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Looking Beyond the Present: The Historical Dynamics of Adivasi (Indigenous and Tribal) Assertions in India

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Abstract

This essay is organized into two parts that describe some of the important conceptual, historical and representational issues that relate to Adivasi assertion. The first part, 'Adivasis' as 'Indigenous and Tribal Peoples', summarizes the key conceptual and semantic debates that have enabled Adivasis to assert themselves as Indigenous peoples internationally and nationally. This paves the way for a fuller engagement with the topic of Reinterpreting Adivasi History. Here I reflect upon a statement made about 'looking beyond the present' by Shibu Soren, a leading Santal politician, to question how and why movements led by Adivasi freedom-fighters sustain discourses of indigeneity in postcolonial India. The second part, on the ICITP (Indian Confederation of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples), links up the previous strands, to assess how this indigenist organization has developed a reading of Indigenous rights as relating to history, in a range of representational contexts.

Introduction

Since the 1990s, a self-styled Indigenous movement has emerged in India that strengthens the political will and broadens the historical consciousness of many subaltern and marginal communities. Made up of national, regional, district level and grass-roots organisations, this movement seeks to empower 'Adivasis' - a term translated as 'Indigenous and Tribal Peoples' - in relation to the federation of states that rule throughout India.¹ The economic imperatives of globalisation, leading to the liberalisation of India's markets, have generated immense pressures on the social and physical resources of the nation to alter the political dynamic between the states and the subordinate groups. This dynamic is creating amongst Adivasis 'new forms of agency and subjectivity', which are activated via counter-narratives of community identification

¹ 'Adivasi' means 'first dweller' or 'original inhabitant' in Hindi. In this paper I retain its capital 'A', to resonate with other Indigenous texts, and do not italicise the word in an effort to normalise its use. It implicitly refers to a plural social body, yet to retain clarity I pluralise it as Adivasis whilst referring to specific social collectives. Whilst some writers refer to the Adivasi in such contexts, this is too suggestive of a cultural homogeneity which does not exist.

(Sinha 2003).² Whereas the ruling states represent the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples as 'Others' - beyond the pale of civilisation and requiring development projects to uplift them as 'Scheduled Tribes' - recent scholarship has re-evaluated Adivasi histories, questioning the collusions and collisions between colonial anthropology and postcolonial discourses of identity and development (The most notable recent academic monographs on Adivasi history are Hardiman 1987; Sundar 1997; Skaria 1999). Informed by the various trajectories of Subaltern historiography, itself a field that re-interpreted Adivasi insurgency in nineteenth-century India to sustain a critique of both colonial historiography and national elitism, these texts enable readers to comprehend how histories of anti-colonial resistance regain efficacy in contemporary Adivasi identifications and assertions (see Guha 1983 on subaltern consciousness as evident in the *Santal* rebellion and Birsa Munda's *Ulgulan*; Samaddar 1998 on the interpenetration of popular memory and the politics of identity).

Comprising almost 10% of India's billion strong population and residing in every state, Adivasis have only recently represented themselves as 'Indigenous and Tribal Peoples', in the international forum (Mullik *et al.* 1993). Therefore a new global consciousness is developing amongst Adivasis that is prepared to challenge the Indian states in relation to core issues: notably rights to *jal, jangal, jamin* (water, forest, land), as well as to Indigenous histories, languages, educations, and more democratic forms of governance.³ It would be misleading to suggest that the globalisation of indigeneity, witnessed for example in the form of the United Nations Decade for Indigenous Peoples (1994-2004), has ushered in a wholly new political awareness amongst Adivasis (see Karlsson 2003: 403-23) for a critique of Adivasi participation in the United Nations indigenous forums). This is because Adivasis have participated in and led numerous struggles against colonial and postcolonial oppression in many regions of India, enabling their limited rights (as Scheduled Tribes) to be ratified and enshrined in the Constitution of India (see Nayak 1996 for a vibrant analysis of the 'dominant discourses' that have sought to contain Adivasi assertions). Rather, a new phase of the Indigenous movement has emerged, in which the universal language of rights has been internalised (from the perspective of Adivasis) and internationalised (from the perspective of the nation-state), generating unprecedented tensions between Adivasis and the state governments (see Hansen and Stepputat 2001 for a wider theorisation of modernity, state hegemony and ethnic mobilisation).

Once the domain of an ideological battle between colonialists wishing to protect 'Aboriginals' from national development, and Hindu nationalists pushing towards cultural homogenisation, it is Adivasi activists who are now taking charge of the idea of indigeneity, and reappraising its relevance and usefulness in an era of ongoing, or neo-,

² See also Rajni Kothari's inaugural speech at Workshop on India's New Economic Policy, organised by Setu: Centre for Social Knowledge and Action and Minority Rights Group (London) at New Delhi, 6-9 April 1998, http://www.minorityrights.org/WorkshopReports/work_rep_chapterdetail.asp, accessed on 12.07.2004.

³ The notion of *Panchayati Raj* (rule of village councils) is at the centre of these assertions (See Dreze and Sen 2002: 358-70).

or internal-colonialism.⁴ In states such as Jharkhand (Koel-Karo dams), Madhya Pradesh (Forest rights), Orissa (Kashipur aluminium mining), Andhra Pradesh (Birla Periclase project) and Kerala (Wayanad wildlife sanctuary) etc., the coercion of the federal governments against those Adivasis protesting against the injustices of development exemplifies how Adivasis are frequently brutalised, criminalised and marginalised in the political, legal and economic discourses of the postcolonial nation.⁵ The new indigenist discourse enables Adivasis to contest these processes and discourses, as it provides an inter-national system for the resolution of sub-national grievances. By reworking the concept of indigeneity across federal states and between postcolonial nations, Adivasi activists disrupt the familiar dichotomies deployed in the field of development: notably 'the global' vs. 'the local', 'the state' vs. 'the people', and 'the modern' vs. 'the traditional' (Mosse 2003 describes how Orientalist binaries reappear in postcolonial development models). Once confining indigenous groups to an eternity of subordination as 'traditional native communities', these dualities have been unhinged via the new international indigenism. This movement that finds pathways of emancipation in references to:

i) inscribed places and a politics of location, which oppose coercive governmental practices and divisive administrative boundaries.

ii) modern and post-modern collectivities, which oppose colonial and communalist notions of primordial identities,⁷ and

iii) subaltern pasts and memories, which sustain minority histories to oppose the silencing and misappropriation of indigenous liberation/revolution narratives (Chakrabarty 2004) argues how shared pasts translate into politicised histories through their reinterpretation, collectivisation and re-dissemination). As such the new indigenist discourse poses epistemological challenges to social scientists, anthropologists and historians who, whilst reconsidering their own conceptual baggage, can generate new understandings of the political and cultural dynamics of Adivasi activism, to critique the social and academic inequities that mar decolonisation (Sundar 2000).

Supported by the ideology of Adivasi Self Rule, Adivasi assertions gain vitality and national prominence by linking histories of anti-colonial resistance to the discourse of the international Indigenous movement, concerned with Human rights, Cultural rights, Minority rights and Gender rights.⁸ Assuming new forms and working in multiple

⁴ Interestingly (Nayak 1996) widens the scope of 'Indigenous Peoples' in the Indian context to encompass Adivasis, *Dalits* (Oppressed, Scheduled Castes) and Other Backward Castes, a practice that resonates with the idea of 'politics unlimited', (see Chakrabarty 2006).

⁵ See on Jharkhand (Akhilesh and Pathak 2002; Bhatia 2001); on Madhya Pradesh (Raina 2001) on Orissa (Krishna 2005) on Andhra Pradesh (Pragada 1998) on Kerala see (Raman 2004; Krishnakumar 2001; Krishnakumar 2004).

⁶ The movement for Adivasi autonomy in Jharkhand, eastern India exemplifies these dynamics (Basu 1994)

⁷ The political vis-à-vis ethnographic or primordial construction of ethnic groups is well articulated by (Mundu 2002) for wider indigenous perspectives see (Sissons 2005).

⁸ See (Cowan 2001) for a concise history of the interpenetration of rights and culture in international law; on the Constitutional rights of Adivasis see Girish Patel, 'Liberalisation and Adivasis' Rights', minorityrights.org as cited above; gender is becoming increasingly prominent in Adivasi studies, see (Xaxa

trajectories, the presence of Adivasi history sustains the political consciousness of indigenous, as well as non-indigenous leftist communities throughout India and beyond.⁹ In India, the discourses of internationalism, sub-nationalism, regionalism and sub-regionalism, decentralisation, *Panchayati Raj* (village governance), Tribal Customary Law, environmentalism etc. have all been informed to a large degree by Adivasi interventions in modern political processes.¹⁰ Whilst the Constitution of India denies Adivasi claims to indigenous status amongst those classified as Scheduled Tribes, the new international indigenism actively asserts group ownership of resources and collective identities, an idea which usually retains legitimacy and authority only in areas outside the scope of the state (Bijoy 2003). In India today, the routine abuse of land rights and cultural rights conferred to Adivasis leads to heightened claims for various forms of decentralised governance, as well as to the emergence of new forms of resistance, new dynamics of power between state and civil society, and new interpretations of subaltern pasts.

This paper is organised into three sections, that trace some of the important conceptual, historical and representational issues that relate to Adivasi assertion. The first part, Adivasis as ‘Indigenous and Tribal Peoples’, summarises the key conceptual and semantic debates that have enabled Adivasis to assert themselves as indigenous internationally and nationally. The second part, Reinterpreting Adivasi History, reflects upon a statement made about anti-colonial pasts by a leading Santal politician (the term Santal refers to the third largest of the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in India) to assess how and why movements led by Adivasi freedom fighters sustain discourses of indigeneity in postcolonial India. The final part, on the Indian Confederation of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, links up the previous two sections, to assess how this prominent indigenist organisation develops the notion of Indigenous rights relating to history, in a range of representational contexts.

‘Adivasis’ as ‘Indigenous and Tribal Peoples’

The conceptualisation and dissemination of Adivasi identities and histories prompts a range of intellectual and political projects, notably the re-interpretation of Adivasi histories, and the re-assertion of Adivasi rights through fluid local, regional, zonal, national, and international discourses. At the outset, the meaning and history of the term ‘Adivasi’, especially when related to the ‘Indigenous Peoples’ movement, requires some careful analysis. Adivasi representatives translate the term ‘Adivasi’ as ‘Indigenous and

2004) and Enakshi Ganguly Thukral, ‘Impact of New Economic Policy on Adivasi Women’, minorityrights.org as cited above.

⁹ The advocacy of Adivasi rights by non-indigenous writers may be one of the movement’s defining characteristics, suggesting the long history of Adivasi/non-Adivasi cultural interaction and pointing to the regionalist undercurrents in contemporary leftist discourse. Mahasweta Devi is a prominent author whose activism and literary creativity responds to these historical and political dynamics (Arya 1998).

¹⁰ Whereas the Indigenous presence in the early 1990s was accommodated into the national mainstream via environmentalism (Sen 1992), the ecological assumptions about Adivasis and the attendant notions of timelessness are beginning to be dismantled in favour of more politicised readings of Adivasi culture (Baviskar 1997).

Tribal Peoples' in the international forums, in an attempt to allow Adivasis to engage with the discourse of indigenism on their own terms, i.e. their specific historical, cultural and political experiences of being tribal and/or indigenous (Burman 1998). On account of the fact that the concept of 'Indigenous Peoples' is now upheld in international law, and that the global collective of 'Indigenous Peoples' now has a foothold in the inter-governmental development process, group identification as 'indigenous' is becoming an increasingly contentious issue in South Asian nations (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal) (Kingsbury 1995: Bose 2003). As outlined by R.H. Barnes the new constellation of 'Indigenous Peoples' challenges dominant state-centric notions of group identity: '[Indigenous Peoples] is a political category whose definition is in the making, and it will probably change (Barnes 1995: Introduction 1-12). The pertinent issues for group identification as indigenous include:

- i) the international variability of definitions of 'Indigenous Peoples' (a situation that provides space for further indigenous assertion),¹¹
- ii) the open relationship between ethnic identification and claims to 'historical priority', leading to contests over spatial and temporal belonging (in the fallout from the colonial demarcation of cultural terrains and identities),
- iii) the processes of self-determination, and related demands for resource ownership and environmental protection,
- iv) the negotiation of political inequity in both colonial and postcolonial eras (Barnes 1995: 3).

Once voiceless/insurgent communities have regrouped to present themselves to the nation-state as minority 'peoples' i.e. distinct communities with advanced moral and legal claims to regional lands, national citizenship and international rights (Bhengra *et al* 2005). These claims unravel many assumptions that have been written into many ethnographic and administrative texts, such as those describing India's 'tribals', a heterogeneous community (in both cultural and political terms) that encompasses mainland Adivasis, Denotified and Nomadic Tribes, ethnic minorities and in-migrating 'tea tribals' of Northeast India, and the first inhabitants of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.¹² As noted by Crispin Bates, these 'tribals' are often the subjected to prejudice in mainstream national imaginary, prompting the case for a new political identification as Adivasis (Bates 1995: 103-19). Whereas some sociologists demand scientific proof of indigeneity and question the validity of the Adivasi claims (notably Beteille 2005: 19-33), scholars who are familiar with the anti-colonial resistance movements and postcolonial identity-politics generally support the Adivasi assertions as 'Indigenous Peoples'. Although the notion of indigeneity can only be realistically proven at the regional - as opposed to the wider national - level in India, an Adivasi/Indigenous consciousness has been generated through shared experiences of colonisation and anti-colonial resistance, and through the distinctiveness of non-Hindu societal values and

¹¹ (Chakrabarty 2005) analyses the global negotiation, contestation and appropriation of the term 'Indigenous Peoples' as a productive postmodern/postcolonial strategy.

¹² For further information on Denotified tribes see 'Mahasweta Devi', a documentary film by Shashwati Talukdar on the Bengali activist/writer (2001); on Northeast India see (Singh 1982: vol. I) and (Rustomji 1983); on Adivasi diaspora in Northeast India see (Pullopillil 1999).

political systems (Xaxa 1999: 3589-3595 presents arguments for and against tribal indigeneity).

Organisations such as the Indian Confederation of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, or Bharatiya Adivasi Sangamam, are the current flag-bearers of the Indigenous movement in India. Although the representativeness of ICITP as an Adivasi organisation has been called into question - its network covers all of India, but it is led by activists from the state of Jharkhand - its construction of a community of 'Indigenous and Tribal Peoples' both a) resonates in India's federal states where the rights of Scheduled Tribes are ignored, and b) challenges the narrowness of existing definitions of 'Indigenous Peoples' in inter-governmental discourse, which tend to privilege the colonial encounter, over pre-colonial encounters, in the production of indigeneity (Karlsson 2003: 407-408; Karlsson and Subba, 2005: 1-19 'Introduction').

The translation of 'Adivasi' as 'Indigenous and Tribal Peoples' is in itself a strategic move. For indigenous discourse in South Asia, the racial binary produced in narratives of white conquest versus black native populations (inscribed in Euro-centric approaches to the Indigenous movement) is largely irrelevant. This is because it does not distinguish between the historical experiences of heterogeneous populations, such as between Adivasis and non-Adivasis in India. As channelled in the ICITP discourse, for example, an Adivasi identity refers to the multiple histories of resistance to and/or negotiation of the discourses and practices of marginalisation by the dominant groups in India, whether they be Hindu feudalists, Moghul governors, British colonials or Indian nationalists (Bates 1995: 105-109; Xaxa 1999: 3591). In these contexts, neither the term 'indigenous' nor the term 'tribal' adequately encompasses the complexity of Adivasi subjectivity, creating a need for conceptual hybridity and pluralism. Hence the construction of 'Indigenous and Tribal Peoples' as a phraseology that disrupts the global hegemony of the term 'Indigenous Peoples', and internationalises Adivasis in political spaces that both uphold and challenge the national apparatus of 'Scheduled Tribes'. By working between regional, national and international discourses of identity and development, the concepts of 'Adivasi'/'Indigenous and Tribal Peoples' can be understood as analytical features of 'regional modernities'. As defined by Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal such analytics enable discourses of decolonisation and narratives of development to be conceptualised, reproduced and negotiated by both subaltern and state actors (Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal 2003: 1-61).

The term 'peoples' corresponds directly to the political collectivisation of minority ethnic groups, making both the singular term 'people' and the less contentious term 'populations' redundant (Burman 1998: 1-20). Derived from colonial anthropological literature, and replete with elitist notions of divisions between tribal and Hindu societies, the term 'tribal' has been re-cast in postcolonial South Asian anthropology and is still preferred to 'Adivasis' in the mainstream media and development discourses (Xaxa 1999: 3589-3590). This is because, in its perpetuation of cultural (as opposed to political) identification, it preserves the hegemony of the culturalist imaginary of the postcolonial nation. The administrative homology of the term 'tribal' is Scheduled Tribe (or 'ST'), which links 461 supposedly distinct minority ethnic groups, such as the Bhils of western India, Gonds of central India, Santals and Mundas of central-eastern India etc, on account of their shared cultural distinctiveness vis-à-vis the mainstream populations (Xaxa 1999:

3589; on Bhil movements see Mathur 1988). The construct of ‘Scheduled Tribe’ was formalised in the tribal policies that the Congress government implemented in the years following Independence (Singh 1989). These policies revolved around affirmative action for the *anusuchit janajati* (STs), the protection of *anusuchit kshetra* (Scheduled Area), the authority of the Tribes Advisory Council and the representativeness of the federal state Legislative Assemblies (Munda 2002). The notion of ‘Scheduled Tribe’, however, privileges a spatialisation of groups in particular states or regions, and does not adequately denote indigeneity in national terms. This is because members of STs may only be considered ‘indigenous’ to particular states. If displacement and rehabilitation into a different state occurs, persons may lose their identification and rights as Scheduled Tribes. The concept of indigeneity therefore remains partial in the national Constitution, giving the non-Adivasi elites opportunity to further manipulate, abuse and negate the system of Scheduling.¹³

Premised on anthropological tropes such as locality, contiguity, and difference, the mainstream discourses of tribal provinciality and social inferiority are increasingly being superseded by Adivasi analytics of self-determination, i.e. decentralised regional autonomy, and Adivasi Self Rule (Savyasaachi 1998). Elaborating new politico-cultural tenets (minority status, linguistic diversity, cultural hybridity and performativity), the mobilisation of Adivasis around the idea of self-determination aims to provide the indigenous and tribal peoples with an equitable stake in the processes of development and globalisation. Although the Scheduled Tribe construct has provided a pivotal space for Adivasi self-identification, it usually features in current Adivasi discourse as a target of criticism, as federal states fail to fulfil their civic responsibilities in relation to the Constitution. The issue of indigenous self-determination causes much angst amongst both national elites, who are not willing to ratify the updated Convention 169 issued by the International Labour Organisation in 1989 that emphasises the rights of indigenous peoples to govern themselves, and state bureaucrats who have grown accustomed to the (mis)management of the Fifth Schedule, which defines ‘Scheduled Areas’ (Munda 2002).

Starting life as a Hindi term derived from Sanskrit (i.e. a non-Adivasi language), the notion of *Adi* (first, original) *Vasi* (dwellers, inhabitants) has sustained indigenous discourse in India since the 1930s. Taking a couple of decades since then to enter, alongside ‘tribals’ and ‘Scheduled Tribes’, into the lingua-franca of postcolonial India, it is still underused, especially considering that overtly derogatory terms are still routinely applied to those groups marginalised by the Hindu caste system, notably *Vanavasi* or forest dweller. However, terms such as *Kaliparaj* - black people, used in colonial-era Gujarat for example, are no longer used in public or administrative discourse.¹⁴ Whereas critics of indigenous discourse see in the term Adivasi a trace of colonial-era protectionism, and a prolonging of social prejudice in the guise of cultural differentiation (Bates 1995: 117), it would be unlikely that the term would now carry so much weight in the indigenous movement unless it resonated with the ideologies of both indigenism and anti-colonialism. Similarly the idea of it being somehow ‘imposed’ on Adivasis, either

¹³ This issue was debated at length at the Tribal Solidarity Groups meeting, Indian Social Institute, New Delhi on 31 July, 2004. The non-Scheduled status of diasporic Santals in Assam in a case in point.

¹⁴ The concept of *Vanavasi* is used by the right-wing religious nationalists to de-legitimise *Adivasi* claims to indigeneity, see Munda 2002. For further colonial-era terms see Hardiman 1987: 13-17.

‘from outside’ or ‘from above’ (Xaxa 1999: 3595) similarly negates the agency of those who first invented and disseminated the term, and its relevance to the hundred million people it now unites to in the postcolonial era.

Originating in the Hindi language in the 1930s, a period of intense conceptual and practical decolonisation, the word ‘Adivasi’ can be assessed as both a translation and a negotiation of the term ‘Aboriginal’. This was a colonial category employed to delineate the conceptual boundaries between Hindus and non-Hindus and thereby undermine attempts to construct a homogenous national identity. The 1931 colonial census writers, for example, re-deployed the notion of aboriginality by emphasising ‘Aboriginal’ religions and languages as categories that could help sustain protectionist policies in areas dominated by this particular demography, such as the Chhota Nagpur region of Jharkhand (Lacey 1933: 262-277, 288-290). An ethno-centric colonial logic stated that ethnic identity for ‘Aboriginals’ would hold sway, in the midst of their increasing multilingualism and conversion to dominant religions. Thus ‘Aboriginality’, as a concept could be reinforced as an elite device to manage the shifting patterns of modernity in India. The census found that the majority of Adivasis spoke in regional languages besides their mother-tongue (such as Bengali, Hindi, Oriya) but still classed as Santali-speakers or *Mundari*-speakers those that belonged to Santal or Munda ethnic groups by birth (Lacey 1933: 240). Likewise, the primordial logic of ‘Aboriginality’ in the 1931 census denied modernity to the categories of religion. Whereas ‘non-Aboriginals’ who had converted to Christianity or Hinduism became members of these socio-religious groupings, ‘Aboriginal’ converts remained defined as Santal or Munda etc. (Lacey 1933: 248). On account of the political capital that could be earned through the de-tribalisation of the so-called ‘Aboriginals’, majoritarian nationalists - who demanded a homogenous, primarily Hindu, national community free from colonial divisiveness - dismissed the idea of ‘Aboriginality’ as little more than a colonial construct preferring to assimilate Adivasis as ‘backward Hindus’.¹⁵ However, during this early phase of national decolonisation, Adivasis internalised the idea of being an Indian national yet different from the majority, by means of

- i) having an indigenous or pre-Hindu ancestry,
- ii) belonging to societies organised through a tribal or non-hierarchical, organic and democratic constitution, and
- iii) aspiring to a realisation of long-held views regarding inter-community coexistence and anti-imperialist politics. (See Singh 1982: ix-xvi for a demonstration of how early Adivasi discourse and early postcolonial anthropological discourse propel similar ideas of tribal identity and assertion).

The pioneering indigenous peoples’ collectives were based in Chhotanagpur (now Jharkhand), a once mineral-rich and forested area that the colonialists administered, on account of the administrative memory of the indigenous assertions, in a different way to other divisions in former Bengal, such as Bihar and Orissa (see Mullik 2003, iv-xvii for a useful introduction to Jharkhand, and the Indigenous movement of the region). Becoming

¹⁵ (Ghuyre 1963: 3-4) addresses the colonial politicisation of the 1931 census. He develops phrase the ‘backward Hindus’ (Ghuyre 1963: 19). For further discussion see Hardiman 1987: 13; Baviskar 1997:103.

politicised through the many Christian missions in the area, the leaders of the Adivasi Mahasabha (Great Council of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples) first disseminated the notion of Adivasi as a political construct, demanding equal status in the political process and particular cultural rights (Singh 1982: 1-29). These demands corresponded closely to the new laws (notably the Santal Parganas Tenancy Act and the Chhotanagpur Tenancy Act) that were implemented in the wake of the *Hul* (revolutionary liberation movement) led by Santal Adivasis in 1855-56 and the *Ulgulan* (revolutionary autonomy movement) led by Birsa Munda in 1896-1900 (Mullik 2003: 244-71). Although some commentators see a paradox in the fact that the claiming of Adivasi rights and identities relates closely to processes that are seemingly non-Adivasi, namely colonial modernity and national modernity, it is precisely this negotiation and strategic internalisation of the key concepts of colonialism and anti-colonial nationalism - such as indigeneity, difference, and dissent - that should stimulate our critical analyses. Otherwise, Adivasi history will be marred by impossible demands for cultural and political authenticity, which belie the formation of Adivasi identities and discourses through the colonial and postcolonial eras.

To summarise, the translation 'Adivasi' as 'Indigenous and Tribal Peoples' generates scope for further contests vis-à-vis both nation-state and regional state, as it re-locates Adivasi subjectivity outside the confines of colonial anthropology and postcolonial administration and within inter-governmental forums and inter-regional networks.¹⁶ By emphasising the need for an interpretation of 'Indigenous Peoples' that resonates in India - in view of both an Adivasi constituency and the national constitution - the strategic mobilisation of Adivasis as 'Indigenous and Tribal Peoples' expands the international scope of an already global discourse. Using Rajni Kothari's terms, such a mobilisation bridges the discourses of 'movements', 'dissent' and 'alienation', and establishes new critical terrains upon which Adivasis engage with the discourses of 'policy' and 'ideology' in the relevant regions (see Kothari 1997: 38-54 for the analysis of the relationship between these discourses).

Reinterpreting Adivasi History

In admiration of the spirit of resistance that has come to define the role of the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in the history of the Republic of India, Shibu Soren claims that: 'We fighting tribals look back to our legendary heroes - Tilka Manjhi, Sido [Murmu], Kanhu [Murmu], Birsa Munda - for inspiration. Their capacity to look beyond the then 'present' of things, and their dauntless spirit along with their love for the land has kept us ticking even in moments of agony and defeat.'¹⁷ Speaking as the leader of the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM, Jharkhand Liberation Front), which is a prominent regional party in central/eastern India, Soren commands high respect in the new State of Jharkhand, formed in 2000 after seventy years of Adivasi assertion. Having gained political prominence in the mid-1970s when he led a mass movement to assert Adivasi land rights, Soren elaborates the revolutionary legacy of his fellow Santals, Sido Murmu and Kanhu Murmu - the leaders of the famous Hul that was fought against the East India

¹⁶ For a fuller theorisation of indigenous rights and self-determination in the context of globalisation, see the chapter on '(Anti)Globalization from Below', in (Neizen 2004: 57-81).

¹⁷ Shibu Soren in conversation with Shachi Arya (28 September 1991), in (Arya 1998: 208-15).

Company and their agents of exploitation in 1855-56 (on the JMM see Panchbhai 1982: 31-52; on revolutionary struggles and memories of the *Santal Hul*, see Duyker 1987). Soren continues to fight for mainstream recognition of Adivasi participation in India's freedom movement, by propelling his reader/listener into a history of Adivasi claims to self-governance that is being suppressed in postcolonial India. He speaks of the '...then 'present' of things...', a reference to the emerging colonial policies and capitalist economies that were resisted, in the late eighteenth, the mid- and late-nineteenth century, by Tilka, Sido/Kanhu and Birsa respectively (on the Birsa Movement see Rycroft 2004: 53-68; on the colonial suppression of the Santal rebellion see Rycroft 2006). Brutally crushed, these anti-imperialist movements continue to inspire Adivasi assertions in contemporary India, suggesting that even with national independence, the aspirations of the rural indigenous communities have remained unfulfilled.¹⁸ Such movements have been previously interpreted as:

- i) local ethnic 'insurrections', in colonial historiography,
- ii) proto-nationalist awakenings, in national historiography,
- iii) 'millenarian' or religious movements, in postcolonial historiography, and
- iv) examples of 'subaltern' consciousness, in leftist historiography (Guha 1983; the notion of tribal millenarianism or messianism is put forward by Fuchs 1965).

It may now be pertinent to respond to Adivasi reinterpretations of their pasts, to analyse how Adivasi Self Rule has assumed importance in debates about nationhood and democracy in postcolonial India. Unsurprisingly, each of these historiographic approaches foreground the ideologies of the dominant class, notably: a) 'race' and counter-insurgency, b) nationality and elitism, c) leadership and community identity, and d) state responses to insurgency or mass mobilisation.¹⁹ In Adivasi reinterpretations of these movements narrative closure is less conspicuous, as new meanings are recovered through collective memories and memorial practices, and as new readings of dominant narratives find their way into Adivasi political imaginaries.²⁰

In the view of Shibu Soren, the historic leaders of Jharkhand shared a visionary capacity that could comprehend and act upon the interests of the marginal Adivasis and their fellow agrarian workers. During prolonged campaigns of counter-insurgency these leaders and their followers were captured, imprisoned and often executed publicly by the colonialist police. Such scenarios prompt a questioning of how these movements have retained their vitality and political viability in the midst of collective trauma, forced migration and multiple phases of subordination. The descendents of those closely associated with the movements were often forced to forget their insurgent pasts, fearing of state retribution.²¹ Yet each of these movements engendered shifts in colonial policy,

¹⁸ This idea is expressed by Rup Chand Murmu, 7th generation descendent of Chunu Murmu (Sido and Kanhu's father), in the documentary film, 'Hul Sengel: The Spirit of the Santal Revolution', dir. Rycroft and Tudu (ICITP and University of Sussex), 2005.

¹⁹ I cover many of these issues in Rycroft 2006.

²⁰ For example, see John Jantu Soren's drama *Sengel Dak* (Raining Fire), which was included in the film *Hul Sengel* and subverts the historical novel by Robert Carstairs, *Harma's Village*, Pokhuria: Santal Mission Press, 1935.

²¹ See my discussion of Bitiya Hembram in the next section.

pointing to their partial success in creating a discourse of indigenous power and mobility that could be reworked by Adivasi representatives and activists in later decades. These issues can be approached by taking on board recent methodological shifts in the fields of Indigenous Studies, Applied Anthropology and Subaltern Historiography. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, for example, has set out numerous ways to pursue an indigenous research project, incorporating the reclamation of indigenous pasts, testimonies, stories and memories (Smith 1999: 143-146). Many of these projects overlap with newly established 'Southern', post-colonial, feminist and Fourth World approaches to history that have emerged in the 'new humanities' over the past two decades (Chatterjee and Ghosh 2002; Nayak 1997).

Challenging disinterested scholarship, the identity-politics that these approaches address can also generate negative responses amongst reactionary state institutions, leading to complications in the role of postcolonial academicians. Positioning herself as a researcher straddling the domains of academic inquiry and political activism, Nandini Sundar has recently detailed how an applied anthropology in India can critique the historical tendency amongst politicians and activists to essentialise group identities, whilst redressing power inequities between scholarly and civic agencies (Sundar 2000). In her excellent analysis of collective memory amongst Santals, Prathama Banerjee demonstrates how Adivasis who survived the colonial suppression of the *Hul* kept its radical temporality alive via their own speech and songs (Banerjee 2002: 242-73). By recollecting the *Hul* as an alternative future, which allowed indigenous as opposed to colonial ideologies to thrive, these Santals contested conventional ways of interpreting the past and of writing history.

Whereas Banerjee is concerned primarily with strategies of memory in the colonial-era, the writing of Adivasi consciousness must also confront the workings of modernity in the postcolonial state, from its origins in the developmental state as espoused by the Congress Party (the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty), to the more recent states of communalism as produced by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) (see Kothari 1997: 44-45 for a discussion of Adivasi movements and federalism in the context of Gandhian ideology). In the context of the ultra-Right wing nationalism that the BJP has fostered throughout the 1990s, the very notion of a minority or Adivasi identity (i.e. being non-Hindu or Indigenous/Tribal) has been undermined by a Hindu-centric conception of India's population. The BJP has strengthened the nexus between state bureaucrats, nationalist politicians, multinational industrialists, and district police, which is a trend that has come to characterise the economy of India in the era of liberalised markets from the point of view of non-elite Adivasis (Rao 1996). Shibu Soren's recollection of '...moments of agony and defeat...' gain a renewed relevance since they were spoken in 1991, his words becoming entangled in the political realities that define indigenous identity in India today as the BJP has gained control in many Adivasi-dominated districts (Joshi 1999; Chatterji 2004).

Shibu Soren's glorification of Tilka, Sido, Kanhu, and Birsa, manifests what Stuart Corbridge has termed 'ethno-regionalism', or the building of a political agenda around 'the ideology of tribal society' in the postcolonial era (Corbridge 2003). The idea of Adivasi autonomy in central-eastern India has revolved around the reorganisation of four federal states, namely Bihar, West Bengal, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh, to include a fifth,

Jharkhand, and a sixth, Chhatisgarh. Although devolution has since occurred - Jharkhand and Chhatisgarh were both inaugurated in 2000 - only the borders of Bihar and Madhya Pradesh states were affected, with Jharkhand and Chhatisgarh emerging after their bifurcation. Much to Shibu Soren's annoyance, and having previously widened his party's programme to incorporate the interests of the non-indigenous workers, at the time of reckoning the glory of devolving Jharkhand fell ironically to the BJP. Although the notion of a Jharkhand state first gained popularity amongst urbanised Adivasis in the 1930s, via the work of Jaipal Singh, the Adivasi Mahasabha and the Jharkhand Party, the Congress party curtailed any moves towards Adivasi-oriented decentralisation in the 1960s by breaking intra-party consensus (Singh 1982: 8). New organisations, such as the Sido Kanhu Baisi (Committee), kept the ideology of the Jharkhand movement alive by commemorating the Hul and by probing the elitist bias of national parties (Panchbai 1982: 36-38). The Hul Jharkhand Party (the Revolutionary Jharkhand Party, which also recalled the spirit of the Santal rebellion) and the JMM were formed in the 'ethno-regionalist' climate of the 1970s, again bringing the idea of Jharkhand statehood into the national mainstream, to such an extent that its implementation became a significant bargaining tool between the regionalist and nationalist parties (Singh 1982: 9).

Located within this political genealogy, Shibu Soren's words can be interpreted as both an assertion of Adivasi ideology and as a critique of colonial and national modernities in India. Beginning his career as a son of a murdered agrarian worker he consciously styled himself as an Adivasi revolutionary in the 1970s during the movement to harvest forcibly the produce of expropriated Santal lands (Panchbhai 1982: 44-48). He has since become known as *guruji* (respected leader) amongst tribal and non-tribal constituencies in Jharkhand. Whilst his Adivasi critics claim that in pandering to regional elites he has diluted the ideology of tribal society, he is generally perceived in the national mainstream to be the embodiment of sub-nationalist assertion. Presenting the ideologies of regionalism and indigenism to the people, like his fellow JMM parliamentarians he lives and works amidst a host of emerging and contradictory political dynamics, which lend themselves to an interpretation beyond the new boundaries of Jharkhand. Whilst the ongoing violation of Adivasi and workers rights in Jharkhand is evident for example in the routine abuse of both migrant female miners in mineral-rich urban areas and bonded labourers in rural locations, as well as the federal state's encroachment upon Adivasi lands, the implementation of Jharkhandi statehood has not equated with Adivasi autonomy in any practical or meaningful way.²² Having appropriated the idea of Jharkhand regionalism, the agents of state nationalism have continued to ignore the cultural rights of non-elite Adivasis, a condition that is reflected in many of the Indian states (On social exploitation and cultural assertion in Jharkhand see Mathew Areeparampil 1995 and Mathew Areeparampil 2002). Thus the Adivasi movement in India now assumes an inter-regional dynamic, which aims to draw together the demands of Adivasis in various states to strengthen the presence of indigenous representation in the national political forums.

²² Many of these issues are elaborated in Participatory Research in Asia, *Tribal Land Rights and Industrial Accountability: case of mining in Dumka, Jharkhand*, New Delhi: SPRIA, 2004.

The regional demands are often closely related vis-à-vis the anti-democratic actions of Indian states. These include the deliberate oversight of the rights enshrined in the Constitution pertaining to the ownership and non-transferability of Adivasi lands in locations defined since Independence as 'Scheduled Areas', forcible displacement of Adivasi inhabitants of villages targeted by mineral extraction corporations, criminalisation of Adivasi activists protesting against state development projects, the mismanagement of state funds earmarked for Adivasi welfare, the denial of Adivasi access to forest produce by petty officials, etc (Bijoy 2002: Janu 2003). These violations are supported by a global geopolitical apparatus that purports to represent national interests yet increasingly sustains a vision of modernisation that actively marginalises the commitment to the democratic process of Indigenous Peoples worldwide. Representatives of Adivasi interests in India are negotiating this situation by lobbying for Adivasi autonomy and self-determination within the general parameters of the national Constitution and via the legal and political framework of federal states. By pursuing the avenue of decentralisation, the proponents of Adivasi Self Rule have much support from the Leftist bloc, as both indigenous and Marxist/Maoist ideologies also seek to dismantle the hegemony of communal parties and of inter-governmental development projects (Rao 1996; Kothari 1997). Throughout the 1990s a new political culture has emerged that supports committed solidarities between non-governmental organisations, Adivasi activists and communities, regional and leftist parties, and civil rights actors. In this milieu, campaigners for *Panchayati Raj* (Village Councils) aim to reawaken the longstanding ideal of democratic governance in South Asia by mediating authority between the Indian state and the physical and social resources of any particular area (Dreze and Sen 2002: 358-70). Since the colonial period, some of the areas dominated by Adivasis have been administered as Scheduled Areas, under the 5th Schedule of the Constitution. As these are often rich in mineral resources, state governments have been unwilling to implement Panchayati Raj in them. A pan-regional movement led by Adivasi activists helped to usher in the Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act in 1996, commonly known as PESA, although in states such as Jharkhand, the Rightist governments are stalling the act to appropriate more Adivasi lands (Sawaiyan 2002).

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(to be continued)