, meaning-full, ever-changing, ongoing culture making. The argument that the 'saving' of cultures amounts to their calcification and thus ultimate atrophying is a well-rehearsed one, not least in protest by the people thus freeze-framed at a particular point in time and space. What is often overlooked by over-zealous preservationists of 'traditional' cultures in India are the opportunities cultural self-determination open up to create more sustainable Adivasi identities that are more responsive to present-day Adivasi needs. Adivasi identities which may, in fact, turn out to be post-indigenous. An oft-celebrated and -cited example of South Indian Adivasi self-reclamation of political as well as territorial space is that of Muthanga in Wayanad, Kerala. Kjosavik (2006: 15) writes of this tribal land rights struggle that,

> [i]t is important to understand that they were not reproducing the pre-existing adivasi institutions but reconstituting them, after sifting through and retaining what they perceived as the positive features and discarding the regressive ones, and at the same time embracing a new approach that transcended the inter-community hierarchies and incorporated gender concerns […] Evidently, they do not want to live in a frozen past, but rather in a dynamic future.

Adivasis have been pigeonholed according to countless polarising stereotypes. The crucial issue is for Adivasis to move beyond these external representations, whether this is eco-romanticism in the image of Rousseau's ideas, in which the Adivasi is the projected embodiment of an imaginary free state of nature; right-wing extremism, in which the Adivasi is the lapsed Hindu in need of reco-opting into the Hindu fold; or Marxism, for which the Adivasi is the original class struggle hero. The first step in Adivasis' move beyond Rousseau, Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, and Marx, is the reclaiming of Adivasis' self-representation by as broad a base of different tribal peoples (including all genders, classes, religions, etc.). Realistically, only the production of counter-narratives *by* Adivasis will be able to halt the perpetuation of and replace the many faulty narratives *about* Adivasis in the narrative industry of Adivasi indigeneities in India.

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