Adivasi Identity and Livelihoods in Contemporary India

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Rethinking Tribe in Indian Context: Realities, Issues and Challenges edited by Bidhan Kanti Das and Rajat Kanti Das, *Jaipur: Rawat Publications; pp xiv + 230, ₹895.*

Adivasis in India: Resources, Livelihoods and Institutions edited by Kailash Sarap and Venkatanarayana Motkuri, *New Delhi: Bloomsbury; pp xviii + 279, ₹999.*

Every once in a while, news of simmering anger and discontent travels to metropolitan India from regions that are otherwise only known for their abundant natural resources, the absence of *vikas* and the poverty of their residents. Most recently, there was the Pathalgadi movement in Jharkhand, where Adivasi villagers declared self-rule by erecting stone monuments and insisting on self-governance as per the Fifth Schedule provisions of the Constitution. There are also ongoing agitations by Adivasi students and youth in Telangana, demanding the exclusion of one community (the Lambadas) from the official list of Scheduled Tribes (STs) in the state. These are periodic reminders that despite constitutional protections and affirmative action, all is not well with the 100 million people in the country who are variously known as tribes, indigenous communities or Adivasis. Indeed, there is considerable evidence to suggest that Adivasis remain at the lowest rungs of the social hierarchy and fare even worse than Dalits (Scheduled Castes) and other marginalised groups in terms of human development.

There is a continuing need for policymakers, academics and civil society organisations to engage with the "Adivasi question," that is, the cross-cutting themes of land and forest, economy and culture, identity and collective action that shape the lives of more than 700 communities. The two volumes under review are recent additions to a rich body of academic work on the Adivasi question, most notably from the disciplines of anthropology, sociology and history. Scholarship on Adivasi communities has been historically intertwined with state-making projects; the first tribal ethnologies were produced by administrators and military officials when the colonial state was seeking to expand its rule over frontier areas of central and north-eastern India. The work of nationalist anthropologists like Verrier Elwin, G S Ghurye and Nirmal Kumar Bose in the 1940s and 1950s, shaped the contours of the "integration-or-isolation" debate and influenced the state's "tribal policy". The fracturing of the "Nehruvian consensus" in the 1980s and new social movements around dams, displacement, and resource rights, forced scholars to critically re-examine the long history of tribal rebellions and insurgencies. With interventions like the Subaltern Studies Group, the Adivasi emerged as the quintessential "primordial rebel," resisting the depredations of state *and* capitalist modernity. It is in this vein that much of the scholarship on Adivasis has focused on their status as "victims" of state developmental policies or as "agents" participating in social change through movements and collective action. There is emerging evidence that different groups within Adivasi communities—youth, women, farmers, migrant labourers, forest produce collectors—are engaging with the state and with a rapidly transforming rural and urban economy with heterogeneous outcomes (Chandra 2016). Contributions to the literature must be judged in terms of their engagement with theory as well as their ability to draw connections with changing empirical realities.

Overview and Contents

The two edited volumes, *Rethinking Tribe in Indian Context* (RTIC) and *Adivasis in India* (AI), are both products of national-level conferences held in Kolkata and Hyderabad respectively. Contributors include senior scholars who have been studying Adivasi societies for many years, and early career academics and doctoral candidates who have brought in insights from their recent empirical studies. RTIC is divided into six parts with 14 chapters, apart from the introductory chapter. Contributions to the volume focus on issues of identity and indigeneity (five chapters), inequality and development (five chapters), forest rights and policies (two chapters), and tribal politics and the politics of autonomy (two chapters). Five chapters are about specific tribes (Lepcha, Nat, Paniyan, Santhal and Lodha), three are located in geographical regions (North Bengal, Tripura, Darjeeling hills), while the remaining six are theoretical in nature, drawing upon examples from different cultures and contexts. The empirical focus of RTIC is on Adivasi groups in West Bengal, Sikkim and Tripura (with only one chapter focusing on the Paniyan tribe in Kerala). Methodologically, six chapters are based on case studies, field surveys and ethnographic studies carried out by their authors, while four are based on information from secondary sources, and the remaining four chapters are theoretical reflections. Several contributors in RTIC examine the concept of "tribe" and the articulations of indigeneity in particular historical moments, that is, the expressions of indigenous identity in the context of anti-dam movements, political demands for autonomy, and electoral politics.

The second volume, AI, too has 14 chapters (excluding the introductory chapter) but covers more ground in terms of states and regions of India. Nine of the 14 chapters are state-level or regional-level studies (Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, Odisha, Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, tea gardens of Assam, Malabar region in Kerala and the Dangs region in Gujarat). Two chapters deal with interstate comparisons (north-eastern states, Odisha and Jharkhand), two focus on particular tribes (Chenchu and Adiyan) and one is a theoretical overview. In terms of issues, half the chapters of AI (seven chapters) are concerned with Adivasi labour, employment and livelihoods, while others are devoted to mining-related issues

(two chapters), forest-based livelihoods (two chapters), and development and public policy (three chapters). There is an emphasis on quantitative methods and primary surveys in AI; nine out of 14 chapters are studies based on analysis of data elicited from primary field-based surveys. Three chapters are based on analysis of secondary data (National Sample Surveys [NSS], and others) and the other two chapters are based on secondary and historical sources. Collectively, the chapters in AI emphasise the structural factors responsible for the poverty, insecure employment and deprivation of Adivasis in central and eastern India. Through case studies, they point to public policy failures and the processes by which Adivasi communities lose their access to land and forests.

The Authentic Adivasi

Indigenous communities, who share histories of colonial rule and economic subjugation, have asserted their presence in global culture and politics in the 21st century. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) is an important example of how communities have sought to protect their cultural identity and advance their economic and political interests through transnational mobilisations. At the same time, there has been a long and vigorous debate on the definitions of "indigeneity," with states, scholars and indigenous rights activists seldom agreeing on a common definition, or which communities can be considered to be indigenous within the framework of nation states. For instance, the Indian government does not consider the ST communities to be indigenous; instead it argues on multilateral forums that all Indians are indigenous and hence rejects the applicability of international frameworks of protection for ST communities. Since the idea of "indigenous" was originally in reference to "first peoples" in settler societies like North America and Australia, the use of the concept in non-settler societies of Asia and Africa has been contested (Kingsbury 1998; Bowen 2000). Others have argued that shared histories of subjugation and marginalisation in the colonial and contemporary era are more integral to indigenous identities than the bare fact of autochthony (Hodgson 2002). The experience of *being* as well as *becoming* indigenous in the postcolonial world and under conditions of neo-liberalism has been extensively written about in diverse cultural contexts (see, for example, de La Cadena and Starn 2007; Hodgson 2011).

Contributors and editors of the RTIC volume have not engaged with this literature, even though at least six chapters have directly dealt with the challenges of defining "tribe" and indigeneity in India, and growing assertions of tribal identity. Even though the authors express their intent to go beyond narrow framings of indigenous identity, the volume is replete with arguments which suggest otherwise. For example, "[a tribe] can no longer keep aloft its ideal character" (RTIC, p 1), or "[tribes in India] … differ widely among themselves in terms of … stages of social formation and level of acculturation and levels of development in which they are placed. This is not due to the forces operating from within but rather from outside" (RTIC, p 11). One of the editors, who has also authored two chapters in the book, compares the concept of indigeneity in Africa, Australia and India (in Chapter 4), without any reference to existing debates on this theme (for example, Hodgson 2002; Pelican 2009; Trigger and Dalley 2010). As a result, he argues,

> equating tribes with indigenous societies … gives scope for manipulation, twisting of facts, claims and counter-claims, and questioning the very ground of authenticity based on history and traditional continuity. (p 46)[1]

Contributors thus focus their energies on the absence of "authentic" tribal societies in contemporary India, that is, societies unmediated by politics and entanglement with the non-tribal world. However, most scholars of indigeneity agree that the search for authenticity is theoretically unproductive, even when they sharply disagree on the usefulness of the concept (indigeneity) itself (Kuper 2003; Kenrick and Lewis 2004). Similarly, other authors too do not engage with recent debates on the politics of indigeneity in India and the varied conditions under which marginalised communities articulate their indigenous identities (see, for example, the edited volumes, Rycroft and Dasgupta 2011 and Karlsson and Subba 2006). Historians and anthropologists have commented upon the colonial origins of the concept of "tribe" in central and eastern India, and the historical construction of differences between egalitarian "forest-dwelling tribes" and hierarchical "peasant castes" (Guha 1999; Damodaran 2006; Shah 2007; Banerjee 2016). It is surprising that none of these well-known scholars find a mention in a volume that seeks to rethink the category of tribe in the Indian context.

The other theme running through RTIC is a discussion of the performative aspects of indigenous identity (myths, folktales, traditional styles of dressing) and in some cases, criticism of the "inauthentic" nature of such displays. For instance, in a chapter on the autonomy movement in Darjeeling (Chapter 6), the author criticises the "growing tribalism" in the Darjeeling hills for depending upon "romanticised imaginations that … reify the cultural characteristics of communities" (RTIC, p 67) and refers to such tribalism as a "self-defeating project of identity politics" (p 68). Such criticism misses the cultural politics of representation and recognition that has marked the efforts of communities to gain a foothold in the postcolonial Indian polity and economy (Kapila 2008). Anthropologists have long recognised that indigenous identity politics often assumes essentialist *positions*; communities occupy the "indigenous slot" or present themselves as "native inhabitants" or "environmentalists" in order to negotiate their claims upon resources (Li 2000; Tsing 2007). Scholars have debated the ethical and political implications of indigenous essentialism, and their own role in upholding or deconstructing essentialist discourses of indigeneity (Bowen 2000; Li 2000; Sylvain 2014). Contributors to RTIC do not refer to these debates, and therefore succumb to measuring the complex realities of contemporary tribal politics against notions of the "ideal" and "authentic" Adivasi.

Continuities and Change

As mentioned earlier, the second volume, AI, focuses on livelihood struggles and employment issues, and reiterates the

significance of labour, land and forests in Adivasi economies. The introduction by the editors is an overview of the processes that have contributed to economic marginalisation and their effects on Adivasi society: casualisation of labour, low returns from agriculture and poor levels of human development. Different contributors then go on to focus on individual states or regions and the well-being of Adivasi communities therein, through studying indicators such as seasonal migration (Chapter 2), participation in the labour market (Chapters 3, 4, 8 and 13) or participation in trade union activities (Chapter 6). The picture that emerges is a dismal one, where tribal communities pursue precarious livelihoods and are incorporated in the capitalist economy on adverse terms (plantation, mining economy, wage labour). Public policies like land distribution schemes (Chapter 14), Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (Chapter 13) and the Forest Rights Act (FRA) (Chapters 11 and 12) are of some consolation as they act as safety nets and safeguard resource rights, even as significant gaps remain in implementation.

There can be no disagreement with the inferences drawn by contributors and editors of AI. Several expert committees appointed by the government (including one chaired by one of the contributors, Virginius Xaxa) have arrived at similar conclusions with respect to the social and economic status of Adivasi communities, and the implementation of laws like the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act and FRA (GoI 2008, 2010, 2014). However, Adivasi households respond to the structural constraints of their lives by exhibiting a degree of mobility and flexibility with regard to occupational choices and intra-household allocation of labour. Given their marginal landholdings, men and women of a family pursue diverse activities round the year, in order to minimise risks (from morbidity, climactic and market variations) and maximise household consumption. These include self-cultivation, share-cropping or tenant farming, agricultural and manual labour, collection and sale of forest produce, forestry and plantation labour, and temporary migration to the urban informal economy. Ethnographic accounts suggest that there is great seasonal and annual variation depending upon the access to resources (forests, land, farm equipment, irrigation), availability of economic opportunities (in different markets) and labour composition of the household (Shah 2010, 2013; Wadhawan 2013; Steur 2014).

Chapters in AI have been unable to capture the dynamics of this inter- and intra-household diversity, either because they have focused only on one occupation (tea plantation workers, coal miners, agricultural labourers) or because the use of national-level data sets (census, NSS) does not yield an appropriately fine-grained analysis. As a result, Adivasis have been represented only as victims or beneficiaries of particular development policies without considering the ways in which they exercise agency and make a living through mobility and occupational multiplicity. The NSS data suggests that the rate of temporary and seasonal migration is highest among rural ST households in the country (Keshri and Bhagat 2012).[2] Like other communities, Adivasi youth across central and eastern India are migrating to urban areas seasonally to work at construction sites or as industrial labour and domestic workers (Shah and Harriss-White 2011). They are motivated to do so not only because of the absence of economic opportunities at home,[3] but also due to the possibility of cash incomes and freedoms in the city (Shah 2010).

Editors of the volume perhaps need to rethink assertions such as "about 90% (of tribal population) live in the countryside, very often in inaccessible remote areas" (AI, p 4) and "for a majority (around 70%) of the tribals living in rural areas, agriculture and allied activities or primary sector are the prime source of livelihood, and only a small section depends on non-agricultural activities" (AI, p 5).

Rethinking Adivasi Societies

The other dilemma that the AI volume raises is a resurrection of the integration-vs-isolation debate. Most contributors seem to agree that, historically, Adivasis have not benefited from their engagements with the capitalist economy and non-tribal society.[4] However, the reason for Adivasi poverty seems to also lie in insufficient integration with modern society—"poor or inadequate human capital formation" (AI, p 15) or "agricultural techniques and practices followed in tribal areas remain primitive. Mainstream technology and practices have not reached tribal areas" (p 9). Similarly, the state is blamed for "eroding the livelihood base" of Adivasi societies (p 17) and at the same time, policy prescriptions for tribal development in the volume rely upon effective state institutions and efficient market and technological interventions (high-yielding variety seeds, credit, irrigation infrastructure). Perhaps a more nuanced account of Adivasi encounters with the state is required for the contemporary period, one that goes beyond the narratives of a well-meaning yet ineffective welfare state or an exploitative, resource-grabbing state.

Recently, scholars have inaugurated the field of "Adivasi studies," that seeks to reimagine Adivasi societies and their relationships with state, modernity and capitalism in new ways (Chandra 2015). There is fresh thinking about Adivasi subjectivity, regarding the distinctive ways in which Adivasis exercise agency, inhabit land and ecologies and how tribal autochthony is historically produced (Demmer 2008; Banerjee 2016; Kar 2016). Historical as well as anthropological evidence suggests that Adivasi groups have not always confirmed to the image of "state-avoiding" rebels. They have negotiated with colonial and postcolonial states over autonomy within the nation state, affirmative action, land and forest rights. As one scholar has argued, "Adivasi communities across India are deeply entangled within the logics of modern state power" (Chandra 2016: 299). The Adivasi is selling her labour in the fields *and* in the factory, availing state subsidies and market opportunities, in order to increase yields, send her children to school and lead a better life (Deshingkar et al 2008). Smallholders are working hard to overcome structural constraints and grow commercial crops in order to fulfil household and community aspirations (Finnis 2006). And even as private property,

contractual labour arrangements and commercial agriculture gain currency in places where they did not exist earlier, non-market institutional forms and customary relations of exchange continue to exist in the transition to capitalist production (Harriss-White et al 2009).

It is important that students of Adivasi society move beyond binaries (tradition vs modernity, isolation vs integration, tribe vs caste), and analyse the cultural and economic transformations occurring in these societies through new lenses. It is also essential that we turn a critical eye towards the language we employ: for example, "*some* knowledgeable tribals" (RTIC, p 26), "the plight of *slothful* Adivasi workforce" (AI, p 18) and the repeated use of the word "primitive" when describing indigenous communities and their way of life.[5] Scholars need to interrogate primitivist discourses that pervade discussions on tribal development, the belief that Adivasis need to be "improved" and "protected" under the paternalistic hand of the government (Chandra 2013).[6] The volumes under review do this only to a limited extent. However, the contributors provide a very useful panoramic view of tribal India and suggest numerous lines of inquiry that can be taken up by researchers in the future. Together, the two volumes demonstrate that there is a long way to go before the Adivasis redeem their "tryst with destiny" and are able to live a life of dignity, freedom and security.

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NOTES

1 There are other statements that are vague and simplistic: "That 'indigeneity' like ethnicity has been reduced to a political concept is almost a known fact" (RTIC, p 47); "The cultural integrity of indigenous peoples holds little meaning in the present situation unless it could improve their political economy" (RTIC: 48).

2 Chapter 2 in AI also highlights the significance of internal labour migration in the lives of Adivasis in Madhya Pradesh.

3 For instance, in Chapter 4 (AI, p 86), the author writes, "Today, there is lack of work in such occupational fields [primary sector], which, in turn has led to acute unemployment and livelihood problems in tribal areas. Hence, there has been unprecedented migration of tribes, especially of youth, to cities in search of employment."

4 For example, in Chapter 1 (AI, p 3), the editors write, "In the integration process, tribals—an otherwise self-governed and self-sufficient subsistence tribal society/economy—have lost control over and access to their customary land and forest and other resources."

5 Chapter 10 of AI repeatedly uses the word "primitive" in the sense of being deficient and pre-modern. "[T]here are certain tribal groups in Odisha that are techno-economic backward and relatively less acculturated."

6 For example, "special endeavour on the part of tribals is needed so that they could self-locate themselves" (RTIC, p 3). "there is a need to motivate the heterogenous tribal communities through innovative educational strategies, government and civil society activism, and building role models to bring them into the mainstream and instilling confidence and self-respect in them" (AI, p 22).

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