

Critical Sociology

<http://crs.sagepub.com/>

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0896920512443574?download=true&journalCode=crsb>

Adivasi Mobilization in Contemporary India: Democratizing the Local State?

Alf Gunvald Nilsen

Crit Sociol 2013 39: 615 originally published online 11 June 2012

DOI: 10.1177/0896920512443574

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://crs.sagepub.com/content/39/4/615>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Critical Sociology* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://crs.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://crs.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations: <http://crs.sagepub.com/content/39/4/615.refs.html>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Jun 7, 2013

[OnlineFirst Version of Record](#) - Aug 6, 2012

[OnlineFirst Version of Record](#) - Jun 11, 2012

[What is This?](#)

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0896920512443574>

Adivasi Mobilization in Contemporary India: Democratizing the Local State?

Critical Sociology
39(4) 615–633
© The Author(s) 2012
Reprints and permissions:
sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0896920512443574
crs.sagepub.com


Alf Gunvald Nilsen

University of Bergen, Norway

Abstract

This article addresses the political aspects of the structural marginalization of Adivasis (Scheduled Tribes) in India. Relating to critical debates about the changing nature of state–society relations in India, the article assesses the argument that the best way for social movements in India to advance their oppositional projects is to harness the state to their attempts to deepen democracy and advance subaltern emancipation. The trajectories of two Adivasi movements in western Madhya Pradesh are analysed, and I discuss the conceptual and political lessons that can be learnt from these case studies in terms of the relationship between subaltern politics and state power in contemporary India. Theoretically grounded in Marxian state theory, the article puts forward the argument that it is necessary to move beyond both anti-statism and state-centrism in order to develop a politically enabling engagement with contemporary Adivasi mobilization in India.

Keywords

Adivasis, democracy, India, poverty, resistance, state, subalternity

Introduction

Adivasis, the historian Ramachandra Guha (2010: 1) argues, are, as a whole and broadly speaking, the people that ‘have gained least and lost most from six decades of democracy and development in India’.¹ The most unequivocal manifestation of the adverse incorporation of Adivasis – or Scheduled Tribes (STs) as they are also known – in India’s political economy is the extent to which their lives are blighted by severe poverty. Mehta and Shah (2001, 2003) report that almost 52 percent of India’s Adivasis lived below the official poverty line in 1993–4. Some 25 percent of the tribal population lived in extreme poverty (Mehta and Shah, 2001, 2003). More recent figures, cited by Mehta et al. (2011) and the World Bank (2011) respectively, show that almost half of India’s Adivasi population – some 44.7 percent – live below the official poverty line. The STs had registered far lower levels of poverty reduction than the non-ST population between the early 1980s

Corresponding author:

Alf Gunvald Nilsen, Department of Sociology, University of Bergen, PO Box 7802, 5020 Bergen, Norway.
Email: Alf.Nilsen@sos.uib.no

and 2004–5. Indeed, according to the World Bank's figures, Adivasis constitute 25 percent of the poorest decile of India's population. Altogether 30 percent of India's 84.3 million Adivasis are located in the poorest decile of the population, and the disparity ratio between STs and non-STs worsened from 1.73 in 1983 to 2.12 in 1999–2000 (Mehta et al., 2011: 47; World Bank, 2011: 41–2; see also Thorat and Mahamallik, 2007).

It is worth noting that these estimates are based on the official poverty line proposed by the Planning Commission in 2004–5, according to which 27 percent of India's population lives in poverty. This poverty line has been widely criticized for being a gross underestimation, and it is therefore likely that the World Bank estimates of Adivasi poverty are too conservative.² Nevertheless, these data provide a clear indication of the disproportionate level of poverty among Adivasis as one of India's 'historically marginalized groups' (Mehta and Shah, 2003: 502).

This historical marginalization is evident in the long trajectory of dispossession that has deprived Adivasi communities of access to the land and the forests that have traditionally undergirded their subsistence-oriented agrarian livelihoods. This has resulted in widespread distress migration to urban centres where Adivasis swell the ranks of India's impoverished informal proletariat (Breman, 1996; see also Mosse et al., 2002, 2005; Whitehead, 2003; World Bank, 2011). Crucially, as Guha (2010) points out, the impact of socioeconomic marginalization is compounded by political disenfranchisement. Guha sees this mainly as a result of the relative insignificance of the ST vote in Indian electoral democracy, and the inability of Adivasis to mobilize collectively at the national scale. However, I would venture that there is more to the production of disenfranchisement than this.

Crucially, the problem of disenfranchisement is also related to how the local state is constituted in such a way as to reproduce social relations of domination and subjugation, which generates an everyday experience of the state as an oppressive and unfamiliar entity. This in turn prevents the articulation of rights-based demands and the pursuit of collective oppositional projects by Adivasis. For example, in her fascinating study of Adivasi politics in Jharkhand in eastern India, Alpa Shah (2010) describes a state–society relation where Munda Adivasis experience the local state primarily in the form of oppression and coercion at the hands of police and other petty officials. The state, therefore, is feared by the Mundas and appears to them as an opaque entity whose workings are difficult to comprehend and that is controlled by local elites. The descendants of erstwhile feudal landlords, this elite uses its position of dominance in the local matrix of class relations to 'colonize interactions with the developmental state, and keep the poorest villagers out of the state system' (Shah, 2010: 82). As Shah puts it, this engenders a situation in which Mundas perceive the state as a dangerous entity that they are reluctant to engage with, turning instead to their traditional sacral polity – the *parha* – as an 'arcadian space' within which it is possible to develop an alternative political order that is not subordinated to the power of the local elites and the secular Indian state (2010: 184–90, 59–65).

In this article, I intend to explore the significance of local state–society relations in the production of Adivasi disenfranchisement. However, in contrast to Shah, I will explore a different form of subaltern assertion in relation to an oppressive local state, namely rights-based grassroots mobilization in western Madhya Pradesh. The Bhil, Bhilala and Barela communities of this region share in the overwhelming poverty of Adivasis discussed above. In fact, the districts in which they constitute the dominant part of the population – Jhabua, Alirajpur, Khargone and Badwani – figure in the lowest rung of the Madhya Pradesh Human Development Index, with Jhabua and Badwani as the two bottom districts (Government of Madhya Pradesh, 2007).³ Until recently, making a rights-based claim on the state was unthinkable for most Adivasis in this region; the state and its officials were dangerous figures that one avoided or appeased, and under no circumstance challenged. In the following, I will show how Adivasis have sought to turn this particular aspect of their world upside down through collective mobilization. I focus on two organizations: the Khedut Mazdoor Chetna Sangath (KMCS), which was active in what was then

Alirajpur tehsil of Jhabua district from 1982 to the mid-1990s, and the Adivasi Mukti Sangathan (AMS), which has been active in Badwani and Khargone districts since 1992. Furthermore, I will show how these democratic struggles have encountered their limits in the form of state repression when their oppositional projects have come to centre on militant demands for a new political economy of tribal self-rule. The analysis is carried out through a critical dialogue with recent perspectives on the prospects for democratic deepening within the confines of the postcolonial Indian state, and I conclude with a brief discussion of the strategic ramifications that follow from these case studies.

Theorizing Subalternity and State Power

Subaltern Political Cultures and State–Society Relations in India

The study of subaltern political cultures in India has long been dominated by a dichotomous conception in which the political cultures of subaltern groups are conceived of as being wholly separate from the political cultures of the elites (Nilsen, 2009a; Sarkar, 1998). This is in no small measure related to the heuristic that guided the insurgent historiography of the Subaltern Studies collective, launched in the early 1980s with Ranajit Guha's (1982: 4) claim that during the Indian freedom struggle there crystallized a political realm 'in which the principal actors were not the dominant groups of the indigenous society or the colonial societies but the subaltern classes' and that this was 'an autonomous domain, for it neither originated from elite politics, nor did its existence depend on the latter'. This heuristic has also shaped much radical criticism of the postcolonial state and democracy in India, which posits a profound disconnect between, on the one hand, the modernist ethos of the postcolonial state, and, on the other hand, the everyday lifeworlds of India's popular classes (Fuller and Harriss, 2001).

This disconnect is often seen as historically engendered by the colonial imposition of an alien political culture. Ranajit Guha (1989) has argued that colonial rule in India was characterized by 'dominance without hegemony'. Rather than a hegemonic bourgeois culture, which incorporates subaltern groups into its domain and gains their consent to the rule of a democratic state, the colonial state and its political culture were characterized above all by 'a series of inequalities between the rulers and the ruled as well as between classes, strata and individuals among the latter themselves' (Guha, 1989: 229).⁴ Elite dominance was secured above all by coercion, rather than persuasion, and only a small indigenous elite was incorporated into this political domain. In this context, Guha argues, 'the life of civil society can never be fully absorbed into the activity of the state' (1989: 231). Hence the state is present in subaltern lifeworlds only as a threat of violent coercion.

For Sudipta Kaviraj (2010a, b) too, the modern Indian state bears the imprint of its colonial origins. In pre-colonial India, he maintains, the state was simultaneously despotic and marginal: in a 'two-layered' form of sovereignty, 'a distant, formally all-encompassing empire' commanded ceremonial deference from its subjects, but had little capacity to intervene in the regulation of their everyday lives (2010a: 12). The colonial power sought to overcome the marginality of the state, both economically and politically (Kaviraj, 2010a: 12). Education served as a means to induct a small Indian elite into the running of this new political apparatus and, more generally, into a public sphere and a modernist discourse of political liberalism that, despite its obvious exclusions and inequalities, was constituted by and through the colonial project. The imperial polity thus 'provided a discursive space on which nationalist ideas could eventually be formed' (Kaviraj, 2010b: 50).

The nationalist elite that flourished in this discursive space eventually emerged at the helm of the newly sovereign nation-state. However, in the newborn nation, Kaviraj argues, the dominant

position of indigenous elites in the freedom movement came to be 'written as the state–society relation' (2010b: 23). The commanding heights of the state came to be dominated by an elite that 'did not try to create or re-constitute popular common sense around the political world, taking the new conceptual vocabulary of rights, institutions, and impersonal power into the vernacular discourse of rural or small-town Indian society' (Kaviraj, 2010b: 29).

Guha and Kaviraj are only two of many radical critics who posit a deep disconnect between the vernacular lifeworlds of subaltern groups and the modern Indian state as a domain of elite politics. Similar arguments are found in Chatterjee (1993), Inden (1995), Madan (1987) and Nandy (1989).

In recent years, these perspectives on Indian state–society relations have encountered a substantial challenge. The work of scholars such as Chatterjee (2004), Corbridge and Harriss (2000), Corbridge et al. (2005), Fuller and Harriss (2001), Gupta (1995, 1998), Heller (1999), Jaffrelot (2003), Michelutti (2007), Shah (2010) and Sharma (2008) has shown how exploited and oppressed groups utilize the state in a myriad of ways, ranging from quotidian manipulations of the local state to the seizure of state power through participation in electoral politics, to challenge their adverse incorporation in the structures of power that constitute the political economy of contemporary India.

As Kaviraj (1999: 246) concedes, these perspectives suggest that the modern Indian state is undergoing a process of change as 'great numbers of Indians have responded to the historic invitation to political participation, occasionally in ways which liberal purists would not approve'. Moreover, these perspectives suggest that there is a significant potential for subaltern participation and democratic deepening within the parameters of the Indian polity (Desai, 2007; Heller, 1998). In this article, I want to address the debate about Indian state–society relations and the future of Indian democracy through a critical probing of *both* the enablements *and* the constraints that subaltern groups encounter when they challenge structures of power that are entrenched in institutional complexes such as the state. The point of departure for doing so will have to be a relational understanding of subalternity.

Towards a Relational Conception of Subalternity

A relational conception of subalternity takes its point of departure in the constitution and contestation of *historical relationships* – that is, subalternity is understood as being constituted in and through relations between social groups that are differentially positioned and endowed in terms of 'the extent of their control of social relations and ... the scope of their transformative powers' (Sewell, 1992: 20). Dominant and subaltern groups, then, are 'opposites in unity' that structure a social 'field of force' and its historically determinate power differentials (Roseberry, 1994: 356–7; Thompson, 1978: 50). These historical relations are dynamic: they are transformed as a consequence of contestation between dominant and subaltern groups. Two aspects of this dynamic are particularly important in this regard.

Firstly, the hegemony of a dominant social group is never an achieved state of affairs. As Gramsci (1998: 181–2) understood so well, the constitution, reproduction and extension of hegemony is a complex process of negotiation in which 'the dominant group is co-ordinated with the general interests of the subordinate groups ... [in] a continuous process of formation and superseding of unstable equilibria ... between the fundamental group and those of their subordinate groups ...'. In other words, dominant groups have to gain the consent of subaltern groups, and this is, in no small part, achieved through concessions made by the former to the demands and concerns of the latter, without eroding the structural foundations of hegemony as such (Nilsen, 2009b; Williams, 1977).

Secondly, the 'local rationalities' (Cox, 1999; Nilsen, 2009b) that subaltern groups develop in order to ameliorate or oppose their adverse incorporation into unequal power relations, and their

oppositional projects in the form of social movements, are never wholly ‘autonomous expressions of a subaltern politics and culture’ (Roseberry, 1994: 360). Rather, these rationalities are shaped in and through learning processes that unfold as subaltern groups engage with and contest the hegemonic projects of dominant groups and the institutional complexes and discursive formations in which this hegemony is entrenched. Local rationalities are never *either* entirely autonomous of *or* totally encapsulated by dominant ideologies, but tend to be expressive of what Gramsci (1998: 333) called a ‘contradictory consciousness’.

If we relate this broad-brushed conception of subalternity to ‘the political power that is pre-eminently ascribed to the state’ (Poulantzas, 1978: 147), it is necessary to make two basic points. Firstly, our focus should be state power understood as ‘a complex social relation that reflects the changing balance of social forces in a determinate conjuncture’ (Jessop, 1982: 221) – manifest, of course, in an ensemble of institutions that these social forces act in and through. The state, then, is not ‘a fixed sum of resources which can be appropriated by one social force to the exclusion of others’ (Jessop, 1982: 225) so as to make it function as a monolithic vehicle for the execution of the designs of dominant groups.

Secondly, the fact that there are ‘conjunctural opportunities’ for enhancing the access of subaltern groups to state power, and, through this, to modify the form of the state, should not render us blind to the fact that there are also ‘structural constraints’ to the extent to which the state can be harnessed to oppositional projects from below (Jessop, 1982: 253). A given state will be embedded in and central to the reproduction of a determinate latticework of social processes and relations that constitute a structured whole, and as such it will be endowed with what Jessop calls ‘strategic selectivity’: a particular form of state ‘will be more accessible to some forces than others according to the strategies they adopt to gain state power’ and more conducive to ‘some types of economic and political strategy than others because of the modes of intervention and resources which characterize the system’ (Jessop, 1990: 260).

In this article, I am primarily concerned with how subaltern groups⁵ encounter both enablements and constraints as they engage with and appropriate the ‘universalizing vocabularies’ (Corrigan and Sayer, 1985: 7) of democratic rights, citizenship and constitutional entitlements promulgated by the modern Indian state. Such vocabularies are of course central to the hegemonic projects that animate state formation, but they also tend to become ‘sites of protracted social struggle as to what they mean and for whom’ (Corrigan and Sayer, 1985: 6) as subaltern groups initiate and pursue emancipatory struggles, and it is this dialectic which constitutes the focus of attention here.

Struggles for Democracy in the Adivasi Heartland

The Everyday State as ‘Everyday Tyranny’⁶

For most of the Adviasis in western Madhya Pradesh, an encounter with ‘the everyday state’ (Fuller and Harriss, 2001) was not an encounter with an agency and with officials who provided services and who were accountable to citizens and attuned to their rights and demands.⁷ On the contrary, the contrast between the democratic credentials that were foundational to the postcolonial Indian state and lived realities in these communities could hardly be starker: Adivasis encountered an ‘everyday tyranny’ (Nilsen, 2010) in the form of state officials – forest guards, police constables, revenue officials – who imposed a cruel and coercive regime of extortionate exactions on people who, in relation to the actual workings of the local state, were in effect rightless subjects.

A KMCS activist from a Bhil village on the banks of the Narmada river explained how officials of the state were a constant source of terror in the villagers' lives:

The officials working for the forest department and the revenue department, as well as the local police, harassed and extorted the villagers very badly. The fear of the officials was such that, if two brothers were caught working on a field in the forest, one of them would do the ploughing, and the other would stand guard to look out for the forest rangers. If they were caught ploughing their field, they risked being beaten up, or having their hand nailed to the trunk of a tree. Invariably, villagers that were caught cultivating their plots in the forest would be taken to the local police station. A savage beating would follow, and a case would be filed against them for encroaching on reserved forests. This would in turn be used as a means to extort money from the villagers: a handsome bribe would make the charges disappear. If officials ran into a villager on the road, they would often demand that he or she carry their bags for them. If this was refused – and even if people failed to greet the officials politely – they would be given a heavy bashing. (Ratan, interview, March 2003)

In one case, villagers recounted how, if they were caught walking along the road carrying a sickle, they would be accused of going to collect fodder from the forest and beaten up; the officials would invariably demand money from them if they wanted to avoid criminal charges. Similarly, if people were caught with an axe, or if they were carrying firewood, they would risk beatings and extortion. If someone needed to cut down trees to get building materials for a house, the forest guards demanded a bribe of up to 2,500 rupees, chickens and home-made liquor.

The reason why the forest and its resources were at the heart of the machinations of everyday tyranny is to be found in how Adivasi livelihoods clashed with the formal laws of the land.⁸ For the Bhils and Bhilalas of Alirajpur, clearing and cultivating patches of land in the forest – a practice known as *nevad* – is integral to survival. *Nevad* fields complement the yields from revenue land that borders the houses in the village. In addition, the forest provides fodder for livestock, building materials and firewood, and a wide range of minor forest produce that is often sold in the *haat* (market) in nearby towns. However, when Adivasis make use of the forest in these ways, they are effectively in breach of the law. Indian forest legislation, as Gadgil and Guha (1993: 185) point out, establishes 'the right of the state to exclusive control over forest protection, production and management' – a right the lineage of which can be traced to the commodification of India's forests by the British colonial state.

In terms of everyday life, the abrogation of customary use rights in turn entailed that clearing and cultivating fields in the forest as well as other customary uses of forest resources came to be designated as 'encroachments' on state property (Prasad 2004: 32). It is this criminalization of Adivasi livelihoods that undergirds everyday tyranny in western Madhya Pradesh, and which provides to forest guards and other officials the pretext for conducting themselves as tyrannical overlords.

In Alirajpur, the giving and taking of bribes had been woven into the fabric of daily life to such an extent that it had become a guiding principle of how relations and interactions between Adivasis and the state were supposed to be structured (Baviskar, 1995). Indeed, the local rationality bred by everyday tyranny was one in which the fear of violent reprisal ruled out defiance and opposition to the state and its officials. Shankar, a Bhilala activist from Alirajpur district, explained the relation as follows:

... here the environment against the state agents was one of ... deep fear. People would see the 'pant-boot-shirt'-wallahs [state officials] and dry up with fear ... So on every side, it was like this, gundas and dalals, bribed officials, forest department officials who would beat, collections of corn which would have to be

donated. The environment was terrible ... People, well, they had seen this happen for a long time, even before independence, the Raja's jeep or horse would pass and they would all bow, they used to grab alcohol from the stills, take what they want, so there was always a fear of the State, from rule in that sense. The agents would say they were above us, we were below, they would see themselves as higher up, the city folk, and the rural folk were at the bottom. So this was almost tradition. They just thought these must be the rules – that there must be some rule about chickens, to beat must have been a law, because these thanedars, police, they represented the law, and they were always beating people up, so that must have been the law, so they thought. A lot of people assumed these were the laws, accepted them, and it became tradition. (Shankar, interview, May 2010)

Whatever kind of resentment may have bubbled beneath the surface, a 'public transcript' (Scott, 1990) of deference and appeasement was adopted as a survival strategy in the hills of Alirajpur.⁹

*Contesting Everyday Tyranny*¹⁰

However, the power equations upon which everyday tyranny rested was challenged when, in the early 1980s, two middle-class activists¹¹ – Khemraj and Amit – arrived in the region, intent on mobilizing Adivasis. Khemraj, a first-generation literate from a family of poor Jat farmers in southern Rajasthan and a former student activist, was the first of the two to land up in Alirajpur town. He quickly struck up a friendship with Khemla, a young Bhil Adivasi who had received a modicum of education at a residential school in the market town Umralli. The son of a participant in a socialist movement active in the region in the 1960s,¹² Khemla was known for his rebellious attitudes and his readiness to take action against misbehaving state officials. As such he was a natural ally for Khemraj, who settled with him and his family in the village of Badi Vaigalgaon.

An opportunity for the two to cut their teeth on the everyday tyranny of the state soon arose when they learned that close to Khemla's village, the irrigation department was having a pond constructed. Khemla and Khemraj signed on to work on the project, and quickly discovered that the contractor – a non-*adivasi* *sahukar* (moneylender) from Alirajpur town – was paying the workers far less than the minimum wage stipulated by the state government. Led by Khemla and Khemraj, the workers went on strike and demanded that they be paid the wages that were due to them. The contractor responded by having his goons beat up Khemla, but this did not deter the strikers. Ultimately, the Sub-Divisional Magistrate intervened and settled the matter in favour of the striking workers.

The news of the successful confrontation spread quickly in the area, serving the 'dual function of informing and mobilizing at the same time' (Guha, 2002: 227). From nearby villages, people called the activists to come and stay. Joined now by Amit, a middle-class activist who had left his studies at the School of Planning and Architecture in New Delhi, Khemraj and Khemla travelled from village to village, where people would share with them their experiences of the everyday tyranny of the local state and its officials. In this way, the foundation for collective mobilization was gradually established.

A particularly important chain of events was triggered when news reached Khemraj that several people from the village of Gondwani had been picked up by forest guards and taken to the Range Office in the neighbouring village of Attha. Khemraj and some of the villagers went to the Forest Department bungalow to intervene in the situation. When he approached them, Khemraj was invited inside the bungalow. However, as soon as the doors shut behind him, the forest guards proceeded to beat him to a pulp; using lit *beedies* (country-made cigarettes) they burned his arms.

After they were satisfied that they had taught the insolent activist a lesson, they released him to his companions outside the bungalow.

While Khemraj was taken to hospital, Amit and Khemla organized a march to Alirajpur town where they and a group of villagers proceeded to sit on *dharna* (sit-down demonstration) in front of the *tehsil* (sub-district) offices. A complaint was submitted to the police, press notes were circulated, and the incident became news. The Chief Minister (CM) – Arjun Singh of the Congress party – felt compelled to intervene: several of the forest guards who had been involved in beating up Khemraj were suspended. The activists proceeded to take the matter to Bhopal, the state capital, where they met with Digvijay Singh, who at this point was state president of the Congress party, and the CM. The CM dispatched the Conservator of Forests – the highest-ranking official of the Forest Department – to Mathvad, a small town not far from Alirajpur, to consult with people from the communities. Prior to this event, the villagers' experience of the forest guards had been that of perpetrators of violence who demanded bribes with impunity. Consequently, they asked the Conservator whether this was legal or not. When the Conservator replied that it was illegal, the villagers argued that the forest guards were clearly not following his orders. In response, the Conservator implored the villagers to file complaints if such incidents took place again.

On the basis of these confrontations and the concessions exacted from the state, mobilization started to spread throughout the southern part of Alirajpur, extending, at its height, to approximately 100 villages. Eventually, a formal organization was put in place and registered as an independent trade union under the name Khedut Mazdoor Chetna Sangath. The KMCS gradually expanded its array of activities from combating the brutality and exactions of petty state officials to implementing anti-corruption campaigns, constructive work in health, education, and agriculture, participation in local politics, and, perhaps most significantly, a protracted struggle for the recognition of Adivasi forest rights.

The decision to centre their mobilization on the issue of forest rights came naturally to the activists. Of all the state agencies that preyed on the Adivasi communities, it was the Forest Department that was responsible for the worst depredations:

... people were under this impression that their whole lives were bound by the forest guards: 'if we do anything, we are breaking the law' ... And the forest issue was not just asking for land, *hain na*, or complaining against the beating by forest guards. It was a whole idea, instilling an idea in the minds of the people that 'whose forest is this; did we come here first or did the Forest Department come here first?' ... So basically we were trying to say that this is our forest and we have to look after it, and we have to decide the rules and laws for its use. (Amit Bhatnagar, interview, August 2009)

In 1988, the Sangath was successful in forcing the Forest Department to conduct a survey of *nevad* cultivation in the block of Mathvad. This showed that all cultivators in the surveyed area had several small plots of *nevad* to complement their legal holdings. The survey, however, did not result in anything like a concerted move by the authorities to recognize *nevad* lands as the lawful property of the cultivators.¹³ The struggle for forest rights continued, and at times it escalated to violent confrontations, such as in the early 1990s, when protests against the digging of Cattle Proof Trenches that would block access to the forests for several villages that were actively involved with the Sangath ultimately resulted in police opening fire. What was ultimately achieved was a kind of *modus vivendi* between the KMCS and the villages mobilized by it on the one hand, and the state authorities and the Forest Department on the other, in which the Forest Department would, by and large, allow *nevad* to proceed in villages that were known to be Sangath strongholds. Thus, the KMCS carved out a space for *nevad* as a livelihood practice, despite the lack of formal recognition by the state.

Active participation in mobilization and the victories won in this process came to form an experiential counter-weight to the received wisdom that the local state and its officials were all-powerful and best left unchallenged. This in turn fostered a change in the way in which subaltern groups in Alirajpur conceived and related to the state: whereas the Bhil and Bhilala Adivasis of the region had once seen state officials as all-powerful figures, they came to see public servants whose powers were legally circumscribed and who were accountable to them as citizens; where the villagers had once seen a state apparatus whose activities centred on the forceful exaction of tribute, they came to see an institution that was supposed to provide services and safeguard rights, an institution upon which they could make rights-based claims and demands, and an institution in the running of which they could participate.

Through this process, local rationalities were transformed. When I asked KMCS activists what they had learned from their participation in the mobilization, three themes stood out: first, they were losing their fear of the officials; second, they were learning that officials were not entitled to extort them; third, they were acquiring the skills that allowed them to challenge everyday tyranny. In sum, the transformation of local rationalities revolved around effecting changes in emotional dispositions, cognitive resources and practical skills. Central to this process was the way in which the Sangathan used the ‘universalizing vocabularies’ of the Indian state – basic democratic idioms pertaining to the rights and entitlements of citizens – to articulate local grievances against the depredations of state officials. It was precisely by exposing the ‘radical disjuncture between ritual language and social action’ (Nugent, 1997: 20) in the actually existing state that the KMCS was able to bring about a significant democratization of local state–society relationships in Alirajpur.

Crucially, this democratization did not simply revolve around the implementation of a national democratic script at local level, or the unilateral absorption of official democratic idioms by Adivasi communities. Rather, as is evidenced by the negotiation of tolerated space for customary use rights to forest, it was a process characterized by the reaching of compromises between ‘the normative values of modernity and the moral assertion of popular demands’ (Chatterjee, 2004: 41). In this sense, and drawing on Subramanian (2003: 135), one can argue that democratic struggles from below also entail ‘reworking state categories’ to inflect them with meanings that are expressive of the needs and desires of subaltern groups.¹⁴ This dialectic undoubtedly carries with it a substantial potential for democratic deepening, yet, as the next section will make clear, its unfolding is not necessarily one which will proceed untrammelled by elite responses.

*Repressing Subaltern Resistance*¹⁵

The local state, which was the immediate target of the subaltern politics of the KMCS, is of course criss-crossed by social power relations, and the local state in turn constitutes a significant modality in the reproduction of these power relations (see Harriss-White, 2003: chapter 4). In the remainder of this essay, I want to focus on this latter aspect of local state–society relations, in particular in terms of the reaction of dominant groups to democratic challenges from below, in the form of violent repression (see also Sundar, 2010).

In the early 1990s, in what was then Khargone district,¹⁶ an Adivasi-dominated area to the south of Alirajpur, a new grassroots movement started to crystallize. Driven by the initiative of two middle-class activists with a background from the Communist Party of India, the Adivasi Mukti Sangathan (AMS) emerged from a process very similar to that which gave rise to the KMCS.

Bijoy Panda, one of the founders of the AMS, described the scenario he found when he arrived in Sendwaha *tehsil* to mobilize among the Bhil, Bhilala and Barela Adivasis there: ‘... they were exploited, suppressed, brutally killed. And even if they were cheated, and all these things ... they

were not able to open their voice. They were really voiceless. So our initial strategy was to create a situation where people can have their own voice before anything' (interview, November 2009).

Mukesh, a seasoned AMS activist from Warla block, described the relationship between the Adivasi communities and the Forest Department as being characterized by corruption and violence. 'The forest guards', he argued, 'treated the people's property – their hens and their goats and so on – as their own'. In the villages, people knew very little of their rights in relation to the state:

Nobody knew anything. They didn't know a thing about rights. The people thought it was all right to get robbed. If the forest guards beat us up, the people said they had a right to do so. If the policemen would forcefully enter someone's house and catch them with 2–5 litres of alcohol, the people still said it's their right to do so. Nobody knew anything about rights. (Mukesh, interview, November 2009)

In other words, the everyday tyranny that defined local state–society relations in Alirajpur was also operative in the plains of Khargone.

In its initial years of operation, the AMS made significant achievements in challenging local elites' grip on the state and generating a sense of self-confidence and a capacity for assertion in local Adivasi communities. Mukesh commented:

When the Sangathan was formed, people became more aware of their rights. That this was plain robbery, that this was wrong and that we don't need to give money, we don't need to give hens, that the government officials are servants of the people. And ever since we started questioning about this, they started robbing us less. (Mukesh, interview, November 2009)

However, by the middle of the 1990s, two developments converged in such a way as to spark a virulent reaction to the AMS from the dominant groups of the region.

Firstly, the AMS had dramatically extended its reach across Khargone. By 1996, it was active in more than 500 villages in three blocks of the district, and linked its activities to several other Adivasi organizations in the region. At this point, the organizational capacity of the movement started to make a real dent in the illegal timber trade, and in the liquor trade in the Adivasi villages. In Bhagwanpura block, the AMS pursued a campaign against the liquor trade that eventually led to the closure of some 250 outlets. This was a direct blow to the incomes of the powerful group of vendors, as well as to local police and Adivasi *dalals*. In particular, it hurt the interests of Jhagdia Patel, president of Bhagwanpura Congress Committee and hereditary headman of Kabri village, who had profited from illegal trading for a long time. Similarly, the timber mafia suffered a substantial blow when AMS activists stopped a truck carrying a huge load of illegally felled timber and reported the matter to the police and to the media. The capture of the truck enraged local politicians, whose pockets until then had been comfortably lined with bribes from the timber mafia.

Secondly, it was at this point that the oppositional project articulated by the AMS was decisively radicalized, as the organization adopted village self-rule as a key demand and ambition:

We liberated them, the communities, from the oppression of the local officials, traders, and dominant class there, but we were not successful to challenge the government policies, in order to control the natural resources ... It started in the nineties, in the early nineties, when people ... thought we should take control over this forest, land, water because even though we are free from this local exploitative system, but we still get these eviction notices. (Nikunj Bhatia, interview, April 2010)

In order to pursue this objective, the AMS linked its activities to the Bharat Jan Andolan – a national network of people's movements spearheaded by the erstwhile Commissioner for Scheduled

Castes and Scheduled Tribes, Dr B. D. Sharma – and its campaign for the implementation of the Bhuriya Committee Report, which had been submitted to the Government of India in 1995, arguing for the implementation of tribal self-rule in Scheduled Areas. In 1996, the central government enacted the Provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act of 1996.

Not only did this give recognition to the demand for tribal self-rule, it also put a potentially effective weapon in the hands of a dynamic organization such as the AMS, which by this time had managed to gather more than 100,000 people for a national rally championing Adivasi self-rule in the district headquarters of Khargone – an event that was bound to make regional political elites sit up and take notice.

One person who did sit up and take notice was Subhash Yadav, Deputy Chief Minister in Digvijay Singh's Congress government, and MLA from the constituency of Kasaravad in Khargone district. In response to a mounting challenge to his position, Yadav moved swiftly. He struck an alliance with the beleaguered Jhagdia Patel and in 1996, orchestrated the formation of the Adivasi Samaj Sudhar Shanti Sena (ASSSS) in order to counter the further rise of the AMS by instigating a series of violent conflicts. What followed was an unprecedented campaign of terror and repression in the AMS strongholds.

In the early months of 1996, AMS activists in the village of Kabri declared that during the Indal festival – the most important annual festival for Adivasis in the region – no liquor would be sold in the village. Jhagdia Patel did not take kindly to this and in response he and his men abducted one of the anti-liquor activists. After they had seized the activist, they proceeded to torture him: they broke one of his legs and one of his arms; when he begged for a drink of water, they pissed in his mouth.

The following year witnessed an escalation of the conflict between the AMS and the Shanti Sena. The brunt of the repression occurred after Kaliabhai, an AMS activist, intervened in the negotiation of a property dispute in the village of Julwania. A *panchayat* consisting of the *patels* of several villages had been called to adjudicate on a case where two brothers were locked in a conflict over land: one man, Bhimsingh, was accused of having dispossessed his brother, Dongarsingh. The *panchayat* fined Bhimsingh Rs. 35,000 for his offence. Bhimsingh then turned to Kaliabhai for help, who in turn negotiated a reduction of the fine to Rs. 13,000. Upset with the outcome, Bhimsingh directed his anger at Kaliabhai, and when prodded by local police, filed charges of extortion against him and some 29 other AMS activists – none of whom had been involved in the settlement of the dispute.

This was a golden opportunity for Jhagdia Patel to launch an attack on the AMS. On 25 August, the day after he had been granted protection by the police, Jhagdia Patel, with a posse of 25 men and a police escort, set out for Kaliabhai's house in Julwania. When they found that he was not at home, they stripped his wife naked and raped her. Five other women from the neighbouring houses suffered the same fate. Unsurprisingly, the police failed to register a case against the perpetrators.

On 26 August, a group of 150 men led by Kaliabhai caught up with Jhagdia Patel, his men and their police escort as they were trying to cross over a small river. The group surrounded the Shanti Sena outfit, who, along with the police, fled into a nearby house and barricaded themselves there. Kaliabhai and his men gathered outside the house and demanded that Jhagdia be handed over. The police officers pushed Jhagdia out the door; he was killed with an arrow, and the group of angry men then stoned his dead body.

In stark contrast to their response to the gang rape of Kaliabhai's wife, the police registered cases against more than 80 people for the murder of Jhagdia Patel on 27 August, and offered a reward of 10,000 rupees for information about Kaliabhai's whereabouts. The police set up camp in Kabri, and the Shanti Sena started touring the area. In the village of Mandav, in Khandwa district,

some 400 forest guards accompanied by a team of 20 men from the Special Action Force, and led by the Divisional Forest Officer, descended upon villagers who had refused to pay bribes in order for the guards to ignore their *nevad* fields, and started to uproot standing crops. When the villagers responded by hurling stones, the forest guards and Special Action Force men opened fire. Two Adivasis were shot dead, and six were injured. Altogether nine farmers had their entire crop – and, therefore, a crucial part of their food supply – razed to the ground.

Following a string of arrests in the month of September, leading activists of the AMS convinced Kaliabhai and 16 other activists to surrender to the Deputy Inspector General of Police in Indore. The court remanded the group to police custody for two days on 15 September. Two days later, in a fateful move, an armed escort of 15 policemen brought Kaliabhai with them on an expedition to identify firearms that were supposed to have been used in the killing of Jhagdia Patel. On their way back to the police station, the team passed through Kabri – Jhagdia Patel's village – and found themselves surrounded by some 200 people who demanded that Kaliabhai be handed over to them. Kaliabhai, who was handcuffed and had his legs chained, was released to the angry crowd. He was killed with an axe, and his body was hacked into small pieces.

As Baviskar (2001: 16) notes, there was no good reason for taking Kaliabhai on this expedition: firstly, Jhagdia Patel had been murdered with a bow and arrow, not a firearm; secondly, there was no need to return via Kabri village. As the report issued by the PUCL in the wake of the killing dryly stated, it was evident that 'there [was] complicity of the police in the custodial death of Kalia' (cited in Baviskar, 2001: 16).

Kaliabhai's death did not mark the end of the repression of the AMS. Attacks continued into 1998 and the repression proved to be a dramatic setback for the AMS. Bijoybhai summed it up as follows: 'In the heydays, we were having more than 60 full-timers; and after that repression, after two years of that repression we slid down to six' (interview, November 2009).

The Dialectics of Conjunctural Opportunities and Structural Constraints

The contrasting cases of the KMCS and the AMS provides us with a point of entry to a discussion of the equations of conjunctural opportunity and structural constraint that social movements are faced with when pursuing their oppositional projects in relation to the state.

As in the case of the KMCS, the AMS was initiated through a series of showdowns that eventually brought an end to the violent excesses and corrupt exactions of low-ranking state officials. Like the KMCS, the AMS fostered a spirit of assertiveness in relation to non-Adivasis, and forced money-lenders, traders and liquor-dealers to loosen their grip on the Adivasi communities in the Nimad plains. These achievements and the collective experience of mobilization from which they stemmed worked so as to transform an extant understanding of the state as fundamentally oppressive machinery whose bidding one obeyed and whose attention one could at best hope to avoid. In its stead, activists developed an understanding of basic democratic idioms and principles, constitutional entitlements and bureaucratic procedures, as well as the courage to act on this new understanding of the state.

However, the AMS took this process further than the KMCS did. In strictly quantitative terms, the AMS constituted a challenge of greater proportions than the KMCS by covering five times as many villages, and its organizational reach alone made it a force to be reckoned with in the area. Beyond this, the AMS emerged at a conjuncture in which activist campaigns for Adivasi self-rule had made a significant advance through the extension of Panchayati Raj to Scheduled Areas (PESA). Emblematic of the ways in which social movements from below can modify the form of the state and its modes of intervention, PESA provided the AMS with something that the

KMCS never had: a means of institutionalizing Adivasi empowerment that was sanctified by the legislative powers of the highest authority in the land. The fact that the movement was able to rally more than 100,000 people in support of a militant demand for tribal self-rule in the district headquarters cannot but have driven home the point that the AMS was well on its way to building up the capacity to reverse, in a quite fundamental way, the thrust of extant regional power structures.

In comparison, the KMCS, albeit by no means insignificant in its impact, registered more moderate victories against the everyday tyranny of the local state. In terms of entrenching subaltern power in its area of operation, the Sangath could not proceed beyond reaching an informal understanding with the state that *nevad* cultivation would proceed within certain limits without state interference. Correspondingly, the repression unleashed by the state against the AMS was also of a qualitatively different kind than that faced by the KMCS. In the case of the latter, there were two cases of police opening fire, one of which left a young boy injured, numerous beatings at the hands of police and forest guards, some of which have impaired activists' health for good, and countless false cases, which it has taken years to settle for the people involved. However, when the KMCS disbanded in the mid-1990s, it was not due to repression. Rather, it was due to the fact that the middle-class activists, for various reasons, left Alirajpur, and the movement was not capable of replacing the skills and leadership they had provided to the mobilizing process. The AMS, on the other hand, faced sustained and co-ordinated campaigns of coercion, violence and murder, orchestrated in, through and by the state, with approval from its upper political and bureaucratic echelons.

What these vulgar displays of power reveal is of course the ability of dominant groups to access certain forms of state power, and to put it to efficient use in bringing an end to the advance of radical subaltern opposition. While it would not be correct to say that state repression drove the AMS entirely out of existence, it did end the militant mobilization for tribal self-rule, and thereby brought activist ambition within the bounds of what is acceptable for regional and state elites (interviews, 2009–10). This in turn takes me back to the sketch of a relational conception of subalternity from which I started out. The ability of dominant groups to deploy the coercive apparatus of the state with such devastating efficiency is expressive precisely of how 'the structures of political representation and state intervention involve differential access to the state apparatuses and differential opportunities to realize specific effects in the course of state intervention' (Jessop, 1982: 224).

Concluding Remarks

What this essay has sought to demonstrate is that, on the one hand, democratic struggles from below do have the potential to challenge the adverse incorporation of subaltern groups in historically determinate power relations, and in this sense, such processes testify to 'the possibilities for empowerment that might exist within India's polity' (Corbridge and Harriss, 2000: 238). On the other hand, the essay has also sought to show that the response from above may come in the form of repression that imposes a limit on the subaltern advance. The question that confronting us, if we are interested in discussing the possibilities for a radical deepening of Indian democracy, is how social movements should respond to this equation in strategic terms.

A possible response to this question can be found in Sangeeta Kamat's (2002) analysis of the politics of grassroots organizations in Adivasi communities in Maharashtra. Kamat presents a scenario similar to that found in western Madhya Pradesh, where the local state was feared and Adivasis knew little or nothing of its workings. activists developed 'a pedagogy directed at demystifying the state' and empowering the Adivasis by developing knowledge about the state and

their rights as citizens (Kamat, 2002: 122). Kamat finds fault with this strategy, as it implies that 'politics (power relations) emanates from the state agents as it were, and not from the state structures'. Therefore, the 'juridico-legal' rules of the state 'are seen as binding on everyone equally, or ideally should be' and the praxis of social movements thus becomes centred on making 'the latter possible' without subjecting those very rules 'which represent the formal discourse of the state' to critique (Kamat, 2002: 124). In such a form of praxis 'a distinction is maintained between state as practice and the state as structure, where the former is vigorously attacked and the latter is left untouched', which in effect means that movements from below end up promoting 'the "illusion" of a state which exists for the interests of all people, including that of the poor' (Kamat, 2002: 125–6).

Of course, there is nothing substantially wrong with the theoretical cogency of Kamat's analysis. It is problematic, however, in that it constitutes a retreat into 'the simplistic notions of anti-institutional purity' (Poulantzas, 1978: 153). This is so first of all in the sense that her critique lacks sensitivity to how a strategy of empowering subaltern social groups in relation to the state can in fact be radical relative to the context in which that kind of strategy is adopted. When we are dealing with the mobilization of subaltern social groups in the context of everyday tyranny – i.e. a context in which domination is in large part underpinned by the absence of democratic principles and citizens' rights – then the strategy of claiming citizenship is very likely to be not only a necessary starting point for activism, but also a genuinely radical point of departure for oppositional collective action.

Furthermore, I am less than convinced by her assertion that the pedagogy of demystifying the state necessarily entails a form of political action that is incapable of going beyond the parameters of liberal democracy. It is necessary to recall that social movements are collective processes of learning, that first '*mobilize* people who were not necessarily previously active' and second '*radicalize* people who were previously content with a view of the world designed for situations of relative quiescence' (Barker and Cox, 2002: 21–22). Thus, the argument that mobilizing around the ability to make claims on the state locks in place activism in a form that underpins the status quo loses, if not its theoretical cogency, at least a substantial part of its analytical and strategic purchase. Put slightly differently, in cases where subaltern mobilization takes place in a context of everyday tyranny, the very possibility of the development of a radical form of political agency that transcends the parameters of liberal democracy might well be predicated upon an initial rupturing of local rationalities of submission and deference effected through claims for democratic rights and constitutional entitlement.

A possible alternative would be this: a politics that is sensitive to context, and that avoids translating awareness of the limits to the changes that can be achieved via the institutions, procedures and discourses of the state into a principled rejection of any engagement with the state. Such a politics would push as far as possible to promote empowering transformations within the state-as-practice, whilst simultaneously developing a counter-hegemonic project to challenge the state-as-structure. In other words, if social movements are thought of as developing relationally and historically vis-à-vis the hegemonic projects of dominant social groups, then the trajectory of those movements will quite naturally tend to involve some kind of recourse to state-centred practices, institutions and ideational representations. Given the relational nature of state power, such recourse might also bear fruits. This does not mean that interaction and negotiation with the state is 'the be-all and end-all of movement activity' (Geoghegan and Cox, 2001: 7). It entails, rather, the advocacy of a position that takes account of both the potential and limits of political action within the state system, and that advocates a strategic pursuit of collective oppositional projects both in and against the state in order to advance subaltern empowerment and emancipation.

Funding

This work was supported by the Norwegian Research Council (grant number 190063).

Notes

1. The term '*adivasi*' literally means 'first inhabitant', and was coined by tribal rights activists early in the 20th century to express their claim to being the indigenous people of India. The Indian government does not recognize Adivasis as being indigenous people, but defines Adivasi communities as belonging to the category of Scheduled Tribes as per the Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Indian constitution. The Fifth and Sixth Schedules – schedules are basically lists in the constitution that categorize and tabulate bureaucratic activity and policy of the government – provide an array of protective legislation, special entitlements and reservations for Adivasis. See Bates (1995), Bêteille (1986), Damodaran (2006), Guha (1999), Prasad (2003), Ratnagar (2003), Shah (2007) and Singh (1985) for a selection of perspectives on the issue of indigeneity in the Indian context. In another article I address the wider debate over Maoism in India and call attention to the fact that in parts of India that are not a part of the 'Red Corridor' there are other forms of political mobilization which engage with the state in a very different way, arguing for an engagement with how one might think about possible avenues towards Adivasi empowerment (see Nilsen, 2012).
2. See Deaton and Kozel (2005), Mehta and Venkatraman (2000) and Patnaik (2005, 2007, 2010) for critiques of the official poverty line suggested by the Planning Commission. Interestingly, a 2005 World Bank study put Indian poverty at 42 percent, and following the recommendations of the officially appointed Tendulkar report, the Planning Commission also accepted an upward revision of the Indian poverty line, so that the national poverty rate was estimated at 37.2 percent of the population (Chen and Ravallion, 2008; Mehta et al., 2011; Planning Commission, 2009). A more recent study by the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative estimates that 55 percent of the Indian population – some 645 million people – live in poverty (Alkire and Santos, 2010).
3. In 2007, when this report was published, Alirajpur was still a *tehsil* (sub-district) in Jhabua district.
4. Here, Guha is arguably operating with a slightly caricatured view of the development of the bourgeois state in the metropolitan context, in which the popular classes are seen as always-already incorporated into its ambit as citizens with democratic rights. This, of course, is not the case: the enfranchisement of subaltern groups in Europe was the result of protracted struggles against elite-dominated, repressive states (Halperin, 2004; Silver, 2003).
5. In what follows I use the term 'subaltern' to refer to Adivasis and Adivasi communities in western Madhya Pradesh. This does, of course, gloss over stratification and hierarchies internal to these communities, based on gender, age and ritual status, as well as the complicity of a small section of the Adivasi communities in the organization of state oppression (see footnote 7). However, I consider this designation legitimate in the context of this article, firstly, due to constraints of space and, secondly, due to the fact that for the *vast majority* of Adivasis in the region, the state was a presence in their lives primarily – if not exclusively – as a source of oppression, extortion and violence. Conversely, the term 'elite' is used in a broad sense to designate state officials at different levels, politicians at local and state level, and regional business interests that together constitute the dominant social force in the state and region. The commonality of interests between these groups is not taken for granted – indeed, as the article will show, activists were at times capable of pitting higher echelons of the state against lower echelons – but is actively produced in certain conjunctures, and typically as a response to substantial challenges from below.
6. This section is based on interviews with KMCS activists carried out in 2003 and 2009–10. I also draw on Baviskar's (1995) analysis of the KMCS. See Nilsen (2010) for an extended account of everyday tyranny.
7. The experience of encountering the state would be different for a small elite among the Adivasis, namely the *Patels* (the village headmen) and the *Patwaris* (the revenue officers). These men were normally the

- nodes that linked the local state to the villages, and they often took part in the coercion and extortion that state officials imposed on the village communities (fieldnotes and interviews, 2009–10; see also Baviskar, 2001: 11).
8. This is not to say that breach of forest law was the only source of state tyranny in the region. See Nilsen (2010) for a more detailed account of the manifold ways in which the local state imposed its regime of extortion on the Alirajpur communities.
 9. This should not be read as an argument to the effect that a lack of a capacity for and propensity towards resistance has been a constant feature of Adivasi relations to external social groups and forces. Rather, the history of Bhil and Bhilala Adivasis in western India 'has been a chronicle of incorporation and resistance' (Baviskar 1995: 85) from the 19th century onwards (see e.g. Hardiman, 1987).
 10. This section is based on interviews with KMCS activists carried out in 2003 and 2009–10. I have also drawn on Baviskar (1995) and Banerjee (undated).
 11. This is the common term used to describe activists who come from an urban background, who tend to be highly educated, and who have grown up in families engaged in white-collar work. The following account of the KMCS is based on interviews carried out in 2003 and 2009–10, as well as Baviskar (1995: Chapter 8) and Banerjee (undated: Chapters 3 and 4).
 12. This was the Lal Topi Andolan, a socialist movement active in the 1950s and 1960s.
 13. See Baviskar (1994) for a detailed account of this campaign.
 14. On this point, see Nilsen (2010: 171–81).
 15. I base this account of the Adivasi Mukti Sangathan on interviews with AMS activists carried out in 2009–10. In reconstructing the repression of the AMS, I have drawn extensively on the detailed account provided by Baviskar (2001), as well as reports by Amnesty International (undated) and Adivasi Mukti Sangathan (1997).
 16. Khargone was divided into Badwani and Khargone districts in 1998.

References

- Adivasi Mukti Sangathan (1997) India: reign of terror unleashed against tribal people and activists. Available (consulted 7 March 2011) at: <http://www.hrsolidarity.net/mainfile.php/1998vol08no01/1296/>.
- Alkire S and Santos ME (2010) India Country Briefing. Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI) Multidimensional Poverty Index Country Briefing Series. Available (consulted 11 March 2011) at: <http://www.ophi.org.uk/policy/multidimensional-poverty-index/mpii-country-briefings/>.
- Amnesty International (undated) Criminalization of adivasi rights activities. Available (consulted 8 March 2011) at: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/ASA20/014/2000/en/d2a8f4e6-df62-11dd-aaaa-7d9091d4638f/asa200142000en.html>.
- Banerjee R (undated) *Recovering the Lost Tongue: An Anarcho-Environmental Manifesto*. Available (consulted 6 March 2009) at: <http://www.scribd.com/doc/47799699/Recovering-the-Lost-Tongue>.
- Barker C and Cox L (2002) What have the Romans ever done for us? academic and activist forms of movement theorizing. Available (consulted 15 February 2011) at: <http://eprints.nuim.ie/428/1/AFPPVIII.pdf>.
- Bates C (1995) Lost innocents and the loss of innocence: interpreting adivasi movements in South Asia. In: Barnes RH, Gray A, and Kingsbury B (eds) *Indigenous Peoples of Asia*. Ann Arbor, MI: Association for Asian Studies, 109–119.
- Baviskar A (1994) Fate of the forest: conservation and tribal rights. *Economic and Political Weekly* 29(38): 2493–2501.
- Baviskar A (1995) *In the Belly of the River: Tribal Conflicts over Water in the Narmada Valley*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Baviskar A (2001) Written on the body, written on the land: violence and environmental struggles in central India. WP 02-10, Institute of International Studies, University of California.
- Béteille A (1986) The concept of tribe with special reference to India. *European Journal of Sociology* 27(2): 296–318.

- Breman J (1996) *Footloose Labour: Working in India's Informal Sector*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Chatterjee P (1993) *The Nation and its Fragments*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Chatterjee P (2004) *Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Chen S and Ravallion M (2008) *The Developing World is Poorer Than We Thought, but No Less Successful in the Fight Against Poverty*. Policy Research Working Paper 4703. Washington, DC: World Bank.
- Corbridge S and Harriss J (2000) *Reinventing India: Liberalization, Hindu Nationalism and Popular Democracy*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Corbridge S, Williams G, Srivastava M, and Véron R (2005) *Seeing the State: Governance and Governmentality in India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Corrigan P and Sayer D (1985) *The Great Arch: English State Formation as Cultural Revolution*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Cox L (1999) Building counter culture: the radical praxis of social movement milieux. Unpublished PhD dissertation, Trinity College, Dublin.
- Damodaran V (2006) Colonial constructions of tribe in India. *Indian Historical Review* 33(1): 44–76.
- Deaton A and Kozel V (2005) Data and dogma: the great Indian poverty debate. *World Bank Research Observer* 20(2): 177–199.
- Desai M (2007) *State Formation and Radical Democracy in India*. London: Routledge.
- Fuller CJ and Harriss J (2001) For an anthropology of the modern Indian state. In: Fuller CJ and Bénei V (eds) *The Everyday State and Society in Modern India*. London: Hurst, 3–30.
- Gadgil M and Guha R (1993) *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Geoghegan M and Cox L (2001) Outside the whale: (re)thinking social movements and the voluntary sector. Available (consulted 14 May 2004) at: <http://www.iol.ie/~mazzoldi/toolsforchange/afpp/martino.html>.
- Government of Madhya Pradesh (2007) *Human Development Report 2007*. Available (consulted 16 August 2011) at: <http://www.dif.mp.gov.in/mphdr2007.htm>.
- Gramsci A (1998) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- Guha R (1982) On some aspects of the historiography of colonial India. In: Guha R (ed.) *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on Indian History and Society*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1–8.
- Guha R (1989) Dominance without hegemony and its historiography. In: Guha R (ed.) *Subaltern Studies VI: Writings on Indian History and Society*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 210–309.
- Guha R (2002) *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Guha R (2010) Adivasis: unacknowledged victims. *Outlook*, April 14. Available (consulted 12 August 2011) at: <http://www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?265069>.
- Guha S (1999) *Environment and Ethnicity in India, 1200–1991*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gupta A (1995) Blurred boundaries: the discourse of corruption, the culture of politics, and the imagined state. *American Ethnologist* 22(2): 375–402.
- Gupta A (1998) *Postcolonial Developments: Agriculture in the Making of Modern India*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Halperin S (2004) *War and Social Change in Modern Europe: The Great Transformation Revisited*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hardiman D (1987) *The Coming of the Devi: Adivasi Assertion in Western India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Harriss-White B (2003) *India Working: Essays on Society and Economy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Heller P (1998) Degrees of democracy: some comparative lessons from India. *World Politics* 52(4): 484–519.
- Heller P (1999) *The Labor of Development: Workers and the Transformation of Capitalism in Kerala, India*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Inden R (1995) Embodying God: from imperial progresses to national progresses in India. *Economy and Society* 24(2): 245–278.

- Jaffrelot C (2003) *The Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Lower Castes in North India*. London: Hurst.
- Jessop B (1982) *The Capitalist State: Marxist Theories and Methods*. Oxford: Martin Robertson.
- Jessop B (1990) *State Theory: Putting the Capitalist State in its Place*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Kamat S (2002) *Development Hegemony: NGOs and the State in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Kaviraj S (1999) The modern state in India. In: Doornbos M and Kaviraj S (eds) *Dynamics of State Formation: India and Europe Compared*. Delhi: Sage, 220–249.
- Kaviraj S (2010a) On state, society and discourse in India. In: Kaviraj S (ed.) *The Imaginary Institution of India: Politics and Ideas*. Delhi: Permanent Black, 9–39.
- Kaviraj S (2010b) On the construction of colonial power: structure, discourse, hegemony. In: Kaviraj S (ed.) *The Imaginary Institution of India: Politics and Ideas*. Delhi: Permanent Black, 39–84.
- Madan TN (1987) Secularism in its place. *Journal of Asian Studies* 46(4): 747–759.
- Mehta AK and Shah A (2001) *Chronic Poverty in India: Overview Study*. Available (consulted 20 August 2011) at: http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1754532.
- Mehta AK and Shah A (2003) Chronic poverty in India: incidence, causes and policies. *World Development* 31(3): 491–511.
- Mehta AK, Shepherd A, Bhide S, Shah A, and Kumar A (2011) *India Chronic Poverty Report: Towards Solutions and New Compacts in a Dynamic Context*. New Delhi: Indian Institute of Public Administration.
- Mehta J and Venkatraman S (2000) Poverty statistics: bermicide's feast. *Economic and Political Weekly* 35(27): 2377–2382.
- Michelutti L (2007) The vernacularization of democracy: political participation and popular politics in north India. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 13(3): 639–656.
- Mosse D, Gupta S, and Shah V (2005) On the margins in the city: adivasi seasonal labour migration in western India. *Economic and Political Weekly* 40(28): 3025–3038.
- Mosse D, Gupta S, Mehta M, Shah V, and Rees J (2002) Brokered livelihoods: debt, labour migration and development in tribal western India. *Journal of Development Studies* 38(5): 59–88.
- Nandy A (1989) The political culture of the Indian state. *Daedalus* 118(4): 1–26.
- Nilsen AG (2009a) Autonome domener eller relasjonelle praksiser: makt og motstand i indisk historie og samtid. *Agora* 27(1): 126–165.
- Nilsen AG (2009b) The authors and the actors of their own drama: towards a marxist theory of social movements. *Capital and Class* 33(3): 109–139.
- Nilsen AG (2010) *Dispossession and Resistance in India: The River and the Rage*. London: Routledge.
- Nilsen AG (2012) Adivasis in and against the state: Subaltern politics and state power in contemporary India. *Critical Asian Studies* 44(2): 251–282.
- Nugent D (1997) *Modernity at the Edge of Empire: State, Individual and Nation in the Northern Peruvian Andes, 1885–1935*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Patnaik U (2005) Theorizing food security and poverty in the era of neoliberal reforms. *Social Scientist* 33(7/8): 50–81.
- Patnaik U (2007) Neoliberalism and rural poverty in India. *Economic and Political Weekly* 42(30): 3132–3150.
- Patnaik U (2010) Trends in urban poverty under economic reforms: 1993–94 to 2004–05. *Economic and Political Weekly* 45(4): 42–53.
- Planning Commission (2009) *Report on the Expert Group to Review the Methodology for Estimation of Poverty*. New Delhi: Government of India Planning Commission.
- Poulantzas N (1978) *State, Power, Socialism*. London: Verso.
- Prasad A (2003) *Against Ecological Romanticism: Verrier Elwin and the Making of an Anti-Modern Tribal Identity*. Delhi: Three Essays Collective.
- Prasad A (2004) *Environmentalism and the Left: Contemporary Debates and Future Agendas in Tribal Areas*. New Delhi: Leftword.
- Ratnagar S (2003) Our tribal past. *Social Scientist* 31(1–2): 17–36.
- Roseberry W (1994) Hegemony and the languages of contention. In: Joseph GM and Nugent D (eds) *Everyday Forms of State Formation: Revolution and the Negotiation of Rule in Everyday Mexico*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 355–366.

- Sarkar S (1998) *Writing Social History*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Scott JC (1990) *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Sewell WH (1992) A theory of structure: duality, agency, and transformation. *American Journal of Sociology* 98(1): 1–29.
- Shah A (2007) The dark side of indigeneity: indigenous people, rights and development in India. *History Compass* 5(6): 1806–1832.
- Shah A (2010) *In the Shadows of the State: Indigenous Politics, Environmentalism and Insurgency in Jharkhand, India*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Sharma A (2008) *Logics of Empowerment: Development, Gender and Governance in India*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Silver B (2003) *Forces of Labour: Workers' Movements and Globalization Since 1870*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Singh KS (1985) *Tribal Society in India: An Anthro-Historical Perspective*. Delhi: Manohar.
- Subramanian A (2003) Modernity from below: local citizenship on the South Indian coast. *International Social Science Journal* 55(175): 135–144.
- Sundar N (2010) Vigilantism, culpability and moral dilemmas. *Critique of Anthropology* 30(1): 113–121.
- Thompson EP (1978) Eighteenth century English society: class struggle without class. *Social History* 3(2): 133–165.
- Thorat S and Mahamallik M (2007) *Chronic Poverty and Socially Disadvantaged Groups: Analysis of Causes and Remedies*. Available (consulted 15 August 2011) at: http://www.chronicpoverty.org/uploads/publication_files/CPRC-IIPA_33.pdf.
- Whitehead J (2003) Space, place and primitive accumulation in Narmada valley and beyond. *Economic and Political Weekly* 38(40): 4224–4230.
- Williams R (1977) *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- World Bank (2011) *Poverty and Social Exclusion in India*. Washington, DC: World Bank.