

Introduction: Reading the archive, reframing 'adivasi' histories

Sangeeta Dasgupta

Jawaharlal Nehru University

In recent times, much has been happening that has brought 'adivasis' or 'tribal' communities to the fore, making them increasingly visible as subjects in debates around indigeneity, autonomy, development and conversion. With the developmentalist agenda uppermost on the minds of the Indian state and its allies, loss of land, displacement and forced resettlement have been part of the experiences of many amongst these peoples. Precisely for this reason, adivasis are seen to be easy targets for Maoist propaganda, those whose interests are naturally antagonistic to that of the Indian state, and who would be the ultimate victims of the Operation Green Hunt. In the midst of controversies around conversion, the adivasi features again, this time as *vanavasis* (forest people), as the Hindu Right, and especially the Rashtriya Swayam Sewak Sangh, advocates re-conversion or *ghar wapasi*—bringing them back into the Hindu fold, reduced as appendages in organisations like the Bajrang Dal, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram. And if in the year 2000, there was disappointment in many hearts that it was not Sibu Soren, the leader of the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha, but Babulal Marandi of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), who became the first chief minister of Jharkhand, we have today a BJP government, and for the first time, a non-adivasi as the chief minister of Jharkhand. Indeed, at many levels, adivasis are being marginalised, their interests waived aside. But amidst all these, the voices of adivasis, even if multiple, fractured and differentiated, are heard as they assert their identity, express their politics and negotiate with the state and its institutions.

But who are these adivasis, conflated often unthinkingly with the colonial category of 'tribe', the legal or constitutional category of 'Scheduled Tribes', and the global category of 'Indigenous Peoples'? These terms, it needs to be pointed out, are neologisms, and are products of distinct genealogies.¹ Academics engaging with such neologisms, and the people that these are seen to represent, consciously select a particular nomenclature from these jostling terms. Others, like Beteille, have virulently cautioned us against this.² 'Tribe', in colonial records,

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¹ Karlsson and Subba eds, *Indigeneity in India*.

² Beteille, 'The Concept of Tribe'.

particularly from the mid-nineteenth century, was considered to be different from 'caste'; it referred to communities that were assumed to be primitive and uncivilised, geographically, culturally and economically separated from the mainstream. It attributed fixity to the hitherto fluid and interconnected relationships between social groups in the pre-colonial and early colonial period, a point made by scholars like Devalle, Skaria and Guha.³ Yet, for many, and particularly for those living in areas of the north-east governed by Schedule VI of the Indian constitution, this anthropological construct of the tribe, despite its racial and primitivist connotations, is an acronym for Scheduled Tribes, and is acceptable in the pan-Indian context.⁴ Others, confined to Schedule V areas in central India, prefer the politically assertive term 'adivasi': adivasi, translatable as 'original inhabitants', came into use for the first time in 1938 in a political context, with the formation of the Adivasi Sabha in Jharkhand.⁵ Today, different social groups define themselves as adivasi and stake their claim to material and symbolic resources, imparting to the term a legitimacy that is difficult to ignore, and yet which needs to be reviewed, embroiled as it is in a host of historical and representational contests and controversies.⁶

In academic discourse, particularly from the 1980s, adivasi, as a term, has been increasingly used, though in remarkably varied contexts. Those who identify themselves with a newly emerging field of adivasi or tribal studies, which in itself subsumes a variety of perspectives, have been assessing its relevance.⁷ David Hardiman, one of the earliest to privilege adivasi over tribe, discards the latter as 'an English word which has no historical equivalent', and for its 'strong evolutionist connotations'. He writes: 'The term adivasi is preferable in the Indian context because it relates to a particular historical development: that of the subjugation during the nineteenth century of a wide variety of communities which before the colonial period had remained free, or at least relatively free, from the control of outside states.'⁸ Damodaran critiques 'revisionists' like Guha who write against the notions of indigeneity (or of the adivasi) at a critical moment when 'the marginalisation and proletarianisation of many forest-based communities and the demise of their traditional livelihood gains pace all over the worlds'.⁹ Baviskar locates the importance of the term in the context of a liberalised political economy that has led to new kinds of social exclusion and new forms of collectivisation.¹⁰

³ Devalle, *Discourses of Ethnicity*; Skaria, *Hybrid Histories*; Guha, *Environment and Ethnicity*.

⁴ For tracing the background of scheduling, see Chandra, 'Liberalism and Its Other' and Tewari, 'Tribe and Development'.

⁵ Hardiman, *The Coming of the Devi*, p. 15, Munda and Bosu Mullick, 'Introduction', pp. iv–xvii.

⁶ Rycroft and Dasgupta eds, *The Politics of Belonging*, p. 2.

⁷ Rycroft and Dasgupta eds, *The Politics of Belonging*; Bates and Shah eds, *Savage Attack*; and Das Gupta and Basu eds, *Narratives from the Margins*.

⁸ Hardiman, *The Coming of the Devi*, pp. 13–15.

⁹ Damodaran, 'Colonial Constructions', p. 162.

¹⁰ Baviskar, 'Red in Tooth'.

Rycoft and Dasgupta argue for the need to unpack the idea of adivasi to reveal political and representational tensions that can be re-read and re-articulated in wide-ranging activist and academic contexts. New sets of political and cultural matrices can be better grasped, they argue, if the histories of 'becoming adivasi' are considered.¹¹ Bates and Shah underline the necessity for a historically, socially and politically situated approach to the ways in which forms of resistance get labelled as adivasi/tribal or not.¹² From connoting a history of subjugation and difference, 'adivasi', as a category, is increasingly seen, in addition, as embedded in a politics of representation.

This special issue of the IESHR intends to unpack the adivasi/tribe in different spatial and historical contexts: it questions the stereotypes and essentialisms associated with these categories; recognises the tensions in the possible and continuing usages of such terms; and explores the advantages and disadvantages of carving out a domain of enquiry in the name of the adivasi. If an engagement with the archives helps us to rethink existing historiographical frames, it is as important to unravel the pasts of those we designate today as the adivasi/tribe and disentangle the different ways in which ideas of difference were generated and acknowledged in colonial and postcolonial times.

It is in this context that some of us came together to interrogate received ideas and engage with historiographical debates and contemporary concerns. Mahesh Rangarajan suggested the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library as a venue for discussion; Tanika Sarkar, Indrani Chatterjee and Prathama Banerjee, along with the discussants Bimol Akoijam, Savyasachi and Amita Baviskar, helped us in our deliberations. This special issue is the result of a collective endeavour; it is, in a sense, a reflection of our own dilemmas as we engage with the adivasi/tribe as a subject.

Despite the visibility of the adivasi in present times, it is 'caste' that continues to be the 'key discursive category' in contemporary Indian social thinking.¹³ Studies on the adivasi/tribe in colonial and postcolonial times have been neither vast, nor varied.¹⁴ But, there have been shifts in historiographical approaches that one needs to recognize.¹⁵ In the 1960s, the predicament of distinguishing between caste and tribe had begun to haunt anthropologists, who began to contest the idea that the tribe represented communities that were bounded, unchanging, isolated and undifferentiated.¹⁶ By the 1990s, this question was reframed in terms of

¹¹ Rycoft and Dasgupta eds, *The Politics of Belonging*, pp. 2–3.

¹² Bates and Shah eds, *Savage Attack*, p. 2.

¹³ Sarkar and Sarkar eds, *Caste in Modern India*, p. ix.

¹⁴ Since the 1990s, some of the significant monographs are Guha, *Environment and Ethnicity*; Sundar, *Subalterns and Sovereigns*; Skaria, *Hybrid Histories*; Baviskar, *In the Belly of the River*; Banerjee, *Politics of Time*; and Shah, *In the Shadows of the State*.

¹⁵ For a historiographical discussion, see Dasgupta, 'Locating Adivasi Identity', pp. 112–19.

¹⁶ See Bailey, 'Tribe and Caste in India'; Sinha, 'Tribe-Caste'; Bose, *Tribal Life*; and Beteille, 'Tribe and Peasantry'. See also Prathama, this volume.

whether the category of tribe was a colonial construct, and whether the discipline of anthropology was implicated in this construction.¹⁷ But in this debate, there are different perspectives. Some have categorically argued that the tribe is a 'colonial category, ahistorical and sociologically groundless',¹⁸ 'a product of colonial theories and practices' rather than a 'continuation' of 'Indian practices';¹⁹ others uphold the role of indigenous agency in the production of the category. Colonial epistemology, it has been argued, even as it drew upon eighteenth- and nineteenth-century notions of race, an environmental determinism and a humanitarian concern, aligned itself with Brahmanical notions of caste, values and laws.²⁰

Indrani Chatterjee and Bodhisattva Kar engage with this debate, but from different perspectives. Chatterjee focuses on a range of interconnected Himalayan mountain and plain societies to demonstrate that it is impossible to identify any one group in this region as 'original inhabitants'. Attempts to treat neologisms like 'adivasi', 'janajati' and 'tribe' as ontological verities, she argues, are rooted in particular colonial and ongoing postcolonial attempts to erase complex pre-colonial political, military and economic relationships. Who then constitutes the category of the 'tribal' or the 'aboriginal' is a question that requires closer attention to both historical processes and an understanding of space and subjecthood.

Like Chatterjee, Bodhisattva Kar explores the politics of colonial categories. However, he does this not by referring to pre-colonial pasts as Chatterjee has done, but through an examination of texts of contracts between joint stock companies and the so-called 'primitive' communities in the northeastern frontier of British India. Kar questions the stereotype of the tribe as having always resisted colonial/capital coercion, and the presumed antithetical relationship between the contractual and the customary. 'Speculative tribes', he argues, were born out of the entanglements of the contractual and the customary; through these entanglements were played out the multiple intersections between logics of lineage, landscape and accumulation. The victimhood narratives of identitarian histories, Kar posits, teach us to read the tribes in the world of capitalism as communities *at risk*; a reading of joint-stock contracts, in contrast, allows us to understand them also as communities *of risk*.

Colonial ethnographic and anthropological texts were, on the one hand, describing communities and defining categories. Colonial administrators, on the other, were forced to reckon with 'irrational primitives' who believed that bullets would turn into water, with *badmashes* or wretches who tumbled down mountains and were bloodthirsty in their vengeance, with lunatics who deserved to be imprisoned.²¹

¹⁷ See Devalle, *Discourses of Ethnicity*; Chaudhuri, 'The Myth of the Tribe?'; Bates 'Race, Caste and Tribe'; Padel, *The Sacrifice of Human Being*; Skaria, 'Shades of Wildness'; Guha, *Environment and Ethnicity*; Damodaran, 'Colonial Constructions'; and Chandra, 'Liberalism and its Other'.

¹⁸ Devalle, *Discourses of Ethnicity*, p. 50.

¹⁹ Skaria, 'Shades of Wildness', p. 730.

²⁰ Damodaran, 'Colonial Constructions', p. 44.

²¹ Dasgupta, 'Reordering of Tribal Worlds', pp. 160–64.

This colonial stereotype of the irrational, unchanging and isolated tribal, forever on the verge of rebellion, has of course been irrevocably accepted as a myth. And with that, there have been repeated re-evaluations of adivasi/tribal protest. We have moved away from assessing the importance of adivasi movements in the context of their contribution to the nation and its making.²² The subaltern studies initiative, which had sought to write the marginalised, or 'a people without a history' to quote Guha, into the pages of history, has been critiqued from both within and outside the subaltern frame.²³ The adivasi is no longer seen merely in opposition to the *sarkar-sahukar-zamindar* nexus,²⁴ but as a modern subject negotiating with modern state power. Hierarchies within the community, which in turn affect adivasi protest, have been discerned.²⁵

The essays by Uday Chandra and Sangeeta Dasgupta engage with the above historiography and offer alternate readings of two key episodes in the history of Chhotanagpur in the colonial period: Birsa Munda's *ulgulan* (uprising) and the Tana Bhagat *andolan* (movement). As Chandra writes, the making of the modern 'tribal' subject in India and beyond remains as little understood today as it was in the nineteenth century; at the heart of the problem lies the persistence of primitivism as a social theory that describes the ways and lives of so-called tribal subjects in colonial and postcolonial times. In his study of Birsa Munda's *ulgulan*, Chandra critiques the applicability of the analytic of 'millenarianism' to tribal rebellions and social movements in British India. In contrast, he shows that tribal religious traditions were deeply intertwined with modern statecraft, agrarian political economy and the politics of conversion. As he argues, radical historians put their own anti-colonial, even nationalist, concerns in the mouths of imagined subaltern heroes. We, as academics, must be wary of such exercises in political romanticism that grossly distort our understanding of adivasi pasts that are already difficult to access and interpret.

Sangeeta Dasgupta, in her essay on the Tana Bhagats, explores the multiple ways in which Tana pasts have been viewed. As she counterpoises the colonial archive with Tana pamphlets and petitions and their oral narratives, she illustrates the differences between the histories that historians construct from the official archive, and histories that the Tana Bhagats emphasise. Further, Dasgupta argues for the need to locate hierarchies within the Oraon community. Emphasising the continual revision of community boundaries, she demonstrates that the movement of the Tana Bhagats was not a singular event, motivated by necessarily similar imperatives. We need to recognise, then, multiple histories of protests and demands.

²² See Datta, *The Santhal Insurrection*; Jha, *Kol Insurrection*; Jha, *The Bhumij Revolt*; and Singh, *The Dust-Storm*.

²³ Guha, 'Subaltern and Bhadrakok Studies'; Sarkar, 'The Decline of the Subalterns'.

²⁴ Guha, *Elementary Aspects*; Hardiman, *The Coming of the Devi*.

²⁵ See Dasgupta, 'Reordering a World'; and Sarkar, 'Rebellion as Modern Self-fashioning'.

Tying up the different issues in the above essays, and moving beyond, is Prathama Banerjee's essay in which she asks a set of questions: What are the advantages and disadvantages of carving out a domain of enquiry in the name of the adivasi? How then do we imagine the adivasi as a distinct political subject, and a subject of study? Should we think of adivasi studies as a field of operation of a special subject, the adivasi, tribe, indigene, or as a field constituted by a set of distinctive issues and concerns, such as land, forest, stories? Adivasi studies, Banerjee argues in tandem with the other contributors to this volume, would develop around the adivasi as subject, but would not necessarily be confined to the adivasi: it would provide a critical lens through which other worlds could be viewed.

What unites the essays in this collection is the critical engagement of the contributors with the archive. Since many decades, there have been discussions on the 'archival turn': the idea of the archive as a symbol of knowledge and power; the systems of regulation and coercion that the archive imposes; the practices of reading and writing, and seeing and knowing, that are contingent on the archive.²⁶ In this collection of essays, the engagement with the archive entails understanding and moving beyond the silences of the archive, deliberating on the processes of collecting and forgetting traces of the past, searching in the colonial archive for other kinds of records, and counterpoising oral narratives and colonial documentary evidence, all of which make us 'read' afresh the politics of remembering and representing; the notions of the 'primitive', 'savage' and 'tribe', and iconic protests such as the Birsaita *ulgulan* and the Tana Bhagat movement. Chatterjee draws upon numismatic and epigraphic evidence from the eighth century onwards, and select medieval chronicles. Kar draws our attention to texts of contracts between joint stock companies and 'primitive' communities which are almost the only documents in the imperial archive that bear the 'signatures' of 'tribal chiefs'—self-written names, crosses and other marks, and finger prints. Chandra re-examines the colonial archive, particularly agrarian and judicial records, and in addition, unexplored missionary records. Dasgupta counterpoises the colonial archive with Tana pamphlets and petitions and oral narratives. Banerjee talks of the difficulties of recovering the adivasi from the generalised archives that historians refer to. The question of 'finding tribes' in text, archive and field is, she argues, as much a question of renegotiating our imaginations of tribal and adivasi subjectivity.

We, as contributors, hope to keep our discussions alive, and Tanika Sarkar's afterword, a view 'from outside the field', by raising a series of questions, provides us the possibilities. Sarkar weaves her discussion around two fundamental and interrelated questions. If one takes into account the range of multiple histories around the singular subject of the adivasi or tribal, what then is the ontological and epistemological validity or relevance of this catch-all term? And, can a single

²⁶ See, for example, Davis, *Fiction in the Archives*; Bayley, *Empire and Information*; Steedman, *Dust*; and Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*.

collective noun be adequate for the infinitely variegated and complex histories that adivasis created and experienced? These questions are not easy to answer.

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