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Unpacking how indigeneity originates as a political narrative

Steur, Luisa. 2017. *Indigenist mobilization: Confronting electoral communism and precarious livelihoods in post-reform Kerala*. Oxford: Berghahn books

Sudheesh R. C.¹ 

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Indigenist Mobilization is an ethnographic account of the historical and political environment in which a social movement of tribes in Kerala, southern India, adopted the narrative of indigeneity. Unpacking minute strands of Kerala's political biography and life histories embedded in them, the author links the rise of indigeneity to the limitations of the local communist parties in incorporating the experiences of tribes within their class framework. These insights are then extended to the context of deepening capitalism in the world and expanding neoliberalism in India, in order to demonstrate how indigeneity as a political narrative sprouts from struggles that face up to these. In this review, I try to locate the book in the current political climate of Kerala and understand its relevance for the ongoing debates on caste, class, and indigeneity. I then discuss the book's significance for young researchers handling ethnography. Finally, I dive deeper into the core argument of the book regarding class and indigeneity to understand the fresh perspective it provides on the contentions between the two. My words are informed by my position as a researcher working on the impacts of land policies and agrarian change on indigenous peoples in Kerala.

The book is organized into five parts encompassing seven chapters. Part I introduces the work and its theoretical framework. Here, the author takes great care to reflexively outline the challenges of conducting such research within the ideological and political limitations of a university space. Part II explores the anthropological history of the category of tribe and what it means to be an Adivasi in the Kerala context, historically and politically. The political side is further elaborated in Part III, which dissects Kerala's social development experiments, the role of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPIM) in these and the exclusions that were produced. Part IV beefs up the insights by elaborating how indigenous peoples' precarity

✉ Sudheesh R. C.
rcsudheesh@gmail.com

¹ Oxford Department of International Development, University of Oxford, 3 Mansfield Road, Oxford, Oxfordshire OX1 3TB, UK

continues in the present times. The author revisits her theoretical points and concludes by drawing parallels with indigenous movements around the world in Part V.

Kerala had been a poster child of human development in the third world for many years, with its notable achievements in literacy, gender indices, land redistribution, and decentralization of power, among others. This story came under fire when evidences of social exclusion—particularly of castes in the lowest rung of social hierarchy (Dalits) and of indigenous peoples (Adivasis)—were brought out. Land was a crucial issue for the Adivasi movements, given land was historically alienated from the Adivasis by social groups wielding more power. Many of the leaders of these movements had associations with the CPIM, but slowly became disillusioned with the party's nonchalance toward Adivasi issues. The formation of the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha (AGMS) (literally, the grand assembly of the indigenes), the focal point of the book, was a consequence. Steur expands the canvas of the book beyond Adivasi struggles and brings in Dalit politics in the state and notes the similar process of “disidentification” that the leaders in the latter went through in relation to the CPIM.

The book comes out at a moment when politics in Kerala is marked by steep differences between the CPIM and Dalit-Adivasi struggles. The ongoing struggles by Dalit women tea plantation workers in Munnar for better wages and by landless Dalits and Adivasis in Chengara for land have deepened the chasm between Dalit-Adivasi organizations and the CPIM, which has been largely unsympathetic to these. *Indigenist Mobilization* shows that this chasm is not new and records the complex processes that led to the current scenario from as early as 1970s, when the CPIM-led land redistribution was implemented. More importantly, the book places these developments in the backdrop of deep-seated casteism and patronizing, often insulting, attitude of the larger Kerala society toward the Adivasis. In this regard, the author provides a valuable review of anthropological studies conducted on the Adivasis within the state, especially by governmental institutions, to expose how tropes of essentialism rule over academic engagements with the Adivasis.

The ethnographic material incorporated in the book is vast. A reader new to Kerala may struggle a little to keep track of the multiple events and life histories that come and go through the pages. But the richness of the material presented precisely offers the book its authority—the multiple conjunctures that led to the rise of indigeneity are detailed with great effort. For young researchers using ethnography as a method, the work could present an example of navigating positionality issues determined by one's social location through the sheer detail of the evidences collected and the sensitivity with which they are presented. It is not just the sensational Naxalite uprisings of 1960s or agitations of Muthanga in the early 2000s—key points in the Adivasi political history of Kerala—that are recorded, but lesser known struggles in Dalit settlements like Kurichy and Kundala as well, in order to reveal how deep the marginalization runs. That said, the author's frequent switch between the Dalit and the Adivasi struggles may perplex a few readers who may not be in the thick of the discourse on the synergies and tensions between and within the two. Also, given the fact that the AGMS's agitation of 2003 was launched in response to the failure of the government led by the Congress party to keep its promise of providing land, it would have been worthwhile to engage in greater detail with the Adivasi leaders' approach towards this party's policies. This becomes relevant since the CPIM and the Congress have roughly alternated in power in the state and have made their own policies for Adivasi welfare at the same time as undoing the policies of the other.

The book is perhaps most important for the theoretical insights it provides. From Steur's standpoint of Marxian anthropology, indigenous peoples are seen as struggling in a world

system of capitalism, marking indigenous identity as a register of particular forms of exploitation, dispossession, and resistance sparked by this system. The connection between events in Kerala and the world system is made through the analysis of the recent breakdown of the social development endeavors of the state as a result of the onslaught of this system. Early on, the author warns against a reductive reading of Marxism as merely a grand narrative of class conflict. Class, then, cannot be disentangled from other sites of exploitation, such as caste, gender, and race, the author observes. By offering us an “extended” class perspective, the book outlines an empirically informed framework that helps move beyond class-indigeneity dualism. Steur succeeds in being loyal to her Marxian standpoint as well as critically evaluating the CPIM, a Marxist party at least in its founding principles. The author manages this even as some quarters of the Dalit movements have rejected Marxism in its entirety as either flawed or outright anti-Dalit in its class analysis. However, precisely because of the stubbornness of the real-world tensions between the Dalit movements and the class framework, as evidenced in the author’s own material, the question remains if such a seamless, extended class perspective is plausible on the ground.

Southern India in general and Kerala in particular are often brushed aside in the discourse on Adivasis; in the case of the latter, often with the remark that Adivasis constitute a minuscule percentage of the state’s population. *Indigenist Mobilization* brings back the region to the center of the debate on indigeneity. The book shows that dispossession can be subtler than directly observable processes like land grab or development-induced displacement. Adivasis in Kerala have an everyday story of marginalization to tell that is curiously the product of a seemingly progressive experiment in development. The book answers to a considerable extent the research question that it sets out with, viz. why peasants and workers use the narrative of indigeneity rather than socialism in their struggles. Recent events such as the decision of the AGMS leader C.K. Janu to ally with the Hindu right-wing National Democratic Alliance suggests that the jury is out on what directions the Adivasi politics in the state would take. On the path traversed so far, *Indigenist Mobilization* is a gripping take that records how the foundations of an autonomous Adivasi movement were laid.