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CHHOTELAL KUMAR
Feb 22, 2022 • Adivasi Lives Matter, Environment, Governance, Staff Picks

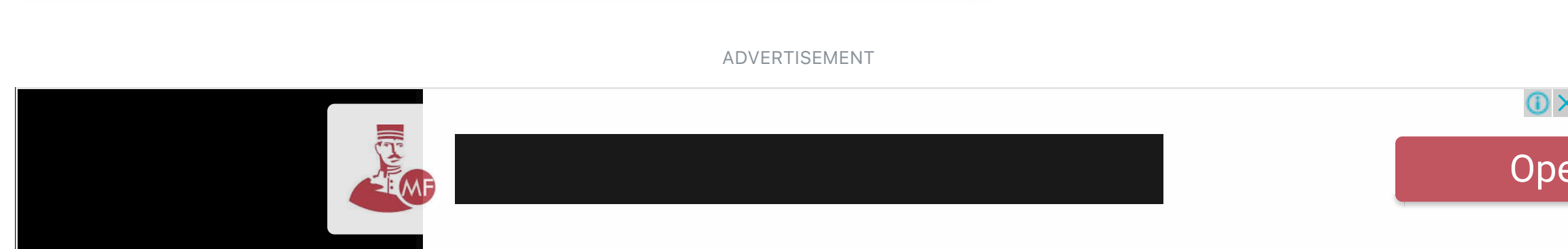
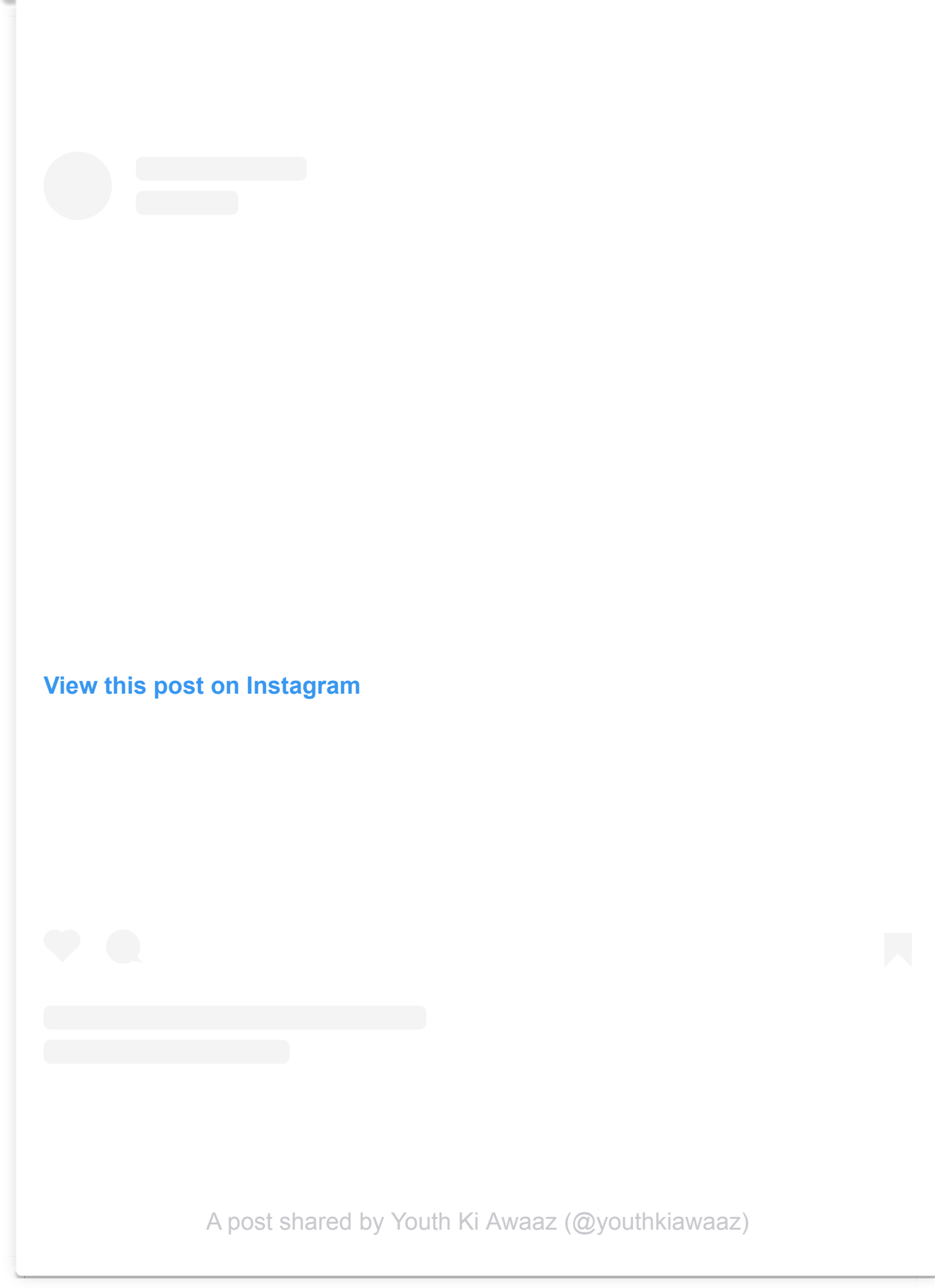
Myth–Busting: Why Do We Tend To Think Of Adivasi Folk As ‘Noble Savages’?



The **mainstream has always viewed adivasis** as “alien people”. In our common perception, they are “noble savages” whose lives are away from modern complexities. They live in jungles and have a foreign culture.

But, while making such a point, we often forget to explore the realities of *adivasi* lives. Terming of *adivasis* (who were classified as scheduled tribes during the colonial times) as noble savages, originated from colonial anthropologists and bureaucrats. Edward Dalton and Herbert Hope Risley are two such names.

They considered *adivasis* as primitive people living a simple life. They thought that *adivasis* couldn't cope up with modern civilisation. In other words, tribes are an antithesis to modern civilization, and to be a precise, **a modern state is antithetical to adivasi culture and existence.**



Scholars like Ramachandra Guha and Sumit Sarkar have made similar points, but in a different way. They argued that *adivasis* are rebellious and anti-statist communities.

Subaltern scholars derived such arguments from reading about rebellious tribes in the 19th century. Tribes were rebelling against the colonial government, which encroached on their traditional style of governance and control over forest and land.

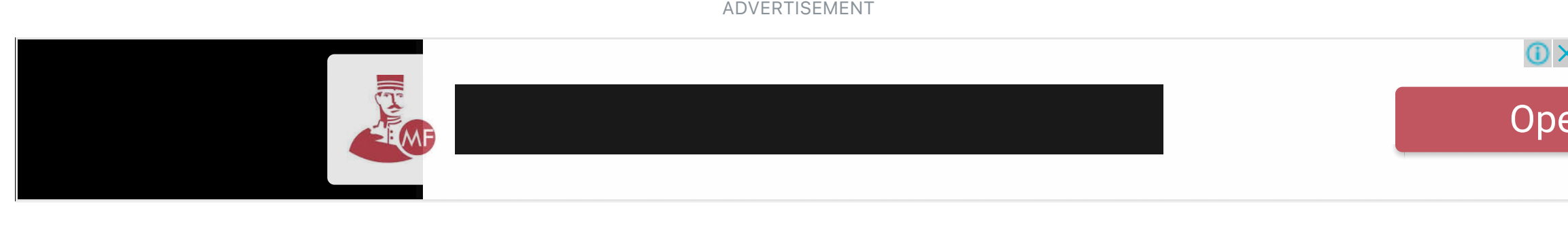
Reading these struggles made subaltern scholars argue that *adivasis* exist outside the ambit of modern state. And, they further reinforced *adivasis'* exceptionalism, as some kind of hostile and/or savage people.

Also read: [How Adivasi Women Are Forced To Bear The Brunt Of 'Development'](#)

Adivasi People And Communities Are Complex

Around the early decades of the 21st century, several scholars made similar points regarding *adivasis*, considering them to be people living outside the modern state, and having an alien culture that does not fit with modern civilisation.

Renowned anthropologist Alpa Shah argued on a similar line. She said that *adivasis* (Mundas) are participating in elections to get benefits of affirmative provisions, and to keep the state away. Further, argued that *adivasis* consider politics as “polluting” and “impure”. **They have their own moral, “sacral politics”.**



Similarly, other scholars have made similar points. I think such arguments are benign readings of specific groups of people among *adivasis*. These benign arguments, too, make a similar point about the modern state being antithetical to the existence of *adivasis*.

However, in recent years, we have seen the emergence of a new strand of scholars who started to argue that *adivasis* are deeply entwined with the “modern state power” logic. They said that *adivasis* are well within the ambit of modern states.

These scholars give us an example of the **Bhils, and other tribes across India**, who have interacted with various states powers, be it the Mughals or the present-day, post-colonial, Indian state.

As Dr Uday Chandra argues, historically, India's hill and forest peoples (who later became tribes) were neither stateless peoples, nor peoples outside history. **They are not simple, non-hierarchical, egalitarian communities.**

Also read: [Opinion: The Cultural Racism And Exclusion Adivasis Still Face In 2021](#)

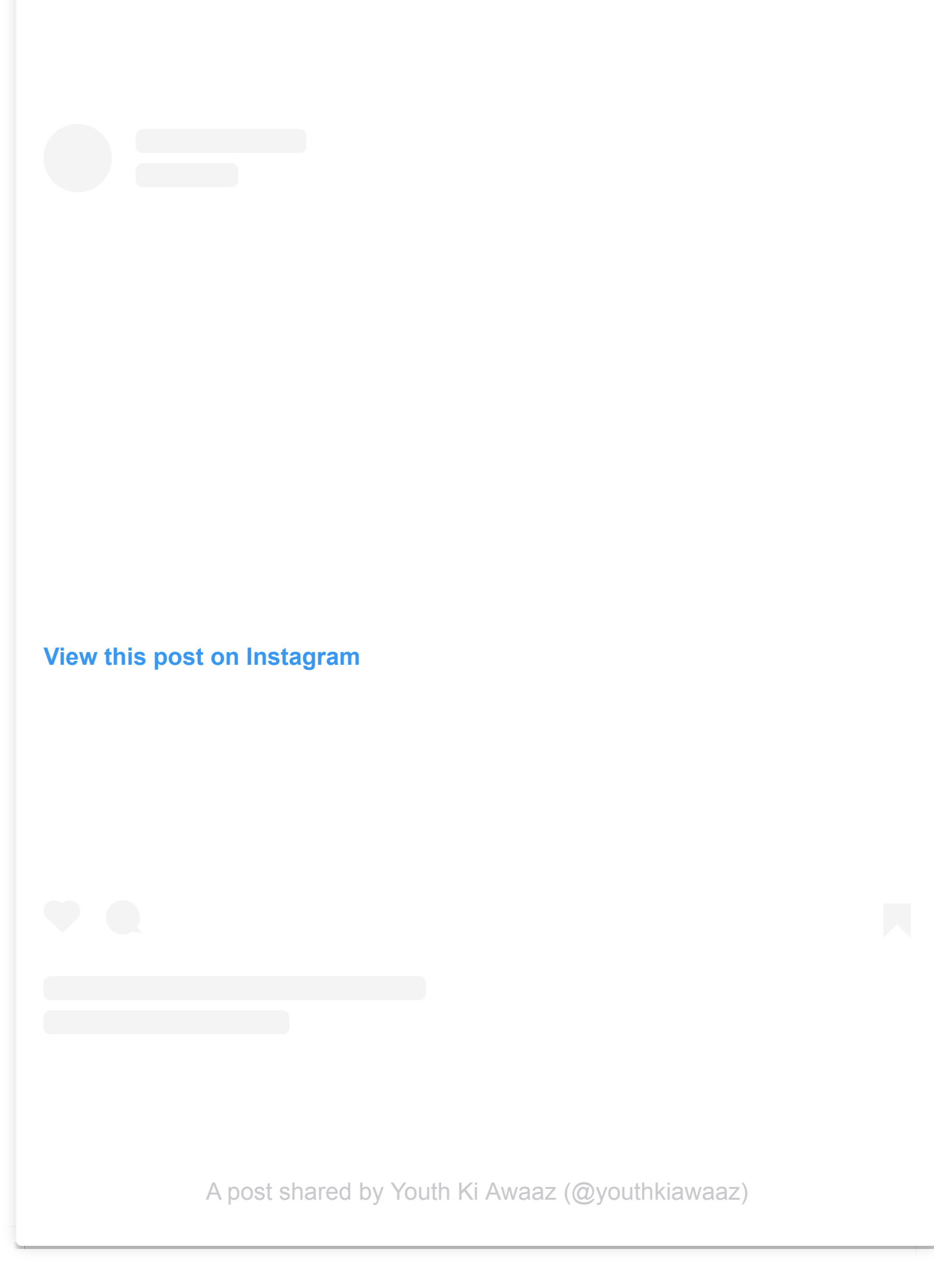
Adivasis Have Always Negotiated With The State

Indeed, *adivasi* peoples have been fully involved with kingships, land and forest politics, tributary relationships with other groups, particularly occupational specialisations, and even commerce and war.

In one of his works, Alf Gunvald Nilsen argued that *adivasis* negotiate with the state every day: from dealing with laws formed by the state to resisting encroachment of forests. So, to think of *adivasis* as noble savages and very primitive people, is misleading and a bogus reading of their history and culture.

To reduce them to such narrow, prejudicial definitions, is very problematic, and adds to the constant discrimination against these communities.

In a recent survey **report by Oxfam India, 20% of adivasis** said that they faced discrimination in hospitals. Anjela Taneja, who led the survey team, said that, “Doctors were reluctant to explain the nature of diseases and treatment to adivasis, believing that they are not likely to understand the information.” This is just the tip of the iceberg.



As we have seen, the mindset of **thinking about adivasis as uncivilised** or noble savages, has its origins in the writings of colonial anthropologists. Still, to trace the theoretical underpinning, we must see it in the context of the advent of modernity.

Modern represented “civilised”, whereas other traditions were considered uncivilised and in need of civilisation. These views were based on a teleological perspective, where the world was moving in the same direction, and those left behind needed to be civilised.

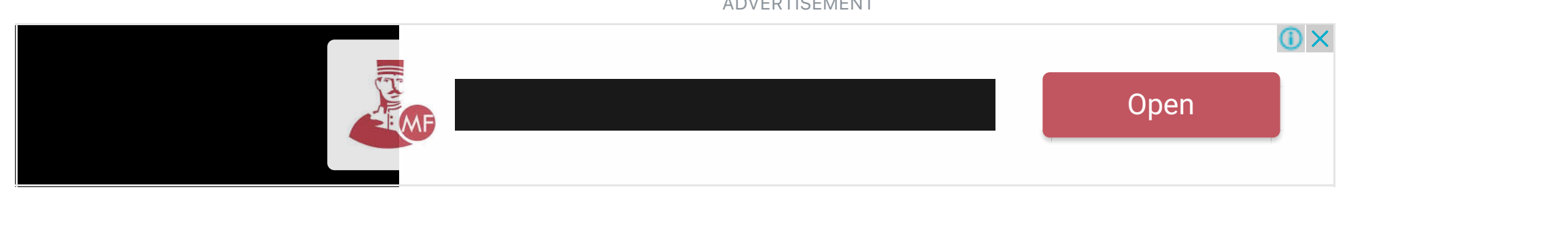
With time, several scholars have realised that this was a narrow, binaried understanding. **They have started to reject the binary of modern (or civilised) versus traditional (or uncivilised).**

So, to think that Adivasis are noble savages, is to trap ourselves in that same narrow interpretation. It's time to reject such beliefs now!

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