

Adivasis in Contemporary India:

Engagements with the State, Non-State Actors, and the Capitalist Economy

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Introduction

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Any consideration of contemporary adivasi politics must confront the prior question of who is an adivasi (and who is not). The answer is, alas, far from obvious even to those, or perhaps especially to those, who claim to study adivasi politics. We know that the neologism 'adivasi', which was coined in the early twentieth century in what is now Jharkhand (Hardiman 1987: 15), literally means something akin to 'ancient inhabitant'. The term represented an attempt by the leaders of social movements in late colonial Jharkhand and its adjoining areas to articulate a political vocabulary beyond the English word 'tribe' with its colonial-era associations of backwardness and savagery. To this extent, 'adivasi' has always been less a social-scientific label to describe existing social groups than an category imbued with a political aspiration, namely, to unite groups who are characterized as 'tribes' or 'scheduled tribes' in colonial and postcolonial India. The implication is that one is no longer only a Munda, Kondh or Bhil, but a member of an emergent all-India collective.

Yet not every 'tribe' found in colonial censuses can be straightforwardly called adivasi in contemporary India. By convention, the term 'adivasi' is limited in its usage to scheduled areas defined under Schedule V of the postcolonial Indian constitution. In other words, those living in Schedule VI areas in north-eastern India are neither described as adivasis nor do they call themselves as such. The distinction between these two types of scheduled areas on the mainland and the north-eastern frontier of India corresponds to an older divide between what the Government of India Act, 1935 defined as 'partially excluded areas' and 'wholly excluded areas'

and what the earlier Government of India Act, 1919 defined as ‘typically backward tracts’ and ‘really backward tracts’ (Chandra 2013a: 149). Schedule V areas have, following colonial precedent, been understood by the postcolonial Indian state to be more integrated with ‘mainstream’ or caste society than Schedule VI areas on the north-eastern frontier. To the extent that claims of adivasi identity are located exclusively in the Schedule V areas, it is important to recognize the intimate relations between the notion of ‘adivasi’ and mainstream caste society in modern India. The same cannot be said for ‘tribes’ or ‘indigenous peoples’ residing in Scheduled VI areas today, whose notions of belonging transcend national boundaries via church, activist, and NGO networks as well as cultural-historical ties with Southeast Asia and Inner Asia. Adivasis, in sum, exist only in the Schedule V areas on the Indian mainland where, despite the existence of internal frontiers, the nation-state is inescapable.

Yet we must also recognize that the term ‘adivasi’ is far from uniformly used within Schedule V areas. Firstly, there are individuals and groups within these scheduled areas who simply do not aspire to be ‘adivasis’ in the all-India sense. They prefer instead to be Oraons or Todas with the distinctive historical meanings that these communities have come to embody locally and trans-locally. Secondly, there are individuals and groups whose aspirations take shape within the contours defined by right-wing Hindu organizations, which see ‘adivasi’ as a politically divisive, even pernicious, term. They prefer to call themselves ‘vanvasis’ (literally, ‘forest dwellers’), and would like to extend this neologism to others who they deem to be similar to themselves. Thirdly, there are groups in these scheduled areas that do not claim to be ‘adivasis’ because they seek to be recognized by the postcolonial state as ‘scheduled tribes’. Far from abandoning colonial stereotypes of backwardness and savagery, they seek to enact these tropes of what I have elsewhere termed ‘primitivism’ (Chandra 2013a) in order to force their

way into the official schedule or list of ‘tribes’ recognized by the Indian state. In the strict sense, therefore, very few groups defined by the contemporary Indian state as ‘scheduled tribes’ in Schedule V areas call themselves ‘adivasi’, though it remains a matter of lively debate among activists and academics whether self-ascription should be the sole basis of defining an adivasi identity.

It may be fair to say that the empirical connotations of the term ‘adivasi’ are considerably narrower than the political aspirations represented by the term, and this is arguably why social scientists are far from unanimous in adopting it. Over the past two decades, politically-engaged scholars seeking to express solidarity with particular adivasi movements have tended to prefer ‘adivasi’ to describe all state-defined ‘scheduled tribes’ in Schedule V areas (see, e.g., Baviskar 1995; Sundar 1997; Damodaran 2002; Rycroft and Dasgupta 2011). This is, of course, as much a political choice on the part of these scholars as it is an intellectual one. Such a choice may, however, be accompanied by a willingness to speak for ‘adivasis’ in a quasi-activist tone at the risk of ventriloquizing and disregarding inconvenient realities. On this count, a significant strand of scholarship on modern India has questioned and criticized the notion of ‘adivasi’ as a useful empirical category (see, e.g., Béteille 1986; S. Guha 1999; Prasad 2003). These critics contend that the politics surrounding the term ‘adivasi’ are hardly any different from the colonial notion of ‘tribe’ that has been discredited globally over the past half century (Fried 1975; Fabian 1983; Mamdani 1996; Kuper 2003; Rolph-Trouillot 2003). Moreover, following the writings of the sociologist G.S. Ghurye (1943, 1963), these scholars question the analytical utility of the term ‘adivasi’ as a marker of irreducible cultural and political difference in Indian society. From an altogether different perspective, an emerging body of scholarship has also questioned the intellectual and political value of the term ‘adivasi’ insofar as it is tied inextricably to the

postcolonial Indian nation-state. These scholars argue for the need to connect the local with the global without the mediation of the national, and hence, call for erstwhile ‘tribes’ in India to rally under the global banner of ‘indigeneity’ today (see, e.g., Munda and Bosu Mullick 2003; Karlsson 2003; Karlsson and Subba 2006). The political aspirations of ‘indigenous’ populations, according to these advocates, transcend the nation-state, and the politics of indigeneity thus paves the way for emancipating marginalized groups from their imprisonment in specific national contexts. Without adjudicating between these divergent scholarly perspectives, it may be wise to conclude that it is neither easy to ascertain who is an adivasi (and who is not), nor is it obvious that the term itself is particularly helpful.

It is worth clarifying here that none of the preceding discussion is meant to go so far as to suggest that the term ‘adivasi’ is an empty signifier. But it is equally important to clarify that the term is far more contested and narrower in empirical scope than its proponents acknowledge. With these clarifications in mind, we may proceed to the core of this essay, which is divided into three sections: (1) adivasis and the state; (2) adivasis and non-state actors; (3) adivasis and the capitalist economy. In each section, I shall explore the fuzziness of the term ‘adivasi’, and urge the reader to compare and contrast different instances of adivasi politics in contemporary India. What makes adivasi politics distinctive is, arguably, worth noting as much as what challenges pre-existing ideas of adivasi alterity.

1. Adivasis and the State in Contemporary India

A dominant strand of scholarly and popular common sense has tended to characterize adivasis as inherently at odds with the modern state in India. Recent claims that adivasi communities are deeply invested in ‘obstructing the state’ (Gell 1997) or ‘keeping the state

away' (Shah 2007) have an older pedigree that dates back to colonial anthropologist-administrators such as Edward Dalton (1872), Herbert Risley (1891), William Crooke (1896), and W.H.R. Rivers (1900). Later ethnographers, most notably Verrier Elwin (1943) and Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf (1981), kept alive the apocryphal image of the noble savage as the antithesis of modern civilization and added that the former's existence was being increasingly threatened by the latter. Early subaltern studies and its fascination with nineteenth-century rebellions also ensured, in its own way, that 'tribe' and 'state' continued to be represented as antonyms (Arnold 1982; R. Guha 1983; Dasgupta 1985; Bhadra 1985; Sarkar 1985). As a consequence, the adivasi as an exemplar of Otherness, untouched in absolute or relative terms by processes of modern state formation, has resonated nicely with a more general social-scientific understanding of 'tribes' as state-repelling agents (see, e.g., Lévi-Strauss 1969; Clastres 1987; Scott 2009; Hobart and Kapferer 2012).

By contrast, a diverse range of scholars have now shown that adivasi communities across India are deeply entangled within the logics of modern state power. We know that the social and economic histories of the Bhils in western India, for example, are closely intertwined with Mughal, Maratha, British colonial, and Indian postcolonial states over the past four centuries (Guha 1999; Skaria 1999). Similar *longue durée* histories of adivasi-state relations for northern, central, eastern, and southern India have revealed how foraging and hunting groups in forest niches were 'professional primitives' (Fox 1969) embedded in complex hierarchies of caste, land, ritual, and privilege (Hockings 1980; Sinha 1987; Singh 1988; Sundar 1997; Schnepel 2002). A nuanced historical understanding of the pre-modern pasts of those groups we identify as 'adivasi' today paves the way for a deeper knowledge of how these groups are enmeshed within modern states in colonial and postcolonial India (Chandra 2013b). If forests and hills are

deemed marginal spaces by modern states, we need not assume that the state is somehow weak, absent or at odds with those inhabiting these spaces. Indeed, as a widely-read volume on modern statemaking in the margins argues, margins are suffused with the languages and logics of stateness (Das and Poole 2004). We must thus not only locate adivasi communities within processes of modern state formation, but also appreciate how the notions of ‘tribe’ and ‘adivasi’ have taken their historical forms in close conversation with colonial and postcolonial states in India. To put it bluntly, there are no ‘tribes’ or ‘adivasis’ outside the domain of the modern Indian state.

This is not to suggest, of course, that adivasi-state relations in contemporary India are amicable. Adivasi politics vis-à-vis the postcolonial Indian state are characterized, above all, by negotiating claims that seek to ameliorate socioeconomic conditions as well as to alter state-society relations in legally-demarcated Schedule V areas. Social movements are the principal mechanism through which negotiations with the state take place. These social movements may be mediated by external activists from urban middle class society in India or abroad as, for instance, in the well-known Narmada anti-dam movement (Baviskar 1995; Nilsen 2010; Whitehead 2010; Thakur 2014) or the ongoing anti-mining protests in Orissa and Jharkhand today (Padel and Das 2010; Damodaran 2012). But it is also possible that movements may be organized and led by adivasis themselves as, for instance, in the Koel-Karo movement in Jharkhand (Ghosh 2006; Chandra 2013c) or when groups such as the Gaddis and Gujars seek recognition as ‘scheduled tribes’ (Kapila 2008; Mayaram 2014). Both types of movements put forth a set of claims to governmental officials and use the available cultural and material resources to negotiate smartly. Whereas some claims such as those of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) tackle the risk of dispossession and displacement, others such as the Gujars’

seek to enhance one group's position relative to others' in the region. Political parties such as the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) have also participated in adivasi negotiations with postcolonial state structures over regional autonomy in Jharkhand and the recognition of Santali as an official language in West Bengal. Negotiations with the state are also negotiations of state power from below, and to this extent, adivasi movements are characterized by a blend of conflict and conformity as they seek to attain their goals.

Students of adivasi politics have often assumed coherence on the part of claim-making communities vis-à-vis the state, but this is rarely ever the case in practice. Adivasi communities in contemporary India are fissured along the lines of class, gender, and generation, and their claims on the state differ accordingly. Movements such as the NBA have, for instance, emerged as key mechanisms of social mobility for low-status Bhils who have not enjoyed the traditional privileges of dominant lineages (Thakur 2014). Similarly, Munda women have featured prominently in protest politics in rural Jharkhand because these are well-trod avenues for exiting the drudgery of domestic work and the burden of traditional expectations at home. At the same time, young adivasi men tend to be at the forefront of social movements, which offer greater freedom and opportunities for leadership than in their gerontocratic communities in which village elders reign supreme (Chandra forthcoming). In each case, what it means to be 'adivasi' is itself open to questioning from within and without. If village elders from dominant lineages oppose a dam project on the grounds that they will lose their ancestral lands, the claims put forth will differ substantially from those by younger men and women who seek to sell their lands to the highest bidder and move to a big city. In fact, in the case of forest rights, recent scholarship on Gujarat, Orissa, and Uttar Pradesh suggests that, even where the language of 'custom'

prevails, individual and household calculations trump collective interests in adivasi negotiations with the postcolonial state (Kashwan 2011; Shutzer 2013; Vaidya 2014). We must acknowledge, therefore, that the aspiration to speak for all adivasis invariably conceals the particular interests at stake, but these interests need not always be so opaque to researchers that coherence can be assumed.

To sum up, adivasi-state relations in contemporary India follow pre-existing patterns of negotiation and accommodation. Far from keeping the state at arm's length, adivasi communities everywhere make their presence felt in the domain of postcolonial governmentality. In doing so, they invoke a notion of 'community' that is as much an aspiration of social movements as it is a strategic essentialism. Non-adivasi activists and politicians also take up adivasi political causes, thereby opening up a new terrain of negotiation within social movements in addition to those within the 'community' and in the governmental domain. The interaction between these diverse terrains of negotiation with their accompanying conflicts and compromises, ultimately, determines the success of particular movements. Although the modern state penetrates adivasi communities and suffuses their languages and logics of protest, the state itself is made and remade from below by adivasi claim-making in particular regions and localities.

2. Adivasis and Non-State Actors in Contemporary India

Non-state actors have until recently been neglected in the study of adivasis, though Christian missionaries, extreme right-wing and left-wing organizations, and indigeneity activists dot the landscape throughout the Schedule V areas. Each of these actors differs from each other as well as the postcolonial state, but these differences do not necessarily imply antagonisms. As far as adivasis are concerned, these non-state actors can be valuable allies in negotiations with

the state as well as in achieving social mobility for particular individuals and groups. Yet, at the same time, these supra-local actors come armed with their own agendas, which may sit uneasily with the ambitions of adivasis themselves. A balanced assessment of the relationship between adivasis and various non-state actors in the Schedule V areas must thus avoid the twin evils of partisanship and demonization.

Christian missionaries were vital catalysts of adivasi politics in the colonial period, but Gandhian politics, the passage of anti-conversion laws, and the infamous Niyogi Commission report dealt a severe blow to missions in the early years of the Indian republic (Roberts forthcoming). Missionaries could no longer proselytize under Indian law, and this meant that the ‘encounter of peripheries’ (Carrin and Tambs-Lyche 2008) from Europe and India came to an abrupt halt in Schedule V areas. Missionaries continued to have an impact on the education as well as living standards among adivasis, especially the Christians among them (Sahay 1976; Corbridge 2000: 70). As a former bishop of the Lutheran church in Ranchi put it, even those adivasis who were hostile to their Christian peers and the Gospel recognized the educational and medical benefits provided by missions (Minz 1998: 36-37). But the superior socioeconomic status enjoyed by Christian adivasis did not encourage further waves of conversion in the postcolonial period. Nor did the official reservations policy for scheduled tribes replicate the success of missions (Higham and Shah 2013). Instead, indigenous revivalism centred on the *sarna* (literally, ‘sacred grove’) gave a fresh lease of life to what the early colonial censuses, following the anthropological wisdom of the day, termed ‘animism’ (Munda 2000).

Sarna activism has been, however, upstaged by the proselytising work done by right-wing Hindu organizations in the heart of contemporary India. The Hindu Right in India prefers the term ‘vanvasis’ (forest dwellers) to ‘adivasis’, and since the 1950s, it has run a sustained

campaign in western, central, and eastern India to make good Hindus of these vanvasis. The Hindu Right argue that vanvasis are ‘default Hindus’ (Baviskar 2007: 282), some of whom have been misled by Christian missionaries since the mid-nineteenth century. In arguing thus, right-wing Hindu activists follow the postcolonial constitution, which treats the scheduled tribes as Hindus unless they declare themselves Christian, Muslim and so on. *Shuddhi* or purificatory rituals of re-conversion to Hinduism have typically accompanied medical and educational benefits to bring adivasis into the Hindu nationalist fold in Gujarat, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and Orissa (Xaxa 2000; Desai 2007; Froerer 2007; Kanungo 2008), and the rewards have been reaped not only in electoral contests (Thachil 2009), but also during anti-Muslim pogroms such as the notorious one in Gujarat in 2002 (Lobo 2002; Devy 2002). It would be easy to dismiss right-wing Hindu proselytization as a top-down process with limited reach within rural adivasi communities, but as the rich ethnographic studies by Amit Desai and Peggy Froerer in Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh show, a sizeable section of adivasis have received right-wing proselytisers rather enthusiastically and sought to ‘mainstream’ themselves as modern vanvasi votaries of the Hindu *rashtra*. Much of this success owes to the translation of Hindu myths and legends into adivasi folk idioms, on the one hand, and the accommodation of adivasis within the right-wing Hindu vision of national development, on the other hand (Kanungo and Joshi 2010). With the rise of the Hindu Right to national power in 2014, it remains to be seen whether those calling themselves vanvasis stand to gain materially from the new political dispensation.

In contrast to the Hindu Right, militant left-wing outfits have achieved relatively little among adivasis. ‘Naxalites’, as Indian Maoists are popularly called, invariably hail from upper to middle caste backgrounds in rural and urban India, and their entry into the forests and hills of the

Schedule V areas has been occasioned by military-strategic considerations more than any eclectic affinities with adivasi politics (Chandra 2014a). There has been a lively, albeit pointless, debate in metropolitan India between those who believe Maoism is an imposition on hapless adivasis abandoned by the postcolonial Indian state (Guha 2007; Simeon 2010; Sundar 2014) and those who believe Maoism is the most forceful articulation of longstanding adivasi grievances against the state (Navlakha 2010; Satnam 2010; Roy 2011). This intra-elite debate is pointless because the neat either/or choice it poses makes little sense on the ground, least of all to adivasis themselves. What we do know is that class, religious, generational, and gender divides within adivasi communities are crucial to understand who participates in the Maoist movement, how, and why. Despite their elders' disapproval, young adivasi men and women entered the Maoist movement through real or fictive kinship (Shah 2013a). Thereafter, they sought to assert themselves within local webs of rural politics as political agents, even leaders (Chandra 2013c). The same ambitions, however, also led adivasi youth away from the Maoists towards counterinsurgency (Sundar 2010) and the developmental state apparatus (Shah 2013b). Adivasi agency is slippery, and, as the Maoists have now realized, its revolutionary potential can dissipate rather quickly. The numerous Maoist splinter groups in eastern-central India and the active participation of adivasis in counterinsurgency testify to the limited opportunities afforded by the Maoist movement to adivasis. If the Maoist movement has failed to leave any lasting imprint on adivasi communities, it is not for want of effort but due to the shifting political calculations of adivasi youth seeking social mobility and power in and outside the movement.

The sprinkling of indigeneity activists found throughout India has an even more limited impact on adivasi life than the Maoists do. These activists represent adivasi predicaments today as local manifestations of the worldwide problems faced by ex-tribal 'indigenous' populations

(see, e.g., Munda and Bose Mullick 2003). By connecting the local with the global, indigeneity activism in India seeks to bypass the overbearing presence of the nation-state in adivasi life (Karlsson 2003). But, as Kaushik Ghosh (2010) has pointed out, reading indigeneity into adivasi politics amounts to a subtle epistemic violence that effaces the critical differences that exist between settler colonies in the Americas and Australia and the postcolonial world. Furthermore, the activists' desire to bypass the postcolonial nation-state sits oddly with ongoing adivasi negotiations with the state in the Schedule V areas. For the most part, indigeneity activists are well-meaning middle-class Indians from clean-caste backgrounds, but their tendency to ventriloquize for adivasis is invariably linked more to the construction of their own radical selves than with the articulation of genuine adivasi aspirations in the public sphere (Chandra 2013d). Indeed, as a recent monograph by Alpa Shah (2010) explains, indigeneity discourses fundamentally misrepresent adivasis by casting them as noble 'eco-savages' living in harmony with nature and their millennia-old traditions in the scheduled areas. It remains to be seen how indigeneity activists respond to these criticisms, including those from adivasis themselves, and whether they can recalibrate their politics to better fit everyday realities in the scheduled areas.

In sum, non-state actors such as missionaries, extreme right- and left-wing organizations, and indigeneity activists structure adivasi lifeworlds today in both complementary and contradictory ways. On the surface, right- and left-wing organizations seem to be at loggerheads with each other, yet skirmishes between them are rare despite their coexistence in central and eastern India. Conflicts do exist, however, between missionaries and the Hindu Right in the scheduled areas, especially where state governments are more sympathetic to the latter. But, at a different scale of politics, missionaries and indigeneity activists may have a common interest in transnational advocacy on behalf of their adivasi wards. Adivasis have little choice today but to

navigate this complex web of complementarities and contradictions, minimizing threats to their well-being and enhancing prospects for social mobility simultaneously. When seen alongside their negotiations with state structures, it is possible to appreciate the fraught terrain in which adivasi aspirations take shape in contemporary India.

3. Adivasis and the Capitalist Economy in Contemporary India

Just as scholars have conventionally located the state outside adivasi life, so, too, has the modern capitalist economy. It has thus been argued that market processes are destroying the social fabric and confidence of rural adivasi communities, and rendering them homeless, landless, and destitute (Elwin 1943; Padel and Das 2010; Damodaran 2012). This argument, which undoubtedly has its origins in colonial anthropology (see, e.g., Dalton 1872), treats both adivasis and forest environments as precariously placed within a global capitalist economy (Suykens 2009), and calls for a kind of salvage anthropology to rescue both from extinction (Damodaran 2002; Padel 2010; Padel, Dandekar, and Unni 2013). But these arguments by scholar-activists, much like those of indigeneity activists discussed in the previous section, practice a politics of ventriloquism that, unwittingly, silences adivasi voices (Shah 2010). It is not that the subaltern cannot or does not speak, but that she is not heard by those who insist on speaking for her (Spivak 1988). As such, it is necessary to pay heed to adivasi voices and agency in order to rethink how capitalist economic processes play out in the Schedule V areas today: Our focus here will be on scholarship concerning three closely related aspects of contemporary capitalism in these areas: land and forests, rural livelihoods, and migration to cities.

As far as land and forests are concerned, there is no doubt that, over the past century and a half, processes of sedentarisation and peasantisation have accompanied widespread

deforestation and an expansion of the arable frontier in Schedule V areas (Gadgil and Guha 1995; Rangarajan 1996). There is also little doubt that these socioeconomic processes are linked to the ‘primitive accumulation of capital’ (Marx 1967: 713-74), which has been integral to colonial and postcolonial state formation in India (Sivaramakrishnan 1996). But, far from being simply a top-down imposition, the management of land and forests has placed adivasis in a ‘double bind’ (Banerjee 2006). On the one hand, the expansion of the arable frontier has provided adivasi peasants the opportunity to create private landed property that is recognized by the state and protected through tenancy legislation such as the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act (1908) and the Central Provinces Land Alienation Act (1916) (Upadhyaya 2010; Thakur forthcoming). As such, a number of early adivasi movements such as those of the Munda Sardars and the Tana Bhagats sought either the recognition or the protection of private property in land (Dasgupta 1999; Chandra 2014b). Even recent adivasi politics has prioritized land rights for individuals, including women, and households following progressive legislation such as the Forest Rights Act (2006) (Rao 2008; Kashwan 2011; Shutzer 2013; Thakur 2014). On the other hand, modern regimes of forest conservation since the 1870s have tended to partner with adivasi communities, especially dominant lineages within them, to protect endangered species of trees and wildlife in protected forests as well as to profit from commercially valuable trees, most notably sal (*Shorea robusta*) and from vermin eradication (Sivaramakrishnan 1999). Accordingly, recent attempts at ‘joint forest management’ draw on a longer history of adivasi-state relations, in which a balance is sought between conservation and profit and, equally, between participatory and technocratic modes of governance (Sundar 2000; Sundar, Jeffrey, and Thin 2001). The adivasis’ double bind today stems from their contradictory role as holders of private land rights in forest tracts and as state-appointed conservators of the same tracts. It is not surprising, therefore, that governmental

bids for land acquisition today on behalf of public or private corporations are met with a mix of approval and consternation within rural adivasi communities, deepening existing conflicts along class, gender, and generational lines and, indeed, interrogating the notion of being ‘adivasi’.

Rural adivasi livelihoods and the politics of work in Schedule V areas are no less contentious today. On the one hand, adivasi youth, like their counterparts elsewhere in contemporary India, are steadily moving away from farm labour to take up non-farm livelihoods and work in cities (Shah and Harriss-White 2011). On the other hand, a plethora of nongovernmental organizations or NGOs now routinely intervene in adivasi livelihood activities, ostensibly to ensure food security and economic stability for rural households within local and regional agrarian markets (Chandra 2013b: 304-13; Shutzer 2013). From my fieldwork in rural Jharkhand, I found that those adivasis who own more and better land are more likely to benefit from NGO interventions, especially via governmental schemes such as the Swarnajayanti Gram Swarajgar Yojna (SGSY) and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA). At the same time, those from outside these better off households are more likely to stop farming and shake off any ties of patronage or bondage that may have previously existed. In other words, existing power differentials arising from the ownership of land within adivasi villages may be widening in a sense, but non-farm work, including in NGOs and insurgent groups, also threatens to overturn existing village hierarchies abruptly. In a similar vein, conflicts over livelihoods within adivasi villages may be seen, for example, in fierce debates over the ‘traditional’ production of rice beer and other kinds of female work defined by ‘custom’ (Shah 2011; Chandra 2013c). These brewing intra-community conflicts in relation to land and livelihoods are, of course, anything but uncommon in adivasi villages in contemporary India (see, e.g., Sivaramakrishnan 1998). These conflicts between the young and the old, women and men,

peasant and lord are, to say the least, symptomatic of modern capitalism in the countryside, and it would be fair to say that rural adivasi communities are certainly not exempt from them.

Migration to cities is another classic feature of modernization worldwide, and young adivasi men and women have not been shy to migrate to major Indian cities in search of work and leisure. There is an active debate over whether adivasi migration to cities can be regarded as simply an economic phenomenon by which adivasis are being incorporated into a 'precariat' at the bottom of the expanding capitalist economy in contemporary India (see, e.g., Breman 1996; Mosse et al 2002; Breman, Guérin, and Prakash 2009) or if such migration is better viewed as a cultural phenomenon that permits adivasi youth to break free from the shackles of 'tradition' and 'custom' in order to experience the seductions and freedoms of urban life alongside its dangers (Shah 2006; Hansen and Verkaaik 2009). What this debate misses, however, is that adivasi migration to cities is rarely permanent, and exploitation and freedom are false alternatives from the migrants' perspectives. It may be better to view migration as a livelihood strategy embedded within a household's multiple livelihoods, especially for the land-poor, youth, and women, i.e., those who are at the receiving end of village hierarchies in rural adivasi communities. When, for example, adivasi women migrate to Delhi or Mumbai as maids, they find themselves as breadwinners for the first time with all the risks attendant upon this role as they seek to supplement their rural household incomes (Wadhawan 2013). To judge these women *a priori* as 'free' or 'exploited' within a wider capitalist economy is to necessarily ignore questions over multiple livelihood strategies pursued by adivasi households today, the stretching of kinship networks between the country and the city, and the prospects of social mobility in urban spaces. The challenges and opportunities of migrant work thus present themselves in their myriad hues to adivasi men and women in the Schedule V areas today. There is little reason to believe that

they will wish away these challenges and opportunities, and confine themselves simply to playing ‘traditional’ roles in their rural homes.

In short, we are to take adivasi voices and aspirations seriously, our understanding of capitalist economic processes in the Schedule V areas ought to depart sharply from the received view on the matter. While human poverty and degradation remain vital issues in these areas, they cannot be said to exist exclusively there; nor can it be said reasonably that they are all that exist in these areas. The politics of land and forests, work and livelihoods, and migration to cities throw up opportunities and challenges for adivasis, especially those at the receiving end of rural hierarchies, and moreover, raise important questions about what it means to be ‘adivasi’ today. There are, after all, very real differences, material as well as symbolic, between adivasi elders and youth, dominant and subordinate lineages, and men and women in adivasi villages. The workings of capitalist economic processes sharpen these differences and call the notion of an adivasi ‘community’ into question. This state of affairs may trouble those who prefer to live with simplified visions of adivasi life, but it ought not to trouble those who recognize that it is part and parcel of modern life and there can be no return to some Edenic state of innocence in which all were equal and nature’s abundance ensured plenty for all.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have sketched a broad overview of adivasi engagements with the state, non-state actors, and the capitalist economy in contemporary India. For each of these engagements, I have sought to demystify the conventional wisdom on adivasis by invoking the best available scholarship on the subject to help us understand different aspects of contemporary adivasi life. Far from being hapless victims of modern political and economic processes, adivasis

are subject-citizens of the Indian republic with their own distinctive set of anxieties and achievements as well as constraints and opportunities. Moreover, adivasis are political agents with their own wills and voices that often fly in the face of those who dare to speak for them. But when we ask ourselves what is most distinctive about adivasi politics in contemporary India, it may be most appropriate to say that it is the struggle to define who is an 'adivasi' and who is not in rapidly changing times.