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BOOK REVIEW

# ‘Being Adviasi’: Questions about Adviasi life are answered in this book, but not always convincingly

There is harmony in these voices as far as concern goes, but the search for answers goes off in several, sometimes opposite, directions.

**Avadhoot Dongare**

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*Being Adivasi: Existence, Entitlements, Exclusion*, edited by Abhay Xaxa and Ganesh Devy, contains 11 essays on various themes ranging from constitutional and legal measures from “the Adivasi question” to the silence of popular media on problems faced by Adivasi communities, including the extreme marginalisation confronting the Denotified Tribes, and alternative governance structures that may be built upon an Adivasi vision.

Xaxa, a much-admired scholar who belonged to the Oraon tribe from Chhatisgarh, was supposed to be the sole editor of the volume. He had identified the contributors and collected most of the essays, but his untimely death in 2020 left the work unfinished. After that, the editors of the series “Rethinking India”, under which this volume is published, requested Devy to complete the task. The volume is also a tribute to the concerns that Xaxa raised and manifested forcefully in his famous poem “I am not Your Data”, which is included in this book as an epigraph.

As Devy has noted in his pertinent “Introduction”, the volume creates a “polyphony” on “the Adivasi question”.

“It includes the question of Adivasis in the context of modern India, the questioning of the nation’s ideas of development by Adivasis and also the manner in which Adivasis pose their questions within the much-misunderstood framework of their understanding of what democracy means.”

## The agitations

In an informative essay titled “Safeguarding and Deepening the Promise of India for Adivasis”, veteran bureaucrat NC Saxena highlights the plight of Adivasi communities as they face the onslaught of modern developmental prejudices and how their life and livelihood are imperilled in the process. “Tribals constitute 8 per cent of the [Indian] population but are 55 per cent of the total displaced people in the country,” writes Saxena. But he ends his essay with a strange suggestion: “Genuine grassroots organisations and tribals themselves must learn – from the Shiv Sena and Kejriwal – the strategy of agitational politics.”

His advice understandably opposes Maoist activities, but as far as the “agitation” in politics is concerned, both the Shiv Sena and Arvind Kejriwal’s Aam Aadmi Party (or his earlier campaigns against corruption) have predominantly appealed to urban citizens, with both the mainstream media and middle-classes (and also other sections of urban society at various times) responding to their appeals in varied degrees. Shiv Sena has frequently resorted to violence.

What are the Adivasis, mostly forest-dwellers, supposed to “learn” from these organisations? Ironically, Saxena had played a pivotal role, as the chairperson of the committee that looked into the alleged violation of several environmental and forest norms in the proposed bauxite mining project in the Niyamgiri Hills in Odisha, in establishing a rare example where a state agency respected the demands of the local Adivasis. Eventually the project was scrapped. The Saxena Committee report (2010) advised against the proposed mining. It was a big win for the local Dongria Kondh Adivasis, who consider the hills sacrosanct and protested with constitutional means against the mining.

Sociologist Virginius Xaxa’s essay, “Tribal Development in Fifth Schedule Areas: Affirmative Action or Inequal Exchange?” gives a detailed overview of how the concept of “Scheduled Areas” was born and enforced since the British era. He stresses that the Adivasis have had to face “twin colonisation”, as the post-independent Indian state more or less continued with the same laws, rules, regulations and administration that had imperiled Adivasi lives.

In “Tribal Heritage and People’s Rights”, Meenakshi Natarajan elaborates on the Panchasheel Policy of the first Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru towards Adivasis and says that “these [Adivasi] communities have a strong resentment against their exclusion from the development process and also due to large development projects.” Interestingly, at one place she says, “Mining is necessary for national development, but it should be done by sharing profits with tribal communities and seeking their active participation with compassion.”

However, Natarajan fails to delve into how this “active participation” is supposed to take place. Besides, if Adivasis are not interested in sharing profits that come from relinquishing what they have held dear for generations, what is the way ahead? Such positions exclude alternative visions of development. Her contention also appears simplified if read against the essay co-authored by Kantilal Bhuria and Vikrant Bhuria (“The Question of Integration”), who focus on various constitutional rights technically bestowed on Adivasis but not sincerely implemented. They note how “like in the colonial times, private corporations see Adivasis as impediments in accessing natural resources” and how “their voices are rarely heard in the corridors of power in either the national or state capitals.”

## **The contradictions**

Archana Prasad’s essay (“Class Struggle and the Future of Adivasi Politics”) brings out the complications and

contradictions in the Nehruvian approach to Adivasis and their regions. “These measures were in line with the legal framework that outlined protective measures, albeit without taking measures to restrict the penetration of oppressive economic forces into these regions,” asserts Prasad. But she seems to ignore the complications and contradictions in the contention while using the term “ruling classes” in her analysis of Adivasi politics. Her essay aims to explore “the future prospects of a broader unity being forged between Adivasi and non-Adivasi workers”, but the essay in a way ends up suggesting ways to co-opt “ruling class-led Adivasi identity politics” into “class-based Adivasi politics”.

But never in the essay does Prasad elaborate on who the so-called ruling classes in the Adivasi communities are. Can we use the term in the same vein it is used in the analysis of industrial urban society or modern capitalism in general? She gives a few piecemeal examples like how “the dominance of Mundari culture, Santhali vernacular vocabulary and several other social customs of larger tribes tends to obfuscate the voices of smaller tribal groups within such a political formation.” But does such domination by a particular group of other groups qualify the first group for the epithet of “ruling class”? In any case, did this domination exist before these communities were categorised by the modern state, and their coming into contact with various modern apparatus?

Prasad claims that “ruling class-led Adivasi identity politics is based on the creation of a hegemonic, imagined political community which was influenced by the social and ideological positioning of its leaders.” But she has no such critical approach when she refers to some Adivasi class struggles that are mostly led by upper-caste leaders. Don’t the leaders of class struggles have “social positioning”? Dalit Movement and intellectuals from the wider Left like Sharad Patil have strongly criticised this tendency of the established Left discourse, which ignores various contradictions in Indian society, like caste, while putting exclusive emphasis on class analysis.

In fact, it is a much debated topic and many on the Left too have acknowledged its validity sympathetically. Despite this, Prasad says “one cannot paint all Adivasi identity politics with the same brush, rather, an assessment of diverse movements should be based on the class position of the leadership and demands of each struggle. This is necessary to ‘sift the chaff from the wheat’ and identify the potentially transformative elements of Adivasi identity politics.” But if only those leading the class struggles are supposed to “sift the chaff from the wheat” to “identify” and use the “potentially transformative” elements in Adivasi identity politics, how can it be called “unity” between these streams?

These questions become particularly significant when read in the context of Vincent Ekka's essay "Lessons from the Institutions of 'Indigenous Self-Governance'", where he presents a fine case study of "Parha" – a traditional governance system among Oraon (Kurux) Adivasis in central India. He acknowledges that such customary systems of governance are not "foolproof", as they "may often be fragmented and incoherent in terms of modern political structures". However, he notes various aspects of Adivasi traditions that are premised on the principle of "being more is better than having more". He alludes to several such customary governance practices across the world, and says that "all these concepts create alternative possibilities of a good life."

Ajay Dandekar's essay ("Silent Voices, Distant Dreams: India's Denotified Tribes") brings historical and contemporary aspects of the extreme marginalisation faced by the Denotified Tribes. He points towards the ways "labels" and "categories" were used as tools of "colonial domination", and, sadly, how the state of affairs remained the same for these tribes after Independence. The Denotified communities, being out of "any acknowledged framework of social reference", have unfortunately much less constitutional protection than several other disadvantaged groups.

## **Adivasis' lessons for modern democracy**

Shubhranshu Choudhary's essay ("Speak Up a Revolution") insightfully throws light on the approach behind his innovative platform CGNet Swara (where CG stands for Central Gondwana), a mobile-based news service that can be accessed by anyone anywhere with just a feature phone. "We build a community the way we communicate," observes Choudhary, and explains how his former Adivasi classmates suggested, "Make a media like air, a nature-made media, which is not owned by anyone or owned by everyone, where everyone has equal right to raise their issues, tell their stories." Whether such an expectation can be fulfilled in reality is a different subject, but CGNet Swara is certainly a step in democratisation of media. There are many other aspects, like the security of the citizen journalists in the conflict areas which need more discussion.

Senior activist Ghanshyam has articulated the concept of "indigenocracy" in his essay titled "Indigenous Republic (Indigenocracy)". The essay shows how the mainstream modern democracy can learn from the Adivasi ways of living and how community life can be developed on the principle of "kutumbakam". "In order to appreciate the kutumbakam community, one needs to give up the established historiography depicting history as a progression of the relationship between the dominator and the dominated," asserts Ghanshyam. Although the contention per se is debatable, his essay lays out a point-wise outline of such a system of living,

which has strong echoes of MK Gandhi's *Swaraj*, albeit from the Adivasi space.

Abhay Xaxa's essay titled "How Not to Manage 'Tribal Affairs'" is a brief critique of the present dispensation's approach towards Adivasis, and the concluding essay by Chitragada Choudhary and Aniket Aga, titled "The Life and Legacy of Abhay Xaxa", gives a wider sense of what Xaxa, his activism and his scholarship stood for.

One can see that the volume does create a "polyphony" about the Adivasi question if we understand polyphony as a coming together of various voices. There is harmony in these voices as far as concern for the Adivasi question goes, but their search for answers goes off in several, sometimes opposite, directions. However, the lack of harmony does not mean cacophony always. In fact, it can create a sensitivity to varied voices, like this volume does.

RETHINKING  
INDIA




BEING  
ADIVASI

# EXISTENCE, ENTITLEMENTS, EXCLUSION



*Edited by* ABHAY FLAVIAN XAXA  
G.N. DEVY

***Being Adivasi: Existence, Entitlements, Exclusion*, edited by Abhay Xaxa and GN Devy, Penguin India.**

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