

Writing the Adivasi: Some historiographical notes

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This essay explores the possibility of a new field of research called adivasi/tribal studies. It reflects on how adivasi history and adivasi subjectivity have evolved both in the domain of disciplinary knowledges and in India's national and regional politics. Time and again referring to our experience of how dalit studies have come about in India, and with gender studies somewhere in the background, the essay argues that in order to carve out a field of adivasi studies, we must revisit histories of political and literary representation, political and cultural autonomy, vernacular languages and indeed religion and conversion. At the same time, we need to rethink land, territory and ecology together.

Can adivasi studies become a separate disciplinary field, in the way of gender studies and dalit studies? What are the advantages of carving out a semi-autonomous domain of enquiry, in the name of the adivasi? How does one think of such a field—as the field of operation of a special subject, namely, the adivasi, the tribe, the indigene or as a field constituted by a set of distinctive issues such as land, forest, myth, language or as a distinctive intellectual orientation per se? What could be the relationship of such a field to mainstream disciplines, such as history, economics and anthropology? And how does such a field compel us to rethink our relationship with text, archive and field, that is, the evidentiary paradigm that grounds social sciences today? These are questions that I shall engage with in this essay, in conversation with the other essays that make up this volume.¹

Of these, the last question calls for particular emphasis, because it centrally animates all the essays in this volume. One of the challenges of doing adivasi/tribal studies is that tribes and adivasis are almost always invisible in modern state archives, where they surface only as objects of counter-insurgency and/or policy. Adivasis and tribes also do not figure as subjects of archaeology and textual exegesis. While this is true for most subaltern subjects—the fact that it is difficult to write their

¹ In this essay, I use both the terms adivasi and tribe because while in areas such as Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh communities have chosen to replace the term tribe with the more positive term adivasi, in the northeast, the term adivasi refers to migrants from central India. Indigenous groups of the northeast choose to call themselves tribes in order to distinguish themselves from such later 'encroachers'.

stories because of their archival, archaeological and textual invisibility—adivasis and tribes are doubly disadvantaged, because they have not been able to claim alternative archives and alternative histories of their own, unlike some other subaltern subjects such as dalits. Dalits, we know, have recently argued that dalit literature and life-writing be seen as a repository of ‘facts’ about dalit lives. They have also argued that religious traditions be seen as a relevant archive for the writing of the history of caste and untouchability. But neither literature nor religion seems available in the same way for tribes and adivasis. This, we know, has been compensated by recourse to ethnography. While new, self-reflexive forms of field-work and anthropological writing have no doubt enhanced our understanding of adivasi lives and histories, tribes/adivasis continue to be seen as purely ethnographic subjects, with very limited possibility of their appearing as either historical or economic or literary or even religious subjects in their own right. The following discussion thus implicitly argues that the question of ‘finding tribes’ in text, archive and field is also at the same time a question of rethinking tribal and adivasi subjectivity.

Who Is the Adivasi?

Any attempt to conceive of adivasi studies as an autonomous domain of research faces a paradox. Till recently, we thought of the adivasi as a recognisably distinct identity. The British, the nationalists and even the communists in India, saw in the ‘tribe’ an archaic embodiment of authenticity and radicality, which could generate a temporal imperative and a political aesthetic ‘other’ than the modern.² This romantic imaging of the tribe as a primordial rebel outside of capitalist modernity was indeed quite consistent with the actual administration of tribes in India as the most economically marginalised and politically excluded subject—for marginalisation and exclusion only proved, vicariously, the fact that the tribe and the adivasi were outside the regime of the modern.

The burden of recent historical scholarship has been to explode this myth of adivasi exceptionalism. We now know that the so-called tribe is nothing if not a modern construction—a product of imperial governmental technologies as well as middle-class left-intellectual discourse, as Uday Chandra reminds us in this volume. Historically, the hill and forest peoples of India—who later became tribes—were neither stateless peoples, nor peoples outside history, nor simple, non-hierarchical, egalitarian communities. Indeed they were fully involved in kingships, in land and forest politics, in tributary relationships with other groups, in particular occupational specialisations and even in commerce and war.³ They were also internally variegated, hierarchised and gendered communities.⁴

² Banerjee, ‘Culture/Politics’; Prasad, *Environmentalism and the Left*.

³ Guha, *Beyond Caste*.

⁴ See, for instance, Shashank S. Sinha’s work on the changing gender structure amongst tribes of Chota Nagpur; Sinha, ‘Adivasis, Gender and the “Evil Eye”’; Uday Chandra’s essay here shows how status differentiation based on land-rights marked tribal protest politics in the colonial era’.

Indeed, Sumit Guha's recent book argues that if we rewrite the history of pre-colonial India as a history of the evolution of 'society' out of complex interactions of diverse *jatis*, colonial sociological categories such as caste and tribe would appear quite inappropriate; for these were categories fundamentally shot through with Iberian and British ideas regarding race, blood, birth and backwardness, ideas that were local to early modern and modern Europe. Guha shows that the operative categories of corporate existence in precolonial Indian society were not caste or tribe but a more complex range composed of *jati*, *zat*, *qaum*, *khum* and *kabilah*—categories that variously denoted people, lineage, religious denomination, political status, country, occupational grouping and so on.⁵

In other words, it was only recently, that is, with the onset of colonial modernity, that these diverse groupings in India were reordered in terms of the three defining categories of colonial 'difference', namely, religion, caste and tribe. Tribes became peoples—often of hills, forests and frontiers—who were discursively and materially segregated from 'society' as such, society that allegedly consisted of evolved religions such as Hinduism and Islam and complex differentiations such as class and caste. In contrast to society, tribes were rendered, late eighteenth century onwards, in the romantic image of non-monetised, egalitarian, primordial ~~and~~ communities. The political and economic government of tribes in India—in what came to be called 'excluded' and 'non-regulated' spaces of the empire and in labour and credit markets—was meant to produce and reproduce the tribe as an isolated, ~~a historical~~ and pre-political entity, enabling the infinite reproduction of the 'modern' as the tribe's necessary other.⁶ The tribe/advasi, in that sense, is a modern production, a historical subject par excellence, who—even as she rebelled repeatedly (as did caste peasants and factory workers)—also participated in missionary and nationalist discourses of improvement and education and in modern political idioms of nationalism, law, democracy and rights.

Having acknowledged all this, how then do we imagine the advasi as a distinct political subject and a subject of study? Does the advasi in India embody a unique form of subjectivity or is the advasi just one more modern political identity alongside the dalit, the minority, the middle class, the woman and so on. Who is the subject around which a field such as advasi studies might coalesce in the first place?

The recently constructed and highly problematic nature of the category 'tribe', however, does not make the category itself unreal or immaterial as 'fact' of history. After all, if groups of people have been disciplined and governed as 'tribes' for last two hundred years and more; and if they have subsequently mobilised and politicised as such, then the tribe is indeed a valid and true historical category. Here we can draw a lesson from the career of feminist history and gender

⁵ Guha, *Beyond Caste*.

⁶ Banerjee, *Politics of Time*.

studies. Despite the political power of evocations like ‘womanhood’ and ‘sisterhood’, feminists have consistently questioned ‘woman’ as a stable category, in face of the strongest forms of biological and sexual determinisms. They have done so not only by way of showing up the socially constructed and performative nature of gender roles; they have also admitted to difference and hierarchy amongst women themselves, making impossible an identitarian reduction of the feminist subject into ‘woman’ as such.⁷ Perhaps, this is how we need to think about the future domain of adivasi studies, as an intellectual field developed around a subject contingently or conventionally called the tribe but not necessarily only about him or her. Perhaps, we need to think about how a study of tribal histories allows us a new critical perspective from which to view the modern world at large, somewhat in the way that gender became, through feminist rewriting of the social sciences, a lens with general rather than merely subject-centric implications.

Tribe, Caste and Democracy

The question ‘who is a tribe?’ is troubled by another problem very specific to modern Indian historiography—namely, the problem of the distinction between tribe and caste. The colonial-modern paradigm of aboriginality, we know, derived from experiences of white conquest and settlement of the Americas and the Antipodes and the associated annihilation, dispossession and containment of peoples there. Tribe—now defined as the indigene or the autochthone in counterpoise to invaders and foreigners and playing out an apparently universal narrative of race—subsequently became a global marker of absolute difference between the modern and the non-modern. In India, however, difference was historically articulated through an elaboration of graded hierarchies and undetermined grey zones, because society here was constituted through a complex articulation of multiple ethnic, linguistic, sectarian and territorial communities. Dichotomies such as white/coloured, master/slave, patrician/plebian or even capitalist/proletariat did not sit well with this sociology of ‘graded inequalities’, to use Ambedkar’s felicitous phrase. Colonialism, however, sought to map Indian society upon just such a binary—namely tribe/caste—so as to replicate here the opposition between the modern and the indigene with which it sought to order the rest of the world. The colonial imposition of this binary created a political and intellectual muddle for us for a long time to come.

Social anthropology in India, we know, was hard pressed to catalogue the constitutive differences between tribes and castes. Thus, it was argued that tribes were segmentary, castes organic; tribes isolated and self-sufficient, castes interactive and inter-dependent; tribes ‘animist’, castes Hindu; tribes egalitarian, castes hierarchical and so on. Actual field study, however, showed that very few amongst

⁷ Riley, *Am I That Name?*

the profusion of social groups in India actually fitted this differentiation scheme—leading to the revised proposition that instead of being a binary, tribe–caste was a continuum, with tribes gradually evolving or acculturating themselves into castes, through various intermediate stages marked by both tribal and caste-like traits.⁸ This put in place a hierarchy between tribe and caste, making tribe prior to caste in evolutionary terms. However, this 1950s–60s debate might have ended,⁹ what remained with us in the long run was a certain fraught and unresolved relationship between the two categories of caste and tribe, with serious political implications.

Today, in common parlance, the dalit and the adivasi are often invoked together, in the same breath. Our constitution posits scheduled castes and scheduled tribes as analogous, at least from perspective of the nation-state’s political obligation to them. Everyday political language, such as that of the Bahujan Samaj Party, also pairs the dalit and the adivasi together, for rhetorical purposes. Academics too does this at times. Thus, the recent Indian Council of Social Science Research survey of Indian Political Thought has a single chapter on ‘dalit and adivasi’ thought;¹⁰ and the University Grants Commission guidelines for the setting up of centres for the study of ‘discrimination and exclusion’ in Indian universities also lists caste, tribe and minority under the same rubric.

At one level, this penchant for using tribe–caste as effectively a single term denoting analogous forms of absolute subalternity may appear to validate our argument that in reality the boundary between castes and tribes has always been shifting and contingent and that the tribe–caste distinction was simply an arbitrary distinction instituted by colonial governmentality. One could even argue that recent movements by communities such as the Gujjars demanding that they too be counted as scheduled tribes shows the continuing porosity of the caste–tribe boundary well into our contemporary. However, what this seeming equivalence between tribes and castes glosses over is the story of how differently dalits and adivasis have evolved as political subjects in our times. It also refuses to engage the fact that while caste has gone through a ‘silent revolution’ (to use Christophe Jaffrelot’s term¹¹) that has brought the dalit question to the centre of our democracy, tribal movements, still ongoing and powerful, have receded from visibility. The task of an emergent adivasi studies then is to argue out the specificities of the tribal question in our political present, including by marking out its differences with the dalit question.

A comparison between dalit and adivasi subjects reflects not only upon the distinct histories of caste and tribal politics in India, but also upon the nature of our democracy. To put it simply, the dalit articulation of democracy in twentieth-century India has been through the question of representation, while the adivasi

⁸ Bailey, ‘“Tribes” and “Castes” in India’; Sinha, ‘Tribe-Caste and Tribe-Peasant Continua’.

⁹ Kela, ‘Adivasi and Peasant’.

¹⁰ Datta and Palshikar, *Indian Political Thought*.

¹¹ Jaffrelot, *India’s Silent Revolution*.

articulation of democracy has been through the question of autonomy. The workings of the two are, historically and politically speaking, very different. While there has been much research on representation as such, there has been very little reflection on what autonomy might mean in a theory of democracy. I believe a future adivasi studies will have to engage with precisely this question.¹²

Dalit language and literature movements today emphasise the principle of self-representation—on the argument that only dalits can adequately author dalit lives and selves, and that it is for this reason that language, literary forms and indeed, authorship must be democratised. Dalit literary critics, such as Sharankumar Limbale, explicitly trace this tradition of representational sovereignty back to Ambedkar.¹³ We shall recall that Ambedkar's primary face-off with Gandhi was on the question of separate electorates (rather than simply reserved seats) for dalits. Ambedkar's conception of a federal democracy for India was based on his reworked notion of a dalit minority as 'social' minority.¹⁴ He was arguing against the understanding that minorities had to be necessarily defined in terms of religious or cultural or national distinctions. His recasting of the untouchable as social minority—equivalent to but not the same as cultural/religious minorities such as Muslims and Sikhs—was thus based on not having to prove the untouchables' cultural distinction as a community. Tribes and adivasis in India, however, were imagined as nothing if not distinct cultural communities. Tribes, thus imprisoned in a culturalist format, never entirely made it to the status of a social minority—defined by social marginalisation in the Ambedkarite sense—in the way that did caste. It is not surprising then that in the Ambedkarite scheme of representative democracy, the tribe appeared to be somewhat a misfit.

Ambedkar argued that '[t]he Aboriginal Tribes have not yet developed any political sense' and that they could therefore 'disturb the balance' between minority and majority constituencies 'without doing any good to themselves' by claiming self-representation.¹⁵ In other words, Ambedkar was implying that the tribes did not have the requisite number within the mass of the Indian population, to stand as a political constituency of its own. As a primitive and miniscule minority, they could only disrupt the otherwise stable democratic equation between the more substantial minority and majority constituencies. In terms of democracy as representation, then, the adivasi could not quite become an adequate political subject. Elsewhere, talking of why tribes had not become modern political subjects,

¹² Of course, different tribal groups have differently made demands for autonomy in India. In the northeast, autonomy has taken the form of tribal secessionism, while in Jharkhand it has taken the form of demand of separate statehood within the nation, in Chhattisgarh it is about economic autonomy and about a contemporary Maoist notion of a 'state within the state' and so on.

¹³ Limbale, *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*, pp. 40–59.

¹⁴ Ambedkar 'States and Minorities, 1947', *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches (BAWS)*, vol. 1, pp. 381–449.

¹⁵ 'Communal Deadlock and a Way to Solve It', 1945, in *BAWS*, vol. 1, pp. 355–79.

Ambedkar argued that it was because Hinduism was caste-ridden that Hindus had failed to take civilisation to the tribes of India, who were seen as outcaste and polluting. The tribes therefore remained 'savage' and irrational and often lived the life of criminality. They could therefore justifiably be excluded from current deliberations about a future constitution.¹⁶ Ambedkar evidently did not quite see the dalit and the adivasi as equivalent political subjects in his imagined federal democracy.

At the very time when Ambedkar was articulating such a position, adivasi and tribal communities were claiming a right to autonomy within the nation, for example, in Jharkhand and in Nagaland. Historians have traced this claim to autonomy to colonial governmental strategies by which tribal regions were kept outside the general legal and administrative framework of British India. Others have seen this as a form of counter-nationalism pitched against mainstream Indian nationalism and its colonising activities in the resource-rich territories of central India and the northeast.¹⁷ However, we should not be too quick to reduce the history of tribal autonomy simply to proliferating sub-nationalisms, even though that was certainly a central part of the story. Rather a field such as adivasi studies will do well to reflect upon the ways in which the idea of autonomy fed into a broadened imagination of democracy in India.

This comes through clearly in the constituent assembly debates around the question of reservation of seats in the legislature for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes and around the Vth and VIth schedules of the constitution that dealt with tribal autonomy. Many, though not all, members of the assembly agreed to the principle that seats should be reserved in the legislature for adivasi members in the same way as for ex-touchables. There was some fear, especially in context of Assam and Bengal, that reservations might cause dalits and adivasis to 'combine' and so become a disproportionate force in local politics. But the overall sense was that tribes were still far behind dalits in political competence and that while lower castes could be expected to come up at par with upper castes in 10 years, tribes would need a longer period of reservation to make it to modernity and democracy. The real dissensus, thus, was not on the question of reservation but around the question of autonomy and self-government.

P. R. Thakur, the Namashudra leader from Bengal, said that tribes constituted a unique 'political minority' (as opposed to social and cultural minorities like untouchables and Muslims) precisely because they possessed distinctive practices of self-government. In response to the argument that introducing elections in tribal areas would introduce an individuating principle amongst essentially communitarian peoples, Jaipal Singh argued that tribal modes of self-government were

¹⁶ Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, p. 20.

¹⁷ A very eloquent formulation of the ongoing life of colonialism in so-called tribal spaces is Boddhisattva Kar's essay 'Can the Postcolonial Begin?'

already democratic in nature and could indeed be a lesson to India's deeply hierarchical caste society. He further argued against imagining Hindu lower castes as indigenes and against attaching the prefix *adi-* to their identities. It were tribals who were the true indigenes, he insisted, and as such tribes could legitimately lay claim to the whole of India instead of a few regions of imputed 'autonomy'. What was therefore needed for true democracy in India, according to Jaipal Singh, was a 'daring redistribution of provinces' in terms of existing self-governing units—rather than in terms of religion (as was the debate just prior to Partition) or in terms of the map of elite vernacular languages (following which the Congress had structured its provincial committees and would later structure linguistic states in India).

Opponents of adivasi autonomy, such as Lakshmi Narayan Sahu from Orissa, strongly argued that allowing 'tribal' forms of self-government in place of a homogeneous, territory-based structure of local governance across India would allow tribes to evolve politically along discrete lines and by that logic, there was nothing to prevent frontier tribes from merging into non-Indian political regimes, such as Tibet or Burma. The status of the Tribal Advisory Committees was also under contention. The Tribal Advisory Committee was three-fourths composed of elected adivasi members of the state legislatures and was meant to advise the government of the states in matters pertaining to the administration and welfare of the scheduled tribes. The dispute was about whether such 'advice' by tribals should be made binding upon the government. Yudhisthir Mishra from Orissa reported that he had received memoranda from adivasi groups stating that adivasis did not consider the constituent assembly to be representative of them and were therefore not obliged to follow the Indian constitution as their own constitution.¹⁸ Clearly, with regard to tribes, the right to govern oneself was a political principle that was very much at stake, indeed far more than the principle of self-representation.

Half a century after the constituent assembly debates, the autonomy question continues to be contentious in tribal areas. Let me, by drawing on the work of Ajay Dandekar and Chitragada Choudhury, take the example of the 1996 Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act or PESA.¹⁹ PESA became law after prolonged debate in parliament and public sphere and now formally acknowledges the right of communities of Schedule V areas to self-governance. (Here, we cannot go into the long and contentious process of 'scheduling' in independent India by which regions came to be officially acknowledged as inhabited by indigenous communities with a tradition of cultural and political autonomy. Sagar Tiwari's thesis on scheduling bolsters the argument that this was a history constitutive of the

¹⁸ Constituent Assembly Debates, particularly of 19 December 1946 and 24 August 1949, <http://parliamentofindia.nic.in/ls/debates/vol1p9.htm> and <http://parliamentofindia.nic.in/ls/debates/vol9p17a.htm>, accessed on 30 December 2014.

¹⁹ Dandekar, Ajay and Chitragada Choudhury, 'PESA: Legislation as Myth', in *More than Maoism*, 151–62.

autonomy aspect of Indian democracy.²⁰) As a law, PESA acknowledges the Gram Sabha as having prior right over decisions regarding a range of governance issues at the grassroots level—such as land acquisition and prospecting/mining for minor minerals, land alienation, ownership of minor forest produce, control of money-lending to tribals, etc. The Gram Sabha is meant to be the collective of all adults that make up a habitation or settlement, which might or might not be coterminous to an administrative unit of the state.

Clearly, the point of defining the Gram Sabha in this way is to enable a face-to-face assembly of people who routinely interact in everyday life for the purpose of debating issues of resource use on the one hand and overseeing of state institutions on the other. Whether we call this an instance of direct democracy or not, it is obvious that here we are looking at an imagination of autonomy as an unmediated deliberative agency that can work without being hampered by governmental and juridical procedures that make up the formal domain of state law. However, in the actual working of the PESA in many states, we often find officials functioning with definitions of the ‘village’ that are purely administrative—such as the village as a revenue unit or as coterminous with the Panchayat Committee—definitions that nullify the very idea of an unmediated, face-to-face, local assembly. Similarly, contentious is the question of the legal status of decisions taken by Gram Sabhas. In many states, for example in Orissa, if decisions taken by local assemblies appear to go against state laws ‘currently in force’, state laws are given precedence over community decisions. Even in areas such as Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, where Gram Sabha decisions are taken more seriously, ‘due regard’ to existing relevant laws are demanded from village assemblies, apart from their being ‘in harmony’ with the constitution. Needless to say, not just around PESA, the current debate around the Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act of 2013 and its various amendments also involve the same issue of autonomy of the Gram Sabhas as a unit of self-government.

Clearly, there is a deep contention here between the imagination of democracy as autonomy and the model of democracy as a lateral and vertical elaboration—in the name of decentralisation—of a single, number-based representative structure amongst all peoples of the nation. In the political imagination of Indian nationalism, the stability of representative democracy—which works through the dis-aggregation of the Indian masses into enumerated and enumerable constituencies—depended upon the stabilisation of a uniform and centralised administrative and electoral infrastructure, that politically disaggregates and procedurally integrates at the same time the diverse and conflicting identities that ceaselessly proliferate, encouraged by the natural impulses of a system of numerical and territorial representation. The adivasi, we know, has not been able to participate fully and effectively in

²⁰ Sagar Tiwari, ‘Tribe and Development: Nation-making in Bastar, Central India (1930–80),’ PhD thesis, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 2014.

this system of representation, because neither numbers nor the liberal concept of minority works in their favour. Hence, the emphasis on autonomy.

It is important to remember that in autonomy movements, tribals not only pitched themselves as culturally distinctive, they also claimed a kind of political hyper-visibility—a hyper-visibility quite disproportionate to their numbers—by mobilising a long tradition of adivasi insurgency against colonial rule and against economic exploitation by Indian landlords, merchants and moneylenders. It was exactly this history of political efficacy—rather than minority status—that was invoked by the Jharkhand movement, 1930s onwards, which in the 1960s and 1970s aligned with militant left movements, in the countryside, in plantations and in mines. Needless to say, this political efficacy would often seamlessly translate into adivasi claims of political autonomy and free zones within the nation—in terms of territorial rights, self-governance claims and sometimes even a preference for a loose and unbound imperial structure rather than a tight national, territorial one, as was the case with Phizo’s imagination of post-1947 Nagaland. While this assumed political efficacy fired the imagination of middle-class left activists and intellectuals, as Uday Chandra’s paper argues, it was also very much a part of the self-presentation of tribal activists, especially in the 1960s and 1970s. The nation-state of course could only accommodate this demand for autonomy by trying to render political autonomy into a version of cultural autonomy for the adivasi. This culturalist reduction of the autonomy question, which founds modern liberal governmentality, we know from Povinelli’s ground-breaking work on Australian multiculturalism, demands an impossible authenticity from the indigene and in so doing inhibits claims of political transformation.²¹ What the Indian adivasi was demanding, however, was a completely different constitutional imagination of a loosely structured, federal democracy, which fit neither the earlier British nor the contemporary Indian model of diversity management. Adivasi autonomy would then emerge as nothing other than a variety of counter-nationalism, even secessionism—either to be tamed with the granting of statehood within the nation and consequent incorporation into the standard number-based representational regime or with the exercise of brute force through the Armed Forces Special Powers Act.

Tribes and Land

The tribal demand for autonomy brings to the fore the land question. The demand that right to land be recognised as a basic right of the subaltern has of course been a persistent sub-text of modern Indian politics, right from the days of Kisan Sabha struggles and communist mobilisation of peasants and tribals in 1940s Bengal and Telengana. Post 1947, issues of zamindari abolition, land reform and land redistribution continued to drive agitational politics, and in the 1950s–60s, chronic food

²¹ Povinelli, *The Cunning of Recognition*.

scarcity gave the land issue an even more radical edge. In our contemporary, the land question has acquired a very different character through peasant and tribal resistance to land acquisition by mining and industrial corporations and against displacement by developmental projects like dams and nuclear plants. As we know, of the population displaced from land in the post-1947 years, tribes and adivasis statistically make up the largest portion. In that sense, the land question today has almost become coincidental to the ‘tribal question’. Additionally, the land question is also now recognised as a pressing environmental question. Many social groups, especially tribals, today explicitly demand rights not just to land but to land-forms, forests, biomaterials and rivers.

While tribes and adivasis partake in the general politics of land, alongside caste-peasants and landless labour, we have to admit that the tribal question puts a distinctive spin on the issue. In mainstream nationalist and communist politics, the land question has been mostly articulated through the ‘land to the tiller’ principle. This upheld the well-known Lockean principle of property, namely, that land, found given in nature and thus belonging to everyone, became property only through the investment of human labour into it—except that unlike in John Locke’s formulation, in radical peasant politics ownership devolved upon the actual labourer (rather than the master or rentier) in the field. As Judy Whitehead demonstrates, John Locke’s political thought was directly applied to India in colonial times—through the workings of the Permanent Settlement (1793), the Ryotwari Settlement and the India Forest Acts (1865 and 1878). Locke’s concept of wasteland, as opposed to value-producing land, constituted the founding binary opposition behind the categorisation and administration of Indian landscapes. The categories of wasteland and productive land were in turn applied to social groups supposedly attached to these different landscapes, namely tribes and castes. Associated with wildness, wilderness and savagery since the nineteenth century, the category of wasteland defined peoples who would become most vulnerable to dispossession and/or enclosure—namely people who would be called ‘tribe’.²² This classical liberal principle of value in/of land transmuted in time into the principle of productivity and was embraced by Marxism and subsequently fuelled the land-to-the-tiller slogan. The peasant in communist imagination thus was the hard-working, productive peasant, engaged in sedentary agriculture in large riverine plains. Communist models of just land use were thus either through a system of collectivisation of land as in Russia, reproducing the factory model in agriculture, or through a fair redistribution of landed property and/or tenancies in the form of roughly equal small peasant holdings as in India.

These models of land use based on the agrarian imagination did not take into account other modes of use and habitation of land that were common in India at the time of colonialism. These other modes were rediscovered only in the latter

²² Whitehead, ‘John Locke and the Governance of India’s Landscape’.

part of the twentieth century through the overlapping concerns of tribal histories, histories of the commons and ecological histories.²³ It was now clear that those who came to be classified as tribes in modern times were precisely communities who were not fully identifiable as sedentary cultivators, though many communities were indeed agriculturists of various sorts, and therefore could not be mobilised simply in the name of labour and productivity. Tribes were those who were seen as not necessarily following the absolute principle of productivity, that is, who did not use land purely as property and resource but also often simply inhabited it and even sacralised it. In actuality, this was and continues to be true for not just tribes and adivasis but many other rural groups in India. What was specific to the tribes was that they, given their ecological contexts, more commonly lived by a complex combination of individual ownership, common property and communal and village rights and also inhabited a combination of forest, field and hill spaces rather than only cleared plains.²⁴ In colonial modern discourses, these communities were therefore seen as misfits to the modern regime of property and productivity. Not accidentally therefore, colonial attempts to ‘pacify’ tribes were primarily attempts to sedentarise them and turn them into productive peasant communities. Many tribes on their part laid claim to lands and forests on various ‘unverifiable’ and ‘irrational’ grounds—including on the ground that they were the first settlers and clearers of such land and that such land was the abode of their gods and ancestral spirits. But despite claiming land, the so-called tribes did not always promise to cultivate such land in its entirety and utilise its full productive potential. We know the story of how colonial authorities tried, often in vain, to instil a ‘proper’ economic subjectivity amongst tribes through measures like the circulation of monetary incentives and making of land-tenures conditional upon cultivation of a certain percentage of lands granted.²⁵ But tribes, such as the Oraons in Sangeeta Dasgupta’s essay, often grasped with great astuteness the fact that their forced transformation into full-time cultivators—and their alienation from forests and other ecological habitations—was really the root cause of their radical impoverishment and eventual subordination.

I must clarify right away that in speaking of tribal relationship to land in this way, I am by no means returning to an earlier variety of romantic ‘primitivism’. Archana Prasad’s excellent book *Against Ecological Romanticism* warns us in no uncertain terms against this modern, indeed urban myth, about tribes. However,

²³ Chakravarty-Kaul, *Common lands and Customary Law*; Bhattacharya, ‘Remaking Custom’; Cederlöf, *Landscapes and the Law*; Singh, ‘Conformity and Conflict: Tribes and the “Agrarian System” of Mughal India’; Gadgil and Guha, ‘Ecological Conflicts and the Environmental Movement in India’.

²⁴ Xaxa, ‘Transformation of Tribes in India’; Bordoloi, ‘Tribal Land Tenure System and Land Alienation in North-East India’; D’Souza, *Traditional Systems of Forest Conservation in NorthEast India*; Roy Burman, ‘Historical Process in Respect of Communal Land System and Poverty Alleviation among Tribals’.

²⁵ Banerjee, *Politics of Time*, pp. 121–39.

I am indeed arguing that adivasi or tribal studies, because it concerns peoples who have historically inhabited lands and ecologies differently and not only in terms of value production and property, does offer us a unique vantage point from which to unpack neoliberal economic orthodoxies of today. It helps us interrogate not only the dominant discourses of growth, productivity and development, on grounds of its ecological unsustainability and high social cost, especially to tribal communities. It also allows us to rethink more foundational categories of economic thinking like value, rent, property and so on, in the process producing a critique of what we understand as purely economic, that is, non-political, principles.²⁶

An 'other' history of land—via the story of tribes—challenges us to rethink complexly differentiated forms of property, ownership, usufruct and access rather than think right to land only in terms of the conventional state/private binary. It also opens up a highly complicated and long history of how 'tribeness' was constituted in modern times—not just at the interface of a people with the colonising state but also at the interface between a people and capital. This is a crucial story to explore if we want to engage the contemporary operations of corporations in the predominantly tribal lands of the nation. Boddhisattva Kar's essay in this volume takes up this task admirably. Kar addresses the interesting paradox that northeastern India was the least administered but the most capitalised zone of the British empire—where state officials were sparsely found, but innumerable joint-stock companies operated in tea, mining, timber, ivory and oil. Kar narrates how these companies went about making contracts with different Naga individuals and for that purpose first instituted these individuals as tribal chiefs and then deduced them to be owners of the lands that the people inhabited. In other words, Kar is arguing against seeing the Nagas as always already autochthones, in the sense of being a priori owners of land in the region. Rather he argues that it was the very form of the contract that produced autochthony in the first place, because contracts required authorised signatories, imputed as owners/proprietors, not just at present but demonstrably through descent and inheritance of land from the past. That is, it was the capitalist contract that produced 'tribeness' as the economic form of indigeneity and 'tribe' as the political form of chiefdom.

What Kar's story does is actually open up the question of how land-right becomes the first principle constituting indigeneity in modern times—through the operations of private capital. But while Kar concludes that tribes must therefore be seen not as victims but co-agents of capital in the history of tribal land-rights, I would conclude somewhat differently. I read Kar's narrative as asking a crucial question—how does one think land relations in ways other than through the standard conceptual triangle, consisting of the three nodes of private property, eminent

²⁶ Davis, ed., *Indigenous View of Land and the Environment*. For a discussion of local ways of life and living that partake in the ethos of sharing and conservation rather than growth and productivity, see Nigam, 'Capital, Growth and Molecular Socialism'.

domain and communal property or to say the same thing differently, capital, state and 'tribe'. How did the Nagas inhabit their lands prior to the instituting of private contracts for capitalist prospecting in the region? How does one think of a people's territoriality if not in terms of modern conceptions of land-right and autochthony? Perhaps the clue lies in the ambiguities that Kar brings out in the history of the contract in the northeast. After all, when the colonisers sought to pay *posa* to the Nagas—it could never really be clarified what this payment was meant to signify. Was *posa* a form of 'rent' on land owned by the Nagas or 'blackmail money' to buy peace from them or 'tribute' in recognition of their territorial sovereignty or 'pension' to ensure an eventual monetisation of land relations. Perhaps what we need to explore is how the operations of contract in this region converted political territoriality to the purely economic form of land right?

This brings me to the other way in which adivasi studies can contribute to a rethinking of the land question. In conventional history writing, the story of land as property and resource has been seen as separate from the story of land as territory, country and nation. The former has been part of economic history, the latter political history. Further, in conventional history writing, the story of land as ecology has been seen as separate from the story of land as concerning people's livelihood. The former has been part of environmental history, the latter political history. This divorce of economy, ecology and polity plays out to our disadvantage, as demonstrated in the recent debates around the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006.²⁷ Adivasi and tribal movements of autonomy, however, tell us in no uncertain terms that land right, ecological politics and territorial autonomy share deeply connected histories that need to be thought together. No doubt, access to land as economic resource is very much at stake in peoples' claim for autonomous zones of existence within the nation and its economy. But also at stake is the notion of homeland and sovereign territoriality.²⁸ In fact, one could argue, drawing from adivasi histories, that the very concept of land must be reimagined as ecology rather than land per se, that is, as inclusive of forest, field, minerals, water and animals on the one hand and of specific modes of habitation of and relation to such land on the other. The latter would include political, cultural, symbolic and indeed spiritual investments that diverse peoples make in their lands and landscapes. As importantly, it would include not only the question of using and inhabiting land in particular ways, but also diverse modes of traversing land as it were. Thus, especially with regard to tribes and pastoralists, the issues of free and unfree migration, mobile cultivation such as *jhum*, crossing of borders, return and loss importantly constitute the land question as simultaneously a territorial question.

Thinking land as simultaneously resource, ecology and territory brings in issues of state and state-making as intrinsic part of the land question. Sumit Guha's work

²⁷ Saikia, *Forest and Ecological History of Assam*.

²⁸ Ghosh and Sengupta, 'Nationality Question in Jharkhand'.

on environment and ethnicity shows in no uncertain terms that in western and central India, in medieval and early modern times, peoples such as the Bedas and the Bhils—later to become stereotypical tribes—played their control over forest and hilly lands in order to acquire military and royal powers. Surrounding kingdoms had to negotiate with these peoples in unmistakably political terms. He also shows that thinking land as simultaneously territory and ecology allows us to understand that so-called tribal society and agrarian peasant society worked in necessary interaction with each other and that they were nothing if not contemporary and coeval (to use Johannes Fabian's term) because neither formation could work without the proximate presence of the other.²⁹ It was only in colonial modern times that agricultural land and forest land became marked as modern and primitive, civilised and wild, respectively.³⁰ The modern state, seeking both sovereign and governmental powers over society, now embarked upon a dual strategy of what Kaushik Ghosh calls 'incorporative' and 'exclusive' exercise of powers. It was the 'exclusive' strategy of governing some territories as 'external' and 'exceptional' to mainstream society that produced tribes, in opposition to other territories, such as those inhabited by caste and class, which were 'incorporated' in the juridico-legal and representational matrix of the modern state.³¹

Here one could refer to the ethnographic work of Clare Anderson, Madhumita Mazumdar and Visvajit Pandya.³² They show how governmentality and social welfare practices of the Indian nation-state constitute the being of the 'primitive' in the Andamans, in what is the archetypal primordial space, namely, the tribal reserve. But in these spaces, the book argues, the state appears to engage in a systematic erasure of its own archives, in order to dissimulate so-called primitive spaces as forever untouched by and autonomous of the modern state regime. Other scholars such as K. Sivaramakrishnan and Arun Agarwal also emphasise governmentality and environmentality as twin imperatives in the constitution of modern tribal subjectivity in Bengal and Uttaranchal, respectively.³³ This scholarship is an important corrective to the conventional rendering of tribes as state-less societies.

However, there is more to the question of land and state with regard to the adivasi. If one studies the processes by which the modern Indian state reproduces its own privilege of 'eminent domain' over primarily tribal and adivasi lands of the nation, it becomes clear that what we are seeing is a new form of exercise of sovereignty by the modern state, in contexts where the question of land shades off into the question of ecology, territory, border and frontier. What we now see is not sovereignty in the premodern, European sense—namely, sovereignty as a transcendent and/or spectacular exercise of power à la Foucault—but a form of

²⁹ *Environment and Ethnicity*.

³⁰ Skaria, 'Shades of Wildness'.

³¹ Ghosh, 'Between Global Flows and Local Dams'.

³² *New Histories of the Andaman Islands*.

³³ Sivaramakrishnan, *State-making and Environmental Change*; Agarwal, *Environmentality*.

sovereignty that appears to draw its power from the allegedly irrational, primordial and exceptional characteristics of certain groups of people and certain spaces of the nation, which by their very nature appear to fall outside the mainland parameters of modernity, representation and democracy. The contemporary history of Maoism in central India and insurgency in the northeast demonstrate precisely this sovereign working of political power in 'wild lands' beyond the framework of governmentality.³⁴ A future adivasi studies, in this way, offers a critical location wherefrom to conduct a serious historicisation and ethnography of the modern democratic state.

One could briefly add here that the land and productivity question with regard to tribes departs significantly from the ways in which land is (or rather is not) part of dalit studies today. In the early twentieth century, no doubt, the question of access to village commons, land ownership and servile labour on land was very much part of dalit politics, such as in Maharashtra, Kerala and Bengal, especially in dalit opposition to middle-peasant, middle-caste mobilisation in these areas. However, in its critique of the Gandhian valourisation of 'village India',³⁵ which repressed the facts of rural untouchability and servitude, dalit subjectivity eventually recast itself as predominantly an urban subjectivity. Adivasi studies would therefore have to assert its 'difference' in terms of the land question from what functions today as the general rubric of 'dalit and adivasi studies'.

History, Language, Culture

In the way that an emerging field of adivasi studies must struggle against economic orthodoxies, it must also negotiate anew its relationship with history, and in the very same move, anthropology. How peoples constituted as tribes were globally rendered history-less is a well-known story and does not need to be retold here.³⁶ I have also discussed elsewhere the story of how late eighteenth century onwards, colonial and nationalist restructuring of economic relationships between diverse peoples materially constituted tribes as indebted subjects in capitalist modernity, subjects who were henceforth recast as purely presentist, extravagant and bodily beings, with no sense of savings, accumulation or credit, that is, with no sense of the future and of time as such.³⁷ I shall not dwell on that story here either. What I shall discuss here is the fundamentally ironic condition of being a tribe in our contemporary—namely, the condition of being always already archaic and yet indelibly presentist.

Tribes and adivasis, even as they are represented as survivals of the past, are not recognised as embodiments of past histories. This is the ironic condition of

³⁴ Sundar, 'Interning Insurgent Populations'; Shah, *In the Shadow of the State*.

³⁵ Jodhka, 'Nation and Village'.

³⁶ Wolfe, *Europe and the People without History*; Fabian, *Time and the Other*.

³⁷ Banerjee, *Politics of Time*.

being a tribe in modernity. The tribe's imputed pastness is seen as the mere pastness of anachronism—their being of a time which is other than their time of being, to put it rhetorically. Anachronism can disrupt the coherence of the modern by its sheer presence but it apparently cannot produce a different history of the present. Historians committed to studying tribes and adivasis have sought to remedy this sterile temporality ascribed to their subjects in two ways. First and most effectively, they have shown up the tribe and the adivasi to be modern subjects after all, and not archaic or primordial beings as they were once believed to be. They have shown that it was the temporalising logic of global modernity that created the global primitive, as a 'constitutive outside' which rendered the modern recognisable as modern in the first place. Instead of being 'before' the modern, the tribe and the adivasi thus were modernity effects, so to speak. This important historical critique of the putative pastness of tribes, however, has had the unintended consequence of ascribing to the tribe an uncompromising present-ness, without assigning them any other kind of historically efficacious past.

Secondly, modern historians have also shown that tribes do embody other kinds of pasts, even if such pasts might not have left traces in textual documents and archaeological sites, that is, upon the familiar material forms that constitute the main body of historians' evidence. Historians have therefore taken recourse to the study of memory and myth and combined it with ethnological fieldwork in the contemporary, in order to reconstruct narratives of tribal pasts as far as possible in the tribal subject's own voice. While such uses of anthropological techniques have democratised the historian's text—by staging the historian's narrative side by side with ancestor's stories, tribal lore and field conversations—such staging has also served to make evident the incommensurability between formal history and tribal narratives. Sangeeta Dasgupta's essay delineates beautifully this mismatch between Oraon history and Oraon memory, just as it demonstrates the difference in temporal depths achieved by the two distinct scholarly enterprises of doing 'history of the present' and undertaking an 'ethnography of the contemporary'.

Here again the contrast with dalit history is crucial. Right from late nineteenth century, caste radicals such as Jyotiba Phule sought to engage and rewrite Indian history. Ambedkar himself engaged not only with narratives of history but also with detailed exegesis of classical Sanskrit texts. The intent of dalit politics thus was not only to write histories of dalits or histories of caste and untouchability, but also to rewrite Indian history as a whole from the subject position of the outcaste and untouchable. This was possible because, despite the term 'caste' being a colonial neologism, terms such as *varna* and *jati* and subjects such as the shudra and the *antyaja* commonly figured in ancient and medieval texts, enabling a long history of caste in India. No such analogous figure or term existed in past traditions for the modern category of tribe or aborigine—making it impossible to think of a long history in such cases. The tribe or the adivasi therefore remained a presentist figure in both political and academic discourse, attributed memory but no history.

Indrani Chatterjee's essay in this volume raises this critical point. Chatterjee argues that a deep history of people currently known as tribes and adivasis is indeed possible. But such a history can be written only if we give up the colonial modern categories of tribe and aborigine in the first place. We need approach this history as the history of territory, inhabited by a range of communities engaged in complex interactions, some of whom later get to be isolated and reconstructed as tribes. Chatterjee's essay stages a connected geography, stretched across the eastern Himalayas, involving Tibet, Bhutan, Assam, north Bengal and the region we today call the northeast. The essay elaborates a precolonial form of political arrangement which she calls 'monastic governmentality'—involving teacher–disciple relationships that mediated not only a 'pastoral' government of moral and social conduct amongst different ethnic groups based on the Buddhist principles but also diverse political and economic activities, such as war, farming, herding, 'devoted' service and labour. It is only at the end of the essay, when one reaches colonial times, that we see the so-called tribe surfacing as a category and as an attribute of distinct peoples, through the military and political dismantling of the earlier governmental regime by colonial administration and the erasure of Buddhist and monastic pasts of the region by nationalist history. History of the region was now rewritten in familiar terms of Hindus versus Muslims. The northeast was cut off from this history as the land of tribes, external to the historical nation but attached to it as subordinate, exceptional subjects. In other words, Indrani Chatterjee's essay demonstrates that there is indeed a long history to peoples we now call tribes, but that history is not a history of tribes as such. That history is the history of alternative geographies in which people we now call tribes do centrally figure, not as tribes but as part of a complex political configuration of diverse social and ethnic groups. That we fail to recognise such histories in modern times is because such a history of space neither fits the spatial imperative of nationalisms nor achieves the modern political task of shoring up pure and singular identities, including that of tribes and adivasis.

Chatterjee's essay also raises the question of language with great poignancy. She shows that the functioning of monastic governmentality over a great diversity of ethnic groups inhabiting the eastern Himalayas necessarily produced a polyglot scribal regime and a multilingual population. Even early colonisers could not but note constant activities of translation and interpretation in the area across registers of Sanskrit, Persian, Hindustani, several variants of Tibetan language as well as 'Parbutia, Lepcha, Bhotia, Limboo and the Mech'. This multilingual scene was eventually unraveled, through missionary printing presses and nationalist intellectual labour, into the distinct monolingual spaces of Assam and Bengal. So-called tribal languages were cut off in the process from high literary vernaculars, such as Bengali and Assamese. Needless to say, this had great bearing on the emergence of history as a discipline. We know that modern history came to be based in India on what we now call state archives and state *sahitya parishads*, which were largely monolingual collections of documents and books located in the vernacular regions

eventually to become the linguistic states of the Indian union. So we have Bengali history, Assamese history, Marathi history, Oriya history and so on. In this division of historical specialisations, adivasi language materials do not quite constitute a recognisable archive.

In contrast, dalit history became effective precisely because it raised its head in the domain of operation of the Indian vernaculars. Already, in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, the preliminary category of the non-Brahman was produced through the linguistic claim of autonomy of Tamil against a north Indian, Sanskritic and upper-caste idea of India. Indeed, the notion of the adi- (as in Adi-Dravida, meaning, prior or originary) rested on an imagination of a pre-Sanskritic linguistic and civilisational claim. The separation and consolidation of the dalit as a singular identity, out of the overarching category of the non-Brahmin, was in turn based on the efforts at recouping a popular but literary Tamil from traditions of classical Tamil. It was through this caste-inflected question of language that the very idea of the 'region' emerged in India—region, arguably, which became the fundamental locus of politics in our contemporary. The dalit thus emerged as a regional and regionalised subject, claiming a politico-aesthetic autonomy from the Brahmanical national, based on a well worked out notion of the vernacular. In postcolonial times, this claim to autonomy was further refined through dalit literature and dalit autobiographies, which sought to explode mainstream notions of the aesthetic and raised questions about who was a dalit writer and who a legitimate reader of dalit writing.

The fact that adivasi languages did not historically qualify to the status of the literary vernacular has been a problem for the staging of adivasi subjectivity. As Nishant Choksi's doctoral dissertation argues with great nuance, the politics of adivasi languages has been a politics of script rather than of expression. Amongst the Santals, for instance, the invention of scripts, including Ol Chiki, has been the main agenda of language politics. To think adivasi languages, we therefore need to think of not merely polyglossia but also multi-scriptality.³⁸ What does it mean to have a language with many possible scripts and what politics of subjectivity does that engender? We know that dalit politics have mobilised dalit literature and language in order to critique formal history writing and argue that it is dalit life-writing and fiction that can give a name and an interiority to the dalit self in the way a formal history of dalits as a sociological group cannot. The adivasi mobilisation of the script question, however, has often side stepped the subjectivity question. Language has become, like folklore and songs, yet another aspect of tribal 'culture', to be classified, recorded and protected. But tribal language has not been seen as productive of either a distinct subjectivity or an indisputable locus of a region and regional politics in India.

³⁸ Nishaant Choksi, 'Scripting Autonomy: Script, Code, and Performance among Santali Speakers in Eastern India', unpublished thesis, University of Michigan, 2014.

Speaking of ‘culturisation’ of tribes, it will not be out of place to raise the question of adivasi religions here. As we very well know, the dalit as political subject has had a long history of fashioning what can be called a political theology. Dalit political theology has been worked out both at a historical-textual and a popular-mythic level. Ambedkar formulated his political theology around the issue of world-historical religions—most famously in the form of an encounter between Hinduism and Buddhism. This was a historical and historicist move. At one level, by rendering the dalit as potentially Buddhist, Ambedkar set up an equivalence between dalits/Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims within the religion-based majority/minority framework of representational democracy. At another level, the recovery of an ancient Indian religion of equality and compassion allowed the recasting of the modern dalit subject as an ancient political subject—with its very own autonomous and deep pre-history. Not only in Ambedkarite re-interpretation of Buddhism, such a historical and historicist move can be seen amongst the Ravidasi *chamars* of north India too, who have fashioned themselves as adi-Hindu. In the dalit deployment of the pre-fix adi—adi-Hindu, adi-Dravida, adi-Dharmi and so on—we thus see a claim to temporal and ethical priority which establishes not only the indigeneity of the community but also a self-conscious tradition of political theology. The question of religiosity and ethics also helps highlight the ~~the~~ question of self-cultivation, preventing an easy reduction of the dalit into a faceless constituency or an anonymous mass, defined only in terms the negative parameters of its subalternity.

For the adivasis, however, the prefix adi- has worked out quite differently. No doubt, decades of political mobilisation around the adivasi identity has successfully established their prior claim to land and territory in some parts of India and given them separate states and hill-councils. But unlike in the case of either the dalit or the Australian aboriginal, who, on her part, has produced very interesting forms of ‘aboriginal history’,³⁹ this has not been translated fully into a national claim of temporal and ethical priority. Such a claim could have reframed the tribal question in India as a question of ‘historical justice’ in the manner of dalits and Australian aborigines. After all, adivasi right to land is still confined by law to specific pockets of the country and still subject to historical/documentary proof and evidence.⁴⁰

Additionally, adivasi practices of worship and narrative forms have not quite come together as either a political theology, as in the case of the dalit, or a deep poetic-mythic tradition, as in the case of the Australian aboriginal—which could be politically deployed as the radical other of world-historical religions such as Hinduism or Christianity. The result is that adivasis themselves have become the site of contests between Hinduism and Christianity—despite their claims of

³⁹ Byrne, ‘Deep Nation’; Peters-Little et al., eds, *Passionate Histories*; Weir, ed., *Country, Native Title and Ecology*.

⁴⁰ Sarma, ‘An Assessment of the Indian Forests Rights Act 2006 in Assam’.

priority and antiquity in relation to both. In the century and half long history of conversion and conflict between Christianity and Hinduism over the mind and body of the adivasi, the adivasi thus is rendered seemingly passive, as if she/he has no voice in matters of faith because she/he has no theological religion, only discrete worship and festive practices. Hindutva forces who seek to reconvert adivasis to Hinduism also seek to rename them vanavasi—forest-dwellers—thus wishing away the priority claims that the prefix adi- denoted. By the same virtue, the adivasi is also seen as without any historically grounded practice of ethical selfhood and self-fashioning. The adivasi is then routinely rendered into a culture rather than a subject—in an infinite reproduction of the old anthropological mechanism of culturising the non-modern and the foreign. In other words, the adivasi appears as always already a collective figure, as if the adivasi in principle cannot be individuated and the question of subjectivation cannot be raised with regard to them, even though as an object of conversion and reversion it is the adivasi as individual who is more often than not the locus of experience. The contrast of adivasi history with dalit history, in this matter of selfhood, subjectivity and ethico-political practice, is indeed therefore stark.

Let me conclude here with a provocation. I have argued in this essay that it is not enough to conceive of adivasi studies as simply being about the adivasi or the tribe. This might appear to be a highly objectionable proposition, rendering the adivasi herself incidental to an intellectual field named after her. But my point is entirely different. I have argued that while we must work with the categories of tribe and adivasi, because they are categories owned up by groups of people today, simply staying with these categories can be restrictive, at least in three ways. First, it disables us from raising questions of land, ecology, territory, sovereignty, representation and language as issues of general import. Formulating these questions as singularly tribal or adivasi issues unnecessarily causes them to be localised. Second, it disables us from recovering the deep historicity of peoples now called tribes but who did not pre-exist modernity as tribes. If we seek to recover histories of these diverse peoples, we may need to write histories not of so-called tribes but of languages and geographies and in some cases, proper names—such as Bhil or Gond or Naga. And third, merely staying with the categories of tribe and adivasi might confine us indefinitely to the identity question and disable a recovery of the subjectivity and interiority of those we seek to study. In these many senses, our imagined domain of adivasi studies moves beyond the adivasi herself!

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