

View from outside the field: An afterword

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My piece is entirely a view from the gallery, trying to convey a sense of how the volume looks to a historian from outside the field of adivasi studies. I will place my observations as a series of small queries: some arising directly out of the papers and some looking beyond, towards directions they implicitly open up.

The five articles in the collection immediately suggest diversity within the broad subject of adivasi studies: in terms of different places, times, experiences, methodological concerns and historiographical debates that they cover. That range of multiple histories around the singular subject of the adivasi makes one wonder about the ontological and epistemological validity or relevance of this catch-all term: or, call it tribal, *janjati* or by any other name. Do so many disparate and mostly mutually unconnected people belong with one another in a meaningful unity, and in strong contradistinction from all others around them? We know that the politics of colonial anthropology forced highly discrete groups under a common name. We have also been told that the binary distinction that is made between castes and tribes, between adivasis and their others, is actually misplaced. That being so, it is something of a puzzle that historians, anthropologists and political activists still continue to adhere to the common name as a given, even as they change the precise nomenclature according to their political preferences.

What, then, is the specific politics behind retaining a forced conceptual unity whose colonial makings have been made abundantly evident by now and whose actual disparities become equally abundantly clear even in this small volume of essays? Where do we locate a fundamental grounding that anchors something like a shared identity, despite the many divergences? Of course, several other equally variegated populations are bracketed together under categories like the peasantry or the working classes in terms of their location within a matrix of relations and forces of production. But, in that case, what then would be the typical structural affinity for adivasis, now that both common racial origins and identical cultural practices have been thoroughly problematised by scholars: as has been the notion of a radical and ineffable difference between adivasis and their others?

The question broadens out into adivasis' own perceptions of this attributed unity. Which groups and which segments within each group began to use the generic nomenclature to imply something more substantial than a familiar word, used unthinkingly, or strategically? What are the many meanings that they may attach to it? What is the history of the gradual realisation of the attributed common identity and in what material and political contexts did specific segments acquire

this new self awareness? In other words, what have been the historical function/s and consequences of this process of interpellation among adivasis themselves?

A related question flows from the problem of naming. What did the singular case presume as the pristine or real, authentic adivasi? The word has conjured up primitiveness and even savagery for many colonial and post-colonial officials and scholars as also even for Gandhi and Ambedkar in some ways. Or else, it suggests a romantic image: people lacking the forms of modern rationality, but rich in instinctive wisdom and imagination. But, in some ways, the tropes of innocence or of savagery are mirror images of each other, with values reversed. Both assume an 'other' of modernity, tragically stranded in a modern world. So the real adivasi seems to inhabit not only a different space but also a different temporality. The romanticisation—not always or necessarily misplaced—grows in the same proportion as exploitation and displacement of adivasis grows, in a rather mordant politics of nostalgia.

The adivasi as absolute alterity to modernity has a supplement: the Adivasi as an insurrectionary, the heroic rebel, resisting the onslaughts of the non-adivasi with unparalleled determination, almost always at tragic costs. Once again, this figure is not a mythical but a historical one. It is also easier for historians to focus on this figure almost exclusively, given that state archives begin to take note of adivasis only when they become a problem for the state. These two recurrent images of the 'real' adivasi, however, tend to exclude much else, including their own autonomous and often willed negotiations with the forces of change. That would include matters of conversion, initiation of new religions or cults, internal revolts against older adivasi leaders and political structures, their transactions with other groups in the region which are not necessarily adversarial, their relationships with markets far and near, with modern education and urbanisation, with political parties and electoral processes. We do have rich historical accounts of some of these, especially of adivasi protest cults. But they are predominantly taken to explain the insurrectionary impulse. Moreover, many aspects of their everyday lives—the state of their collective custom and its relationship with legal and judicial processes, or long-term changes in gender and familial relationships and practices—are worth recovering from archival sources as well as with tools of historical ethnography, even when they do not bear an immediate relationship with protest movements. In other words, we need more of a history of the tribal-modern. And that cannot be fitted into the concept of multiple modernities, of which the adivasi would constitute one field. Rather, we need to see them as entangled in a shared modern world, in a contradictory unity with it, with fissures between themselves and other groups, as well as fissures among themselves within each group. Some of the papers in this collection have important things to say about such matters, long neglected so far.

Finally, when is the adivasi an adivasi and when is she presumed to have left the fold? We have tended to focus on one or two familiar habitations—remote hills

or dense forests which impart very distinctive modes of production, relations with nature and social and political organisations. However, there is, by now, a long history of large-scale adivasi migrations into very different locations, occupations, lifestyles. The Santals, for example, have been famed for their skills in sedentary rice cultivation at least since the late nineteenth century. Even now, a large part of Bengal's landless cultivators or agricultural wage labourers come from adivasi groups. Needless to say, coolies in plantations have been, right from the beginning of those gardens, overwhelmingly adivasis and so have been some layers of factory workers and urban scavengers. Their numbers continue to grow with the accelerated pace of displacement, dispossession and pauperisation under the economic policies of the post colonial state. But somehow, they have not usually been the focus of scholarly attention qua adivasis: they are seen, rather, as the urban poor or as plantation labour or as something else: designated by their economic status and functions. Do they abandon their community designation once they move out of the forest, the hill, the terrain that has been ascribed for them? Do they become non-tribals? Or do they develop a new complex, hybridised identity where they are still adivasi but also something else? Or, do they evolve into a new configuration, through important historical processes, where new experiences, and the habits derived from them, slowly render their origins redundant or irrelevant?

Obviously, the answers cannot be monolithic, something that will fit all sizes. That leads us to what we started with: can a single collective noun be adequate for the infinitely variegated and complex histories that adivasis created and experienced?