

# Featuring Adivasi/Indigenous Studies

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The possibilities and impossibilities of carving out a separate Adivasi/indigenous studies field within Indian academia are foregrounded. Counterposing the existing modernist and integrationist studies which endeavoured to weave the multiple histories into one singular Adivasi subjectivity to provide an ontological and epistemological understanding of Adivasi society, it proposes an alternative approach to read and analyse Adivasi society on the foundation of indigeneity, which makes a case for the federation of Adivasi/indigenous studies from a politico-epistemological perspective, as the Adivasi question is mainly both political and epistemological.

In 2016, the *Indian Economic and Social History Review (IESHR)* brought out a special issue on Adivasi or indigenous people problematising the possibilities of developing a separate field of Adivasi studies. Although the issue failed to accommodate a single Adivasi contributor, the effort is noteworthy in the making of Adivasi studies.<sup>1</sup> In this issue, Prathama Banerjee (2016: 131) asks an interesting question: “Can Adivasi studies become a separate disciplinary field in the way of gender studies and Dalit studies?” The trouble is, unlike the Dalits and women, Adivasis are heterogeneous communities. Existing studies have endeavoured to weave multiple histories into one singular Adivasi subjectivity to provide an ontological and epistemological understanding of Adivasi society. In her afterword to the *IESHR* volume, Tanika Sarkar (2016: 155) indeed questions the inadequacy of this approach, which combines multiple histories in one singular history to make a case for Adivasi studies.

When we propose a separate field of study, we should ask specific questions such as: What should be the philosophical and epistemological foundation of the study? Which methodological tools are better suited to read and analyse texts? What should be the location of the author? Before we take up these questions, we shall first examine the historiography of Adivasi studies, not necessarily to find flaws in it but to delineate the trajectories of production of knowledge about the Adivasi society. This would help us propose an alternative approach or departure point to study and interpret Adivasi society.

## What Went Wrong

Mapping diverse forest and hill groups into one singular community called the “tribe,” Scheduled Tribe and Adivasi

began during the British colonial rule in India. As a part of the colonial project of knowledge creation of the colony, the colonial rulers documented the history of Indian communities. The forest and hill groups occupied a lion’s share in this project, as they responded more violently to the expansion of the colonial state in India than the caste-Hindu society. This led the colonial state to treat these groups as a separate entity from the caste-Hindus from the early 19th century. Administrative and governance concerns were central to the production of knowledge about the Adivasi communities.

The inauguration of racial theory and classification of races in Europe in the 19th century made the colonial project of knowledge creation more vigorous in the colony. There were serious debates between colonial administrators and ethnographers on who the “tribes” were and their relation to the caste-Hindu society. The tribes’ mythological origin narratives, clan systems, social practices, belief system and languages were the main points of discussion. These debates resulted in a series of ethnographic volumes on the Adivasi communities, besides the colonial census and gazetteers, that homogenised forest and hill communities as tribes and later as “Scheduled Tribes.” These studies depicted the Adivasis as primitive tribes or barbarians, who were violent, uncivilised, honest and childlike (Bhukya 2008: 103–9). These notions of the “tribe” as “primitive” have been strongly critiqued by progressive scholars of the postcolonial period.<sup>2</sup>

However, one must understand how their constructions denied not only history but also self-rule to the Adivasis. We are made to believe that Adivasi history began only with the advent of colonial rule in India. This approach blurred the long history of state-evading politics of the Adivasis, and thereby their tradition of self-rule and self-determination. Indeed, the stigmatisation of Adivasis as innocent was a colonial design to deny self-rule to the Adivasis. Ironically, the colonial construction of Adivasis continues

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in the postcolonial Indian academia for different reasons.

### Evolutionist and Integrationist Approach

The last decade of colonial rule created immense anxiety of national integration. This anxiety dominated Adivasi studies for the first two decades of postcolonial India, especially given the rise of secessionist movements by forest and hill groups in North East India. The focus had shifted to exhibit a shared cultural and political history of Adivasi and indigenous people with that of the caste-Hindus. First generation Indian sociologists, such as G S Ghurye and M N Srinivas, had taken up the responsibility to make a bridge between the Adivasis and the caste-Hindus. Ghurye (1959: 7) held that every inhabitant of the Indian subcontinent was Hindu by birth. Further, he argued that the Adivasis of India were Hindus for the simple reason that they were born on Indian soil, worshipped Hindu gods, and spoke the same regional languages as caste-Hindus. He also strongly opposed the enumeration of tribals in the census under the separate category of “animists.”

On the other hand, Srinivas's (1966: 6) theory of Sanskritisation, which drew from his observation of the Brahminisation of the Coorgs in South India, argued that “Sanskritisation is the process by which a ‘low’ Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, ritual ideology and way of life in the direction of a high, and frequently, ‘twice-born caste.’” The symbolic claims of Adivasis to Kshatriya status were thus portrayed to assimilate Adivasis into the caste-Hindu society. The phenomenon can, however, be understood differently. As Hardiman (1987: 160) has argued, “it is a historical and dialectical process that is a synthesis arising out of pre-existing social systems in any given society.”

Following an evolutionist paradigm, which believes in a teleology of progress from tribe to caste, and from caste to class, the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies (IIAS) has been tirelessly working with an agenda of national integration. The institution has brought out three volumes: *The Tribal Situation in India*

(Singh 1969), *Continuity and Change in Tribal Society* (Miri 1993), and *From Tribe to Caste* (Nathan 1997), which focus on the supposed fusion of tribes into castes. This approach also resonates with the writings of the so-called progressive Indian scholars. Andre Béteille, one of the most prominent sociologists in India, produced influential studies problematising the formation of class, caste and “tribe” in India and investigating their relations from a modernist perspective (Béteille 1971). In one important study, he endeavoured to show that there is no difference between tribe and caste peasantry in India (Béteille 1974: 60). Subsequently, in a bid to liberate Indian sociological studies from the metanarrative of evolutionism, Béteille preached the concept of coexistence to study the relation between caste-Hindu society and Adivasi society (Béteille 1980, 1986, 2008). His concept of coexistence indeed comes from D D Kosambi's study of early India which argues the existence of Adivasis and caste-Hindus side by side. Béteille suggests that the category of tribe is a historical necessity, and it grew in the lap of civilisation—in other words, in caste-Hindu society or statist society. By invoking the concept of “coexistence,” he romanticises the relationship between Adivasis and non-Adivasis.

Nandini Sundar has also propounded a similar argument. For Sundar (1997: 4–6), British colonialism was a significant

watershed in the history of Adivasis, which produced state effects in the hills and forests of India. She argues that the frontier areas were not isolated from the rest of the larger economy in precolonial India. On the contrary, they were crucial in shaping regional economies. Colonial intervention destroyed these local economies and constructed the Adivasi areas as isolated regions. She critiques colonialism for creating a divide between tribe and caste. Also, she worries that the Adivasi areas have not yet been fully absorbed into the capitalist economy. In a similar vein, challenging the general assumption that the Adivasi people always lived in forests and practised shifting cultivation from time immemorial. Archana Prasad argues that the Adivasis of Central India practised settled agriculture till the advent of the Marathas. It was the subsequent marginalisation of Adivasis by caste-Hindu immigrants that forced them to adopt shifting cultivation. On these grounds, she questions the theory of the original inhabitant and dismisses Adivasis as swadeshis or aboriginals. This position is very close to Ghurye's argument. She also observes that such theories arrest the Adivasis from transforming into a labouring class and block their region from being integrated into a capitalist economy (Prasad 2003: 7).

Although both Sundar and Prasad have significantly contributed to our knowledge of Adivasi society, their studies have

## EPWRF India Time Series Expansion of Banking Statistics Module (State-wise Data)

The Economic and Political Weekly Research Foundation (EPWRF) has added state-wise data to the existing Banking Statistics module of its online India Time Series (ITS) database.

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Data on bank credit are given for a wide range of sectors and sub-sectors (occupation) such as agriculture, industry, transport operators, professional services, personal loans (housing, vehicle, education, etc), trade and finance. These state-wise data are also presented by bank group and by population group (rural, semi-urban, urban and metropolitan).

The data series are available from December 1972; half-yearly basis till June 1989 and annual basis thereafter. These data have been sourced from the Reserve Bank of India's publication, *Basic Statistical Returns of Scheduled Commercial Banks in India*.

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limitations when they romanticise the coexistence of Adivasis and caste-Hindus in precolonial India. They read colonial rule in opposition to precolonial formations. This approach does not allow them to explore the contentious relations between caste-Hindus and Adivasis in precolonial India, which evolved historically. Essentially, they looked at the Adivasi question from a modernist perspective that strongly believed in a universal class society. Their advocacy of the integration of the Adivasi economy in the regional economy of precolonial India obscures and indeed expunges the divide and dichotomy between castes and Adivasis. The main danger with their anachronistic argument is that it posits a singular peasant or labouring class, thereby eliding the dichotomy between mainland India and its periphery (Ratnagar 2010: 2). Taking their overall argument forward from this standpoint, Sundar and Prasad also seem to share the integrationist or assimilationist positions of those who advocate the complete absorption of Adivasis into caste-Hindu society and their integration in a capitalist economy in independent India.

### Tribe–Caste Dichotomy

The 1980's global indigenous peoples' movement intensified the debate on the tribe–caste dichotomy. In response to the global movement, Indian Adivasi activists in 1987 formed a forum called the Indian Council of Indigenous and Tribal People to advocate India's case in the United Nations (UN). Although India was a party to the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in September 2007, it did not recognise the existence of indigenous people in India (Xaxa 2016: 151). Indian sociologists have been arguing the same from the beginning. Responding to the debate on indigenous people, Bêteille (1988: 187) argued that it is difficult to apply the concept of indigeneity in South Asia as castes and tribes have fused so intimately, and no population can be described as settlers. What is missing in Bêteille's argument is the historically developed tensions between India's "mainland" plains and the forests and hills. Reacting to Bêteille, Xaxa (2008: 39) argued that the Adivasi demand for

indigenous people status need not be taken as a claim for the original inhabitants of India but as prior inhabitants of India in relation to other groups. It may be argued that Xaxa adopts such a position because, unlike in the United States, Canada and Australia, the conquest of the indigenous peoples in India occurred in the distant past. Xaxa uses the terms indigenous and Adivasi synonymously. The term Adivasi is a combination of *adi* (earliest) and *vasi* (resident), meaning original inhabitants. The term may have originated in Chotanagpur of Bihar in the 1930s, and it was widely popularised by a social worker A V Thakkar in the 1940s. David Hardiman first used the term Adivasi extensively in his book *The Coming of the Devi: Adivasi Assertion in Western India*, after which it got wider currency in the academic world (Hardiman 1987: 13).

Xaxa's assertion of indigeneity is a politico-epistemological position. Reading and interpreting the forest and hill communities from a politico-epistemological approach puts them in an advantageous position. Indeed, such a position helps the indigenous to retrieve their distant past, thereby providing a potential ground to claim their lost land and political rights. In contrast, the integrationist and modernist approach expunges the history of wars, struggles, resistances, contestations, and insurgencies by the Adivasis against India's mainland plains, leading to the marginalisation of the Adivasis in histories written from the perspective of the plains. In other words, this approach ignores the contested history of Adivasis, and the history of self-rule and self-determination (Bhukya 2017: 5).

The integrationist and modernist approach also failed to give an ideological integration to Adivasi resistance in history. Adivasi communities were engaged in more resistance and insurgencies against the empire or state in India. They were the first to resist the British colonial state. However, their resistances have been criminalised by the regime (Skaria 1999: viii–ix). After decolonisation, there have been attempts by nationalist and Marxist scholars to reconstruct the colonial version of Indian history, using the integrationist and modernist approach. Although these studies are utterly silent

on the precolonial history of the Adivasis, they focused excessively on Adivasi anti-colonial resistance (Singh 1982, 1983). The orthodox Marxist scholars celebrate anti-colonial Adivasi resistances as a stage towards the creation of a new class consciousness. Though they designate such mobilisations as sporadic, spontaneous, unorganised and pre-political, they welcome these mobilisations as providing an opening for the education of the Adivasis in class consciousness by communist party workers, thereby allowing the Adivasi areas to become bases for radical politics and movements (Dhanagare 1988: 18). For these scholars, anything that happened outside the nationalist and class frame is apolitical. Particularly, Adivasi intellectual history, which is the source of insurgent consciousness, has not been seen as resistance and contestation of power.

### Seeding Hope

This approach has been heavily critiqued by Ranajit Guha inside and outside the subaltern studies project. However, Guha fails to see the Adivasis as a separate entity from the peasantry of the plains (Guha 1983: 1–17). The inauguration of subaltern studies in the 1980s, indeed, marked an epoch in the study of Adivasi societies with its sharp departure from facile Marxist historiography. The project was philosophically based on the cultural and sociological theories of Antonio Gramsci, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. The scholars involved in the initial volumes of the project fostered a distinctive methodology and approach in the construction of Adivasi history by distinguishing the autonomy of Adivasi insurgences from a monolithic and hegemonic nationalist movement, by separating "community" from overarching class theory, by portraying Adivasi intellectual history as a form of resistance and contestation of power, and by restoring the dignity of Adivasis. Importantly, it demystified the sacredness of archival sources and brought respect to orality in writing histories of subaltern communities. However, the project remained confined to studying the colonial period. More importantly, after the fourth volume, it took a postcolonial position that primarily

engaged in critiquing colonial modernity (Ludden 2002: 1–28).

### Where to Begin

As has been delineated in this article, considerable literature has been produced on Adivasi society. However, it failed to forge a separate field of Adivasi studies. This is because the literature is not Adivasi-centric. Adivasis are just the object of studies, not its subjects. This ought to be the central issue in Adivasi studies. In such studies, the issue of national integration, social change, modernity, class struggle, land, environment, wildlife conservation, poverty and development are the main concerns, while Adivasis are read against those concerns. It ought to be the other way round, such that those concerns are read against Adivasis. To put it in other words, the issue should be what is modernity to Adivasis, and not how modernity impacted Adivasis. This approach allows us to study counter-modernities or multiple modernities, in

which Adivasis occupy centre stage. The object of Adivasi studies then should be: How can we bring Adivasis to the centre stage of our study?

On these lines, there are a few pioneering historical studies on Adivasis, namely studies by Hardiman, Skaria and Bhukya. In his book *The Coming of the Devi*, Hardiman (1987: 1–9) argues that popular culture was instrumental to the articulation of the Adivasi community of western India in both forging Adivasi modernity and countering and combating the burden of colonial modernity. Skaria (1999) in his *Hybrid Histories* examines how the Dangis of western India imagined historical periodisation as “Moglai” (pre-British) and “Mandini” (British) periods, based on *gots*, or oral narratives. The former symbolises the time of freedom, whereas the latter the loss of their power to the British. He shows how these categorisations do not tally with periodisations applied by historians as both periods

constitute a history of modernity. He says that notions of the *jangal* (forest) and *jangli* (“wild” people) were taken to be the antithesis of civilisation by the colonial as well as postcolonial rulers. In the Dangis’ *gots*, the *jangal* and *jangli* became a counter-aesthetic of modernity and very much a part of their civilisation. This politics also profoundly influenced the society of the surrounding plains, and therefore, the hegemonic discourse of wildness (Skaria 1999). Bhukya’s *Subjugated Nomads: The Lambadas under the Rule of the Nizams* (2010) and *The Roots of the Periphery: A History of the Gonds of Deccan India* (2017), unlike studies by Hardiman and Skaria, delineate histories of a singular community. The former explores the history of a pastoral community called the Lambadas, whereas the latter is a history of the Gonds of Deccan. Both studies examine governmentalisation and state making in India and how these communities responded to such a process.



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Both studies interrogate Indian history from the perspective of the Lambadas and the Gonds. This approach helps us study community histories beyond the integrationist and isolationist approach (Bhukya 2010, 2017).

### The Way Forward

Another critical question is, what can be the common thread that brings multiple Adivasi histories into one field of study? Can we think of something like untouchability and patriarchy, which binds Dalit studies and gender studies, respectively? For Dalit studies, anti-Brahminism and non-Aryan philosophy provided the foundation. It is possible that indigeneity would provide a potential philosophical foundation for Adivasi studies. With indigeneity as their philosophy, the indigenous people of Latin America and North America have developed an independent indigenous studies. These studies are based on the theoretical approach of decoloniality, which questions the universality of European knowledge and superiority of Western culture (Mendoza 2020: 47). This approach has much potential for the study of indigenous people in India. However, the case of the indigenous people of India is also slightly different. American colonialism began only in 1492 AD, whereas in India, it began with the advent of the Aryans. We need to Indianise the decoloniality theory so as to suit the Indian case. Also, applying the decoloniality approach should not lead us to homogenise diverse Adivasi communities or groups, thereby diluting the Adivasi studies project.

Maintaining multiple histories is the strength of Adivasi studies. It is to say that Adivasis or indigenous people cannot be a singular analytical category, as is done in most existing studies. We argue for a federation of Adivasi studies in which Gond studies, Khasi studies, Lambada studies, Munda studies, etc, stand independently. Adivasi communities are neither homogeneous nor isolated but are a federation of communities. The same philosophy should foreground Adivasi studies. From this standpoint, an Adivasi studies initiative was inaugurated in 2015 by the Tribal Intellectual Collective of India. The collective is constituted of

young indigenous scholars and academicians from across India and the globe. It strongly believes that the location of the author is important in indigenous studies. It has been engaged in organising conferences and publishing journals and books on various aspects of Adivasis or indigenous people from an indigenous epistemological perspective. In one sense, the collective is the torchbearer of indigenous studies in India.<sup>3</sup>

To sum it up, a considerable amount of literature has been produced on Adivasi history and society. However, this literature failed to forge Adivasi studies as a separate field of studies, owing to a lack of theoretical and methodological clarity. Importantly, Adivasis are studied as part of dominant narratives, which homogenised more than 700 diverse communities into one category of the tribe or the Scheduled Tribe or Adivasis. Such an approach impedes the development of Adivasi studies. Adivasi studies can be developed as a separate field of study in our academics only as a federation of studies based on the philosophical foundation of indigeneity, which allows us to look at indigenous studies from the politico-epistemological approach. The issue of indigenous people is not only epistemological but also political.

### NOTES

- 1 Sangeeta Dasgupta acted as guest editor of the special issue of the *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol 53, No 1, 2016. The contributors include Indrani Chatterjee, Bodhisattva Kar, Uday Chandra, Sangeeta Dasgupta, Prathama Banerjee, while Tanika Sarkar wrote the afterword.
- 2 For instance, David Hardiman, Ajay Skaria, Virginius Xaxa, Bhangya Bhukya, and Biswamoy Pati have strongly critiqued colonial construction of Adivasis.
- 3 I am personally involved with the collective. I observed a considerable number of indigenous scholars from different part of the country have entered the Indian universities from the early 2000s and deeply engaged in active research on indigenous communities. Let us hope the collective gives a shape to indigenous studies in India.

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