


# Towards Adivasi Studies: New Perspectives on 'Tribal' Margins of Modern India

Studies in History  
31(1) 122–127  
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SAGE Publications  
sagepub.in/home.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/0257643014558479  
<http://sih.sagepub.com>  


**Daniel J. Rycroft and Sangeeta Dasgupta (eds), *The Politics of Belonging in India: Becoming Adivasi*. Routledge, Abingdon and New York, 2011, xvii + 238 pp., \$112.57 (hbk).**

**Sanjukta Das Gupta and Raj Sekhar Basu (eds), *Narratives from the Margins: Aspects of Adivasi History in India*. Primus Books, New Delhi, 2012, 312 pp., INR 995.**

**Crispin Bates and Alpa Shah (eds), *Savage Attack: Tribal Insurgency in India*. Social Science Press, New Delhi, 2014, 306 pp., INR 725.**

The three volumes under review ought to be read not merely in isolation as fascinating collections of essays on *adivasi* history and politics, but as exemplars of an emerging new interdisciplinary field of 'adivasi studies'. The term *adivasi*, as noted by the editors of all three volumes, is contentious and stands in rivalry with competitors such as 'tribe', 'indigenous peoples', *vanvasi* and *janjati*. Each of these terms, Rycroft and Dasgupta explain, connotes a distinctive politics with its own genealogy over the past century or more. Whereas notions of 'tribe' and 'indigenous' carry global, albeit colonial, connotations, '*vanvasi*' and '*janjati*' are awkward Indic neologisms coined by the Hindu Right and the post-colonial state, respectively, that have little currency among the populations being described. *Adivasi* is, in this sense, a middle-of-the-road term, nestled between colonial and postcolonial pitfalls as well as between the global and the local. It is also a term confined to the Schedule V areas of modern India, as defined by the Government of India Act, 1935 and, subsequently, the Constitution of 1950.<sup>1</sup>

*Adivasi* studies, therefore, appears to have a fairly well-defined domain of inquiry, spatially and intellectually, within South Asian studies. If this emerging new field is interdisciplinary, it is by force of circumstance rather than design: historians are now entering territory that was once the sole preserve of sociologists and anthropologists, who, in turn, are compelled now to rethink their data and

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<sup>1</sup> Uday Chandra, 'Liberalism and its Other: The Politics of Primitivism in Colonial and Postcolonial Indian Law', *Law & Society Review* 47, no. 1 (2013): 149.

fieldwork in order to understand the relationship between the ethnographic present and the myriad pasts of their research subjects. However, inter-disciplinarity, as we shall see, comes with its own challenges.

The first challenge concerns the pre-colonial status of *adivasis*. To the extent that a field of academic inquiry is being defined now by a term coined by Christian Munda and Oraon activists in Chhotanagpur a century ago as an alternative to the colonial notion of 'tribe',<sup>2</sup> it is unclear how it can help us make sense of pre-colonial histories of the areas that have been declared 'scheduled' in colonial and post-colonial India. In an earlier generation, Niharranjan Ray sought to extend the venerable caste–tribe distinction of colonial sociology back to ancient history by distinguishing between the hierarchical *jatis* that constituted 'civilization' and the egalitarian *janas* that were their 'primitive', 'savage' or 'backward' counterparts.<sup>3</sup> This distinction between the 'civilised' and the 'barbarian' has, for instance, been used to explicate the relationship between the Mauryan empire and its forest-dwelling subjects.<sup>4</sup> Such a distinction is, of course, far from unique to India, and may, in fact, be regarded as the *sine qua non* of modern anthropology as a discipline.<sup>5</sup> Yet, recent scholarship has questioned the historicity of this a priori distinction that fixes particular social forms to their respective ecological niches, and proposed alternative models of cultural fluidity and integration within pre-colonial political orders.<sup>6</sup> The two essays by Giorgio Milanetti and Marco Fattori in *Narratives from the Margins* follow this recent trend in scholarship and consciously avoid projecting a modern-day caste–tribe onto the pre-colonial past. Milanetti locates *adivasis* within Tulsidas' *Ramcharitmanas*, examining their economic and religious status within this milieu, while Fattori interrogates the privileged position of Bhil *adivasis* within Rajput kingdoms in southern Rajasthan. In *Savage Attack*, Raphaël Roussealau's essay on the politics of *meriah* or human sacrificial rites among the Konds of highland Orissa displays a similar appreciation of how highly localized communities were ritually integrated within wider ambits of royal power and patronage. Roma Chatterji's essay in *The Politics of Belonging in India* on the performative politics of the *chho* dance in Purulia

<sup>2</sup> David Hardiman, *The Coming of the Devi: Adivasi Assertion in Western India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), 13.

<sup>3</sup> Niharranjan Ray, 'Introductory Address', in *The Tribal Situation in India*, ed. K.S. Singh (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, 1972), 21–2.

<sup>4</sup> Aloka Parasher Sen, 'Of Tribes, Hunters and Barbarians: Forest Dwellers in the Mauryan Period', *Studies in History* 14, no. 2 (1998): 173–91.

<sup>5</sup> See, in particular, Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969); Pierre Clastres, *Society Against the State: Essays in Political Anthropology* (New York: Zone Books, 1987); James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Key examples are Paul Hockings, *Ancient Hindu Refugees: Badaga Social History, 1550–1975* (The Hague and New York: Mouton Publishers, 1980); Surajit Sinha, ed., *Tribes and Indian Civilization: Structures and Transformation* (Varanasi: N. K. Bose Memorial Foundation, 1987); Nandini Sundar, *Subalterns and Sovereigns: An Anthropological History of Bastar, 1854–1996* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997); Indrani Chatterjee, *Forgotten Friends: Monks, Marriages, and Memories of Northeast India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013).

goes further to suggest 'culture' as a 'site for border crossings' that unsettle the familiar dichotomies between Santal and Bengali, or indeed, tribe and caste. These four essays add much to the volumes under review by exploring, in creative ways, life-worlds that are often lost to both historians and sociologists. As newer, especially non-textual sources, are mined to write *adivasi* histories today, the pre-colonial status of groups we now call *adivasi* will need to be examined more closely in relation to the established histories of particular regions in the Indian subcontinent. Even if the politics of alterity that defines *adivasi*-ness today may have been absent in earlier historical periods, it may still be possible to probe into the constitution of more nuanced, finer-grained forms of socio-cultural difference as well as how these might have been transcended or transgressed in certain circumstances. At the same time, however, probing into the pre-colonial past may well reveal the limits of *adivasi* studies as a field of inquiry.

Another challenge posed by inter-disciplinarity to *adivasi* studies may be seen in characterizations of the British colonial regime and its 'tribal' subjects. Nationalist historiography generated proto-nationalist images of the Santal Hul, the Kol Insurrection and the Birsaites Ulgulan as anti-colonial struggles par excellence.<sup>7</sup> Early subaltern studies replaced this proto-nationalist imagery with depictions of 'primitive rebels' as authentic anti-colonialists as opposed to the nationalist bourgeoisie.<sup>8</sup> In these dominant narratives of *adivasi* politics during the Raj, 'state' and 'tribe' came to be seen as inherently opposed to each other. Indeed, this opposition was arguably implicit in the very term '*adivasi*' as a counter to the statist notion of 'tribe'. But such conceits are harder to maintain now that social scientists studying the state have ceased to reify it any longer and sought to examine its everyday embeddedness in society.<sup>9</sup> Historians, in particular, have had to rethink their earlier characterizations of the colonial state, which, in David Washbrook's words, ought to be seen as 'part of the same

<sup>7</sup> Three prominent examples are Kalikinkar Datta, *The Santal Insurrection of 1855–57* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1940); Jagdish Chandra Jha, *The Kol Insurrection of Chota-Nagpur* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co., 1964) and Kumar Suresh Singh, *The Dust-Storm and The Hanging Mist: A Study of Birsa Munda and His Movement in Chhotanagpur, 1874–1901* (Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1966).

<sup>8</sup> The best illustration of this reification of 'primitive rebels' as subaltern anti-colonialists may be seen in Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983). Guha relied on all three abovementioned works of nationalist historiography to make his arguments about peasant insurgency in nineteenth-century British India. See also David Arnold, 'Rebellious Hillmen: The Gudem-Rampa Risings, 1839–1924', in *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History & Society*, ed. Ranajit Guha (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982), 88–142; Tanika Sarkar, 'Jitu Santal's Movement in Malda, 1924–1932: A Study in Tribal Protest', in *Subaltern Studies IV*, ed. Ranajit Guha (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985), 136–64.

<sup>9</sup> Philip Abrams, 'Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State', *Journal of Historical Sociology* 1, no. 1 (1988): 58–89; Timothy Mitchell, 'The Limits of the State: Beyond Statist Approaches and Their Critics', *The American Political Science Review* 85, no. 1 (1991): 77–96; Joel S. Migdal, *State in Society: Studying How States and Societies Transform and Constitute One Another* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); C.J. Fuller and Véronique Bénéï, eds, *The Everyday State and Society in Modern India* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2001).

social field as its subjects'.<sup>10</sup> As such, in their introduction to *Savage Attack*, Bates and Shah rethink the conventional focus on nineteenth-century rebellions in the light of a wider range of *adivasi* negotiations with colonial and post-colonial states over land and forest rights. Subsequent essays by Gunnell Cederlöf on negotiated borderlands in northeast India and Vishvajit Pandya on self-making and resistance in the Andamans enable us to rethink the relationship between *adivasis* and the Raj. In their introductory essay, Das Gupta and Basu go a step further to shift the focus from rebellions to the politics of everyday *adivasi* life, bringing social history into conversation with anthropological studies of these rural communities. Essays by Tripti Chaudhuri, Sanjukta Das Gupta, Samita Sen and Shashank Sinha on missionary–*adivasi* exchanges, agrarian change, the politics of migration to the Assam tea plantations and the constitution of patriarchies in village communities, respectively, push us to reconsider the colonial impact on *adivasis*. Far from being a monochromatic story of subordination and immiseration from above, we now have more nuanced accounts of the everyday workings of colonial modernity in the scheduled areas, especially how *adivasis* responded to the constraints and opportunities available to them. Even when we turn our attention to *adivasi* rebellions, as do Tanika Sarkar in *The Politics of Belonging in India*, Atlury Murali in *Savage Attack* and Daniel Rycroft in *Narratives from the Margins*, the simple binary opposition between 'state' and 'tribe' is unsettled ever so subtly as we find *adivasis* refashioning their lives, communities and memories of the past in these moments of rupture instead of reproducing the old colonial stereotypes of superstitious savages at odds with modernity at large. To what extent these rebellions were 'anticolonial', let alone proto-nationalist, is itself open to investigation now. In critically examining *adivasi* negotiations with the Raj and their self-making processes under colonial modernity, *adivasi* studies today has the opportunity to unpack the multi-layered politics underlying the term *adivasi* to explain how this strategic essentialism has been used and reused in dialogue with the modern state in India. The challenge for the field, however, will be to extricate itself from the politics of this complex term.

A final challenge to *adivasi* studies from the new interdisciplinary ensemble available to it may be seen in contrasting approaches to 'indigeneity' in India and beyond. Since the 1980s, advocacy for the rights of 'indigenous peoples' has steadily replaced class-based solidarities across national borders.<sup>11</sup> The 'indigenous' is, thus, now the global subaltern, behind whom activists and academics can rally as they strive for radical social transformations. Some social scientists working on South Asia have responded enthusiastically to this new

<sup>10</sup> David A. Washbrook, 'Law, State and Agrarian Society in Colonial India', *Modern Asian Studies* 15, no. 3 (1981): 713.

<sup>11</sup> Deborah J. Yashar, ed., *Contesting Citizenship in Latin America: The Rise of Indigenous Movements and the Postliberal Challenge* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Orin Starn and Marisol de la Cadena, eds., *Indigenous Experience Today* (New York: Berg Publishers, 2007); Courtney Jung, *The Moral Force of Indigenous Politics: Critical Liberalism and the Zapatistas* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Dorothy L. Hodgson, *Becoming Indigenous, Becoming Masai: Postcolonial Politics in a Neoliberal World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

global trend, arguing that indigeneity discourses mediate between the local and the global without appealing exclusively to nation-states.<sup>12</sup> Others, however, have suggested that the cultural politics of indigeneity revives colonial stereotypes of savagery and primitivism in a new garb, often harming the interests of those that activists seek to speak for.<sup>13</sup> These debates make their presence felt in the three volumes under review, all of which express a healthy dose of scepticism towards the notion of ‘indigeneity’ and the kind of activist scholarship it calls for. Such scepticism is best seen in Nandini Sundar’s essay in *Narratives from the Margins*, in which she identifies the predicaments of *adivasis* in contemporary India entirely within the framework of the postcolonial nation-state. A similar approach may be seen in the essays in *The Politics of Belonging in India* by Christian Strumpell and Amit Desai on *adivasi* workers in a steel town and villagers encountering Hindutva through routine practices of healing, respectively, both of which illustrate how *adivasi* lives and politics are embedded in ‘regional modernities’ and, ultimately, within inescapable national boundaries. Nonetheless, as Luisa Steur’s excellent essay in *Savage Attack* shows, switching from ‘class’ to ‘indigeneity’ can be politically rewarding for *adivasi* activists in an age of neo-liberal land grabs overseen by the State in India today. Darley Jose Kjosavik makes a related point in *The Politics of Belonging in India* when she argues for an ‘indigenist epistemology’ that takes into account the intersection between class and indigeneity in particular contexts. In the same volume, Bengt Karlsson shows how ‘traditional institutions’, far from being forms of political atavism, are at the heart of lively debate and contestation in contemporary Meghalaya as the local and global enter into an alliance against the postcolonial nation-state’s construction of Northeast India. But, arguably, the wisest opinion on the matter is Willem van Schendel’s, who finds ‘indigeneity’ a better alternative to the colonial ‘tribe’ and the nationalist *adivasi*, though it, too, fails to making adequate sense of the fluid, shifting socio-cultural mosaic that constitutes India’s north-eastern borderlands. If these anthropologists seem too eager to engage with indigeneity discourses without accepting their activist presuppositions *in toto*, it is because they encounter their research subjects in a far more direct and obvious way than historians generally do. Moreover, anthropologists working in the Schedule VI areas of Northeast India are likely to prefer the term ‘indigenous’

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Ram Dayal Munda and Samar Bosu Mullick, eds., *The Jharkhand Movement: Indigenous Peoples’ Struggle for Autonomy in India* (Copenhagen: International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, 2003); Bengt G. Karlsson, ‘Anthropology and the “Indigenous Slot”: Claims to and Debates about Indigenous Peoples’ Status in India’, *Critique of Anthropology* 23, no. 4 (2003): 403–23; Bengt G. Karlsson and Tanka B. Subba, eds., *Indigeneity in India* (London: Kegan Paul, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Andre Béteille, ‘The Concept of Tribe with Special Reference to India’, *European Journal of Sociology* 27, no. 2 (1986): 296–318; Andre Béteille, ‘The Idea of Indigenous People’, *Current Anthropology* 39, no. 2 (1998): 187–192; Alpa Shah, *In the Shadows of the State: Indigenous Politics, Environmentalism, and Insurgency in Jharkhand, India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Kaushik Ghosh, ‘Indigenous Incitements’, in *Indigenous Knowledge and Learning in Asia and Africa: Essentialism, Continuity and Change*, ed. D. Kapoor and E. Shizha (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

over *adivasi*, a term coined and current in the Schedule V areas. These distinctions across disciplinary and spatial lines are significant for those grappling with the potentialities and limits of *adivasi* studies today. A one-size-fits-all solution will simply not work, and hence, it remains for *adivasi* studies to untangle itself from the postcolonial nation-state and chart out its own domain, scope and limits of inquiry.

To sum up, the *adivasi* studies project, which ties together the three volumes under review, is both exciting and challenging. The editors of all three volumes offer overlapping accounts to explain how and why they have arrived at their respective positions on ex-tribal subjects of modern India. Das Gupta and Basu explicitly consider pre-colonial pasts but not the 'indigenous' present. The other two volumes do not deal explicitly with the pre-colonial period, but focus instead on the colonial and the post-colonial contexts in which 'tribes' have become *adivasis* or 'indigenous peoples'. Despite these differences, however, the volumes are united in their endorsement of the term *adivasi* as a compromise between the global 'indigenous' and the parochial *vanvasi* or *janjati*. The construction of the *adivasi* as an object of interdisciplinary scholarly analysis poses three key challenges: (a) an inability to connect pre-colonial histories of the scheduled areas and their *adivasi* inhabitants with their better-known modern pasts; (b) a tendency to posit a simple binary between *adivasis* and the modern State; and (c) the practical and epistemic limits placed on the notion of *adivasis* by the rise of indigeneity discourses in the Schedule VI areas of contemporary India and beyond. These challenges derive largely from the interdisciplinary nature of *adivasi* studies as a field of scholarly inquiry: if this was simply a matter internal to the discipline of history, the question of indigeneity could be ignored and time divided up between historians specializing on different periods; likewise, if only sociologists and anthropologists had to tackle these challenges, we would simply be left with the passions and prejudices of their informants today and the past could be studied in terms of memory-making alone. As things stand, these disciplinary solutions take us nowhere. This is why interdisciplinarity is unavoidable even as it presents its own challenges. The extent to which these challenges can be confronted, as the contributors to these volumes demonstrate, depends on how successfully *adivasi* studies define spatial and temporal limits to its domain and scope of inquiry, disentangles itself from the postcolonial nation-state framework within which *adivasis* are embedded in India today, and extricates itself from the politics of social movements that spawned and gave meaning to the notion of *adivasi*. My own attitude is one of cautious optimism. The volumes under review, taken together, chart a new direction in the study of groups hitherto deemed to be 'tribes'. It remains to be seen whether, or to what extent, *adivasi* studies can become an intellectually productive field in the years to come.

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