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

Daniel J. Rycroft

Lecturer in South Asian Arts and Culture, School of World Art Studies and Museology,  
University of East Anglia, UK

### 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.

### Indian Confederation of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples

Defining the trajectories and challenges of the new indigenism in India today, organisations such as the Indian Confederation of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples (ICITP) bring into close dialogue the local, regional, zonal, national and international dimensions of Adivasi discourse. The organisation is a network of one hundred and fifty affiliated Adivasi cultural organisations and political action groups, and is made effective by positioning itself

- i) in rhetorical terms, between the Adivasi people and the nation-state,
- ii) in strategic terms, between the new international indigenous forums, the federal states, and the nation state and
- iii) in discursive terms, between the politics of cultural activism and the shifting cultures of democracy in postcolonial India.

The organisation covers India through zonal (transregional) committees: Central, South, Northwest, Northeast, Southeast, Delhi. Comprising sixty member organisations—including the *Adivasi Ekta Munch* (Lohardaga), the *Akhil Bharatiya Adivasi Vikas Parishad* (Gumla), the All India Santal Welfare and Cultural Society (Dumka), and the

World Santal Students Confederation (Kolkata), the Central zone has the strongest representation. The key aim of ICITP is to represent the wide-ranging political and cultural concerns of Adivasis vis-à-vis the federal states. By exposing the exploitative agendas of the states' development actors and by pressing for indigenous autonomy in international forums, ICITP has utilised international instruments such as the International Labour Organisation, the United Nations Working Group for Indigenous Populations, the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative and the Minority Rights Group (Munda 2002; Whall 2003: 635-59 states the case for inter-governmental intervention in the domain of Indigenous Rights). Implementing a development model of Adivasi self-empowerment through capacity enhancement networks, ICITP enables marginalised communities to access the legal frameworks that the federal states ignore in their efforts to disenfranchise the people (Mardi 2004: 1-3). Whilst the discourse of indigeneity in India previously revolved around claims to regional autonomy in areas that had been historically dominated (i.e. before colonialism) by indigenous and tribal communities, nowadays the discursive and political emphasis of organisations like ICITP focuses on:

- i) on self-determination in the form of Adivasi Self Rule and decentralised power (Mundu 2002).
- ii) solidarity between Adivasis throughout the nation, via media campaigns and civil action (Sawaiyan 2002).
- iii) globalising the network of resistance, to include diasporic Adivasis, pro-Adivasi activists and Indigenous Peoples outside South Asia. Whilst these shifts are sustained by the Cultural Rights and Human Rights agenda of international bodies such as the United Nations and the International Labour Organisation, they are also driven by a radical reinterpretation of Indigenous and Tribal history in South Asia, a point which is often ignored in current anthropologies.<sup>1</sup>

During the recent symposium on Indigenous Education at the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, Dr Ram Dayal Munda (the Chief Advisor to ICITP, and longstanding Jharkhandi activist) and Sukanti Hembrom of the Jharkhandi Organisation for Human Rights (JOHAR) debated the tensions between History education in mainstream schools, Adivasi perception of their pasts, and the assertion of minority histories: 'India basically having an assimilationist policy as far as its minority population is concerned is reluctant to recognise the distinctive features of Indigenous tribal history. For instance, the history books have 1857 as the beginning of the freedom movement of the country whereas in fact the history of resistance against the British in the Indigenous and tribal areas is nearly one hundred years earlier as can be ascertained by the movement of Tilka Manjhi of Jharkhand, Bengal presidency in the early 1780s. In the same manner the practice of democracy (village republic) is a gift of the Indigenous tribal peoples to India.'<sup>2</sup> The reinterpretation of Adivasi pasts as assertions of Adivasi Self Rule can be understood as a critique of United Nations Permanent Forum that does

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<sup>1</sup> Notable exceptions are (Baviskar 1997), who details how the activists of the *Khedut Mazdoor Chetna Sangath* relate the historical actions of heroes such as Chitu Kirad and Motia Bhil to contemporary agitations, and Sundar 1997, who recovers the popular memory of the anti-colonial movements in the Bastar area of Chhatisgarh.

<sup>2</sup> JOHAR and ICITP, 'Joint Statement', *UN Permanent Forum of Indigenous Issues: Agenda item 3b, Education* (unpublished), 16-27 May 2005.

not cover issues of Indigenous and Tribal Self Governance, preferring issues such as Health, Environment and Education. This critique is expanded and redirected towards the nation-state and federal states in India through the 8th recommendation put forward during the permanent forum on Indigenous education by ICITP: 'States must recognise the need to carry forward oral traditions of IPs [Indigenous Peoples]/Tribal Peoples (Adivasis) to ensure that the transmission of oral knowledge is not disturbed or even distorted. The use of convergence media, audiovisual technology should be promoted for the transmission and dissemination of Oral knowledge and Oral History and its documentation for future generations.'<sup>3</sup>

The interface between a reinterpretation of Adivasi history and a critique of state educational policies can be assessed well in relation to the historical consciousness that has been generated by the legacy of the *Santal Hul* of 1855-56. Although Ram Dayal Munda cited Tilka Manjhi's movement against colonial oppression in the permanent forum, it is the *Hul*—which started just two years before the 1857 wars of Independence—that is often recovered by Adivasi activists as a means to contest the dominant national narrative surrounding the freedom movement.<sup>4</sup> Radically effecting colonial policies on 'Aboriginals', the *Hul* is represented as a national movement, not on account of its size or scope, but because it established (temporarily) an indigenous and democratic alternative to colonial rule. The mass mobilisation of 1855-56 was led by two Adivasi brothers—Sido Murmu and Kanhu Murmu—against the British East India Company and their agents in the districts surrounding the Rajmahal Hills in what was then Bengal province. Since Adivasi activists began to reinterpret the mobilisation in the context of Jharkhandi regionalism in the 1960s and 1970s, and Subaltern scholars began to re-think the significance of this and other Adivasi movements in the 1980s, the *Hul* is no longer perceived by Adivasis and leftists as a minor event the long history of India's freedom struggle. Rather, it is interpreted as the first war for Indigenous rights, which continues to be fought along any available democratic avenues as federal States continue to oppress Adivasis in the name of national development. Sido and Kanhu's *parwanas* (orders) issued to the colonial police and landowners speak of the new rule of Santals, as assumed on June 30th 1855 (Areeparampil 2002: 148-52). As an elected *Manjhi* (headman), Sido received divine sanction to form a Santal-led governing body that united the subaltern workers and all Adivasis against the colonial state and regional elites. The memorial practices that commemorate this revolutionary movement also enshrine this notion of indigenous autonomy, i.e. Adivasi Self Rule, and speak in present and future tenses (like Banerjee's archival voices), to suggest that the anti-colonial past and the globalised present interpenetrate in ways that resist conventional representation (Rycroft 2005).

In the year 2005, the 150th anniversary of the *Hul*, ICITP's critiques of the United Nations Permanent Forum and of the states' educational policies in India gain a special significance. To commemorate the anniversary, a year-long project has been set up to reassess the significance of Adivasi history in political and academic arenas. Convened by Dominic Mardi (the Secretary General of ICITP), and Daniel Rycroft (Research Fellow at the University of Sussex), *Santal Hul 150: An International Forum Recognising the*

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<sup>3</sup> JOHAR and ICITP, 2005 based on the resolutions passed at the Asian Indigenous and Tribal Peoples' Consultation on Education, Guwahati, Assam, 26 February to 1 March 2005.

<sup>4</sup> This is one of the main trajectories of the film 'Hul Sengel'.

*150th Anniversary of the Santal Rebellion, in 2005* aims to engage widespread interest in the ongoing legacy of the *Hul* amongst international researchers, Adivasi networks and minority rights activists.<sup>5</sup> As part of this forum international conferences have already been hosted on 'Jharkhand Today' by Peter Andersen at the University of Copenhagen, on 'Reinterpreting Adivasi (Indigenous Peoples) Movements in South Asia' by Daniel Rycroft at the University of Sussex and on 'Hul to Separate State: 150 Years of Peoples Movements in Jharkhand' by Sanjay Bosu Mullik of the Bindrai Institute for Research Study and Action (BIRSA, Ranchi).<sup>6</sup> Other related conferences were held in November 2005 at Visva Bharati University Santiniketan, Jadavpur University (Kolkata) and the Asiatic Society of Bengal (Kolkata). Numerous other educational events are being organised in district centres by the National and Zonal Coordination Committees of *Santal Hul 150 Forum*, each providing delegates with an excellent opportunity to share ideas, and publish material in Adivasi languages.

The 150th anniversary was celebrated at Bhognadih village, the home of Sido Murmu and Kanhu Murmu, on June 30th 2005, with the largest *mela* held there ever since the Sido Kanhu Baisi organised events to remember the Hul collectively in the late 1960s. The 2005 event received excellent coverage in the radical newspaper *Prabhat Khabar*, which produced two supplements of articles that located the legacy of the Hul within the contemporary histories of Jharkhand and of South Asia. In the absence due to rain both of Arjun Munda, the BJP chief minister of Jharkhand, and Shibu Soren, his JMM rival, most media attention was drawn towards participants of a march organised by the Gota Bharot Sido Kanhu Hul Baisi (All-India Sido Kanhu Revolution Committee), that departed from Dumka (the district centre of the Santal Parganas) on 26th June and arrived at Bhognadih on 30th June. This unique rally brought Santals now living (as descendents of diasporic worker communities) in Nepal, Assam, Bangladesh, and West Bengal together with their Jharkhandi comrades, to forge a real sense of international and inter-regional solidarity amongst Santal Adivasis.

As part of its commitment to establish new understandings of Adivasi history and a heightened Indigenous media presence, ICITP in association with the University of Sussex has produced two documentary films on the Santal Hul. In discursive terms, these films are situated between the pro-Indigenous Human rights documentary genre (exemplified by the directors Meghnath, Sriprakash etc.), and the Jharkhandi Adivasi activist paradigm of self-determination. Co-directed by Daniel Rycroft and Joy Raj Tudu (National Coordinator of ICITP), *Hul Sengel: The Spirit of the Santal Revolution* documents how the movement's legacy informs the collective memory of Santals in the Santal Parganas, a district that was formed as a colonial response to the political dynamic of the Hul (and that has recently been dismantled by the BJP government in an effort to weaken the Adivasi consciousness). By incorporating rare interviews between ICITP coordinators and the descendents of Sido and Kanhu, the film emphasises the dialogic aspects of the Adivasi movement to represent agency/authority, voice/presence, and silence/absence in shifting and multiple locations. Bitiya Hembram a fifth-generation

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/development/SantaHul150>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/development/Adivasi>

descendent of Chunu Murmu reveals how her own mother-in-law was not able to tell her about the movement, because her grandmother-in-law was too afraid to discuss the past with her. Suggestive of the milieu of cultural violence that colonialist and nationalist governments sustained in the region some seventy or eighty years after the suppression of the movement, Bitiya Hembram's almost silent voicing of history gains support from other members of the family, notably Rup Chand Murmu, whose dynamic assertion of the legacy of the Hul in the context of present-day Jharkhandi identities signals an engagement with more politicised and collectivised epistemologies (such as those developed via the Sido Kanhu Baisi and the JMM, and now re-presented by ICITP *et al*).

The second documentary, provisionally entitled *Hul Johar: The Long March to Bhognadih*, aims to document and convey the views of those diasporic *Santals* who participated in the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations, whilst also establishing dialogues with Jharkhandi protestors, such as the women of the *Rajmahal Bachao Andolan* (Save the Rajmahal Hills Movement), who also participated in the foot-march. The residents of nine villages near Amrapara, Pakur district (formerly of the Santal Parganas district), are leading a mass mobilisation against the State of Jharkhand, whose development agencies refused to consult the village representatives before attempting to acquire their lands for sale to the Punjab State Electricity Board for the purposes of mineral extraction. Their protests invoke the revolutionary legacy of Sido and Kanhu and reiterate the language of more recent anti-globalisation and anti-state movements such as the Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save the Narmada Valley Movement). The film *Hul Johar* therefore aims to create an informative and inspiring narrative of memorialisation, collectivisation and resistance through which the multiple pasts and presents that constitute Adivasi consciousness can resonate. From the perspective of ICITP, both of these films attend to the need to record and create Adivasi epistemologies that reproduce and reinterpret the range of political positions taken up by Adivasis in colonial and postcolonial history.

### Conclusion

Beyond the new global instruments of indigenous empowerment, the existing Constitution of the Republic of India contains important articles that support Indigenous and Tribal rights, yet that in practice are superseded by the everyday domination of petty officials, police and state-sponsored development projects. Despite the historical dynamic of indigenous resistance being written into the Constitution, in the form of special rights for Scheduled Areas and Scheduled Tribes, the murkiness of the political waters of the newly devolved states often suppress the indigenous spirit that inspired the movements for regional autonomy. The administrative term 'Scheduled Tribe', which is now contested by Adivasi activists as inadequately conveying the notion of indigeneity, was issued in the pre-Independence phase to support the integrationist interests of a paternalistic state. Similarly the notion of a 'Scheduled Area', in which tribal land cannot be commodified, although responding to changes in colonial policy following the Santal Revolution of 1855–56, contains too much scope for state encroachment in the view of indigenous activists. As proved by the movement for Adivasi autonomy in Jharkhand ('forest-country', eastern India), statehood in itself means nothing unless the ethics of the government relate more closely to Adivasi interests.

Both the scheduling and the demands for statehood built upon notions of Adivasi distinctiveness vis-à-vis 'the mainstream community' (in nationalist parlance), and promoted ideas of conditional tribal autonomy, linguistic pluralism and alternative histories. Segregated as 'Aboriginals' in the colonial imaginary, the regional economies and collective identities that Adivasis sustained in the early modern period were increasingly unravelled by the forces of colonial capital and industrialisation. The nineteenth century witnessed numerous ongoing resistance movements led by Adivasi insurgents against the British colonial rulers and their regional accomplices. The brutal suppression of these movements fostered amongst the colonial elites a desire to control the areas then dominated by Adivasis via legal institutions that differed from the Regulation law practised in other agrarian districts. Although many Adivasis labourers were forced to emigrate to tea plantations in Northeast India and to the industrial centres in central India, the new status accorded to Tribal Customary Law in colonial governance provided Adivasis with institutional support in the early twentieth century as nationalist agitations increased. The notion of an alternative indigenous, i.e. 'Adivasi', identity gained currency amongst the new class of politicised Adivasis who perceived, in the indigenous lifestyles, qualities such as community solidarity that were deemed essential to the emerging national consciousness. More reactionary nationalists, however, perceived the newly assertive Adivasi community as nothing more than a product of the wider colonial project that spuriously divided India's population into non-Hindu and Hindu communities, and converted tribal peoples (who they perceived as 'backward Hindus') into Christians. With the rise of *Hindutva*, or right wing religious nationalism, the identity of Adivasis has been challenged further. Contesting the anti-indigenous notion of *Vanavasi* (forest dwellers), as well as many other cultural and political injustices, ICITP has incorporated elements of Adivasi history with the internationalist dimensions of the movement to generate a new discourse of indigeneity that will be tried and tested in many regions in the years and decades to come.

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