



REVIEW ARTICLE

## Special issue: Multiple worlds of the Adivasi. An introduction

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On 6 December 1959, the image of Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru inaugurating the Damodar Valley Corporation dam project in Bihar with a 15-year-old Adivasi girl called Budhini Manjhiyan was flashed across the national newspapers. This was an iconic moment in the national debate around development and change which was to dominate modern India on whether lands, predominately rural and tribal, were to be flooded to benefit the nation.<sup>1</sup> Years later, in 2016, when the newspapers caught up with Budhini, she had returned to Jharkhand and was struggling to make ends meet for herself and her children. Her story resonates with the ways in which, in recent times, Adivasis are becoming increasingly visible as subjects in debates around indigeneity, identity, conversion, development, and climate change. The post-colonial Indian state and its allies, with a developmentalist agenda uppermost in their minds, have made loss of land, displacement, migration, and forced resettlement a part of Adivasi experiences. Forces of globalization, often in tandem with the policies of the Indian state, are engulfing marginal spaces. The increasingly powerful majoritarian narrative of the state subsumes alternate voices with easy nonchalance. The foregrounding of planetary narratives on the fate of humanity in the era of the Anthropocene erases the importance of particular locales and specific communities that could offer an alternative to declensionist narratives. But amid this marginalization, there also lies a story of the assertion

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<sup>1</sup> Amita Baviskar, *In the Belly of the River: Tribal Conflicts over Development in the Narmada Valley*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1995, and Robert A. Anderson and Walter Huber, *The Hour of the Fox: Tropical Forests, the World Bank, and Indigenous People in Central India*, University of Washington Press, Washington, 1988.

of Adivasi agency. Voices of Adivasis—although multiple and fractured—can be heard as they assert their identity, express their politics, and creatively negotiate with the state and its institutions. Scattered across India in geographically differentiated terrains, pursuing different occupations, and speaking different languages, the experiences of Adivasis are varied, as they inhabit many worlds. Their stories point to the multiplicity of cultures and myriad ways of thinking that must be accommodated within the ambit of the nation, and yet offer the possibilities of different ways of living and being on this earth.

As Adivasis become visible in stories of marginalization, resilience, and assertion, the field of ‘Adivasi Studies’, centred on the subject of the Adivasi, becomes increasingly relevant. This special issue reflects our collective endeavour to etch out the contours of the newly emerging field. Unlike Dalit Studies, Adivasi Studies still has some way to go in asserting its turf and establishing itself as a legitimate field of enquiry into the history, ecology, and politics of communities and their complicated relationship to modernity. Woven around the Adivasi, several monographs and essays in edited volumes have been published in the last decade-and-a-half,<sup>2</sup> along with journals like *Adivasi*, a journal of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Research and Training Institute, Bhubaneswar, and the *Journal of Adivasi and Indigenous Studies*. More specifically, there have been recent articulations of Adivasi

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<sup>2</sup> Some of the monographs and collections of essays that have been published exclusively on Adivasis in the last decade-and-a-half are as follows: Prathama Banerjee, *Politics of Time: Primitives and History-Writing in a Colonial Society*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2006; Ganesh N. Devy, *A Nomad Calling Thief: Reflections on Adivasi Silence*, Orient Longman, New Delhi, 2006; Shereen Ratnagar, *Being Tribal*, Primus Books, Delhi, 2010; Alpa Shah, *In the Shadows of the State: Indigenous Politics, Environmentalism, and Insurgency in Jharkhand, India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2010; Bhangya Bhukya, *Subjugated Nomads: The Lambadas under the Rule of the Nizam, Hyderabad*, Orient BlackSwan, New Delhi, 2010; Daniel J. Rycroft and Sangeeta Dasgupta (eds), *The Politics of Belonging in India: Becoming Adivasi*, Routledge, London and New York, 2011; Biswamoy Pati (ed.), *Adivasis in Colonial India: Survival, Resistance and Negotiation*, Orient BlackSwan, New Delhi, 2011; Sanjukta Das Gupta, *Adivasis and the Raj: Socio-economic Transition of the Hos, 1820–1932*, Orient BlackSwan, New Delhi, 2011; Sanjukta Das Gupta and Raj Sekhar Basu (eds), *Narratives from the Margins: Aspects of Adivasi History in India*, Primus Books, New Delhi, 2012; Crispin Bates and Alpa Shah (eds), *Savage Attack: Tribal Insurgency in India*, Social Science Press, New Delhi, 2014; Marine Carrin, Pralay Kanungo and Gerard Toffin (eds), *The Politics of Ethnicity in India, Nepal and China*, Primus Books, New Delhi, 2014; Megan Moodie, *We are Adivasis: Aspirations in an Indian Scheduled Tribe*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2015; Sangeeta Dasgupta (Guest Editor), ‘Reading the archive, reframing Adivasi histories’, Special issue, *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 53, no. 1, January–March 2016, pp. 1–157; Meena Radhakrishna (ed.), *First Citizens: Studies on Adivasis, Tribals, and Indigenous Peoples in India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2016; Asoka Kumar Sen, *Indigeneity, Landscape and History: Adivasi Self-fashioning in India*, Routledge, New Delhi, 2017; Bhangya Bhukya, *The Roots of the Periphery: A History of the Gonds of Deccan India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2017; Alf Gunvald Nilsen, *Adivasis and the State: Subalternity and Citizenship in India’s Bhil Heartland*, Cambridge University Press, New Delhi, 2019; Sangeeta Dasgupta, *Reordering Adivasi Worlds: Representation, Resistance, Memory*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2021; and Alice Tilche, *Adivasi Art and Activism*, University of Washington Press, Seattle, 2022.

Studies as a distinct field of enquiry.<sup>3</sup> Today, as the field expands, courses on Adivasis and ideas of indigeneity are being taught in departments of history and at research centres in universities that study ‘minorities’ and ideas of discrimination and exclusion.<sup>4</sup> In what ways, then, is this collection of articles different and, we hope, significant?<sup>5</sup> To initiate an engaged and critical discussion around the subject of the Adivasi, and to delineate the possible contours of the field, it is important to decolonize Adivasi Studies and to bring together academics and activists. Academics engaging in Adivasi Studies must engage with Adivasi voices and Adivasi experiences, with contemporary articulations of Adivasi identity, all of which assume particular importance in the context of the displacement of communities rooted on land and the destruction of ecosystems. We hope that this volume goes some way towards that goal.

### Decolonizing Adivasi Studies

How do we make sense of the complexity of Adivasi histories and their engagement with modernity? As historians who have engaged with activists, we have brought in the much-needed perspective of environmental history, ethnohistory, and activism to this volume. It has allowed us to detail the history of the communities, many of them self-identifying as Adivasi, in terms of their narratives of history and resistance (see the articles by Ruby Hembrom and Gladson Dungdung et al. in this volume). Adivasi experiences are varied: scattered across India in geographically differentiated terrains, pursuing different

<sup>3</sup> Daniel J. Rycroft and Sangeeta Dasgupta, while emphasizing that the political, cultural, and intellectual terrains of Adivasi subjectivity are continually in flux, seek to conceptually define the field of Adivasi Studies (see Daniel J. Rycroft and Sangeeta Dasgupta, ‘Indigenous pasts and the politics of belonging’, in Rycroft and Dasgupta (eds), *The Politics of Belonging in India*, pp. 1–13). Prathama Banerjee analyses the advantages of carving out a semi-autonomous domain of enquiry in the name of the Adivasi and explores whether the field of Adivasi Studies should be seen 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 and concerns, such as land, forest, myth, and language (see Prathama Banerjee, ‘Writing the Adivasi: some historiographical notes’, *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 53, no. 1, January–March 2016, pp. 131–153). Sangeeta Dasgupta discusses some of the imperatives that make revisiting the field of Adivasi Studies compelling and sets out the markers of the field of Adivasi Studies from a historian’s perspective (see Sangeeta Dasgupta, ‘Adivasi Studies: from a historian’s perspective’, *History Compass*, 16, no. 10, 2018, pp. 1–11; (<https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12486>). Bhangya Bhukya suggests that Adivasi Studies should be understood as a federation of studies (Gond Studies, Khasi Studies, Lambada Studies, Munda Studies, etc.) based on the philosophical foundation of indigeneity, advocating that the location of authors is important in indigenous studies. From this standpoint, he refers to the Adivasi Studies initiative, launched in 2015 by the Tribal Intellectual Collective of India and constituted by young indigenous scholars and academicians from across India and the globe (see Bhangya Bhukya, ‘Featuring Adivasi/Indigenous Studies’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 56, no. 25, June 19, 2021, p. 17).

<sup>4</sup> Such courses are taught, for example, at the Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, and at the Centre for Study of Social Exclusion and Inclusive Policy, Pondicherry University.

<sup>5</sup> The contributors to this collection participated in the panels centred on Adivasis that were organized at European Conference on South Asian Studies (ECSAS) conferences held in Zurich (2014), Warsaw (2016), and Paris (2018).

occupations, and speaking different languages, they inhabit multiple worlds. Therefore, it is critical, we argue, to include Adivasis' own perceptions of the self and the many meanings that they attach to the attributed unity of 'Adivasiness'. It is important to note here that much of the research on the Adivasi in the colonial and the post-colonial period has been dominated by non-Adivasi scholars. This is not a problem in itself. The problem occurs when the research is less about listening and more about an extractive methodology that is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism, a powerful remembered history.<sup>6</sup> In the context of eastern India, the late activist and poet Abhay Xaxa wrote poignantly about the post-colonial project of both the state and elite researchers in a similar fashion.<sup>7</sup>

How do we get away from an extractive model of understanding Adivasi worlds? The Adivasi writer Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar has challenged the stereotyping of Adivasis and the search for an authentic, homogeneous community in his book of short stories, *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*, which came in for some controversy for its portrayal of a Santal woman migrant.<sup>8</sup> These narratives herald a new beginning for Adivasi Studies foregrounding Adivasi voices and signal a much deeper engagement with locality, place, and culture. Anthropologists have long been reflecting on their discipline by decentring the lone fieldworker model and allowing for the inclusion of field research methods such as reflexivity and positionality, and the intermingling of ethnography and memoir. However, as one anthropologist puts it, egocentrism is one of the pitfalls to avoid in exercising reflexivity.<sup>9</sup> For Adivasi Studies, reflexivity is often an empty promise.

There is no denying that there have been powerful evocations of Adivasi narratives in recent times by non-Adivasi writers and activists. These include the activist writings of the late Mahasweta Devi and Father Stan Lourduwamy who worked among the tribals of central India for over three decades and questioned the non-implementation of the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution, which stipulates the setting up of a Tribes Advisory Council, composed of members solely from the Adivasi community, for their protection and well-being.<sup>10</sup> In the journal *Bortika*, Mahasweta Devi

<sup>6</sup> As Linda Tuhiwai Smith notes: 'From the vantage point of the colonized... the term "research" is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism. The word itself, "research", is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary. When mentioned in many indigenous contexts, it stirs up silence, it conjures up bad memories, it raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful. It is so powerful that indigenous people even write poetry about research.' Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Zed Books and University of Otago Press, London, 1999.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.sabrangindia.in/article/i-refuse-i-reject-and-i-resist-poem-abhay-xaxa>, [accessed 11 July 2022].

<sup>8</sup> Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, *The Adivasi Will Not Dance: Stories*, Speaking Tiger, New Delhi, 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Jennifer Robertson, 'Reflexivity redux: a pithy polemic on "positionality"', *Anthropological Quarterly*, 75, no. 4, 2002, pp. 785–792.

<sup>10</sup> Mahasweta Devi, *Aranyer Adhikar* (Rights over the Forest), first published in 1977. See also the powerful advocacy writings of the Jesuit priest Mathew Areeparampil, *Struggle for Swaraj*, Tribal Research and Training Centre, West Singhbhum, 2002. Stan Lourduwamy's tragic death in custody while awaiting trial recently reminds one of the extra-judicial killings of environmental defenders

provided space for small peasants, agricultural labourers, tribals, and workers in factories to write about their problems for the first time.<sup>11</sup> In the 1982 issue of *Bortika* relating to the Lodha-Kherias, the story of Chuni Kotal was published. She was later to commit suicide when she became a butt of ridicule while doing her MA at Vidyasagar University.<sup>12</sup> Mahasweta Devi's detailing of the exploitative working conditions of the lives of tribal women working in the brick kilns, including rape and molestation, based on a survey of a number of brick kilns in the state, was carefully documented in a special issue of *Bortika*.<sup>13</sup> In the context of Operation Green Hunt,<sup>14</sup> there has also been a genre of literature produced not just by those within academia, but by activists, journalists, and other members of civil society who wrote largely investigative, often evocative, accounts of their experiences in the 'Red Corridor', jolting many from the middle class out of their complacency. While such writings focused on the Maoists, these stories brought to the fore narratives about vulnerable Adivasi communities, residing in the deep forests of Bastar, caught in the conflict between the state and the rebel guerrillas, awaiting displacement and destruction because others coveted the mineral-rich lands on which they lived.<sup>15</sup>

Notwithstanding these powerful advocates in an institutional setting, non-Adivasi researchers have continued to dominate the field of Adivasi Studies because the 'mechanisms and practices that regulate the points and

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and human rights activists more globally: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/mar/02/more-human-rights-defenders-murdered-2021-environmental-indigenous-rights-activists>, [accessed 11 July 2022].

<sup>11</sup> Mahasweta Devi, *Dust on the Road. The Activist Writings of Mahasweta Devi*, Seagull Books, Calcutta, 1997.

<sup>12</sup> Chuni Kotal wrote her own life story of passing her Higher Secondary examinations against all odds, her work for her MA in anthropology at Vidyasagar University, and her job as hostel superintendent at the 'Rani Shiromoni SC and ST Girls' Hostel' in Medinipur.

<sup>13</sup> Mahasweta Devi's narrative is a far cry from Alpa Shah's interpretation of brick kilns providing the opportunity for amorous relationships for tribal women. See Shah, *In the Shadows of the State*, where she outlines a different tribal engagement with modernity.

<sup>14</sup> 'Operation Green Hunt', which began in 2009, was the name given to an 'all-out offensive' by the Government of India's paramilitary forces, along with state forces, which took place along the borders of Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, Bihar, West Bengal, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, and Maharashtra, against the Naxalites or those who belonged to the Communist Party of India (Maoist). While the Government of India does not use the term 'Operation Green Hunt' to describe its anti-Naxalite offensive, this term was coined by the media who described these anti-Naxalite operations.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Satnam, *Jangalnama: Travels in a Maoist Guerilla Zone*, (trans) Vishav Bharti, Penguin Books, New Delhi, 2010; Arundhati. Roy, *Walking with the Comrades: Adventures in the Underground Forests*, Penguin Random House India, New Delhi, 2016; Subharanshu Choudhary, *Let's Call Him Vasu: With the Maoists in Chhattisgarh*, Penguin Books, New Delhi, 2012; and Gautam Navlakha, *Days and Nights in the Heartland of Rebellion*, Penguin Books, New Delhi, 2012. In this context, see also Nandini Sundar, *The Burning Forest. India's War in Bastar*, Juggernaut, New Delhi, 2016, and Alpa Shah, *Nightmarch: Among India's Revolutionary Guerillas*, Hurst, London, 2018.

modes of entry, the nature and extent of participation<sup>16</sup> favour them, while Adivasi researchers are less accommodated. Han has noted that ‘the canonisation of theory serves to help anthropology stagnate in its whiteness, especially through citation politics, by connecting neoliberalism and the perpetuation of coloniality in the discipline’.<sup>17</sup> One could make the same case for Adivasi Studies. Furthermore, in line with Han’s argument, taking ethics more seriously may be a way to resist the production and reproduction of non-Adivasi academic privilege in Adivasi Studies and create a more diverse, inclusive, and equitable academy. This will involve telling a range of stories ‘from diverse perspectives and creating an epistemically open environment for marginalized people’<sup>18</sup> which all of our contributors to this volume have chosen to do.

Recent published work by Adivasi scholars, activists, and writers is testimony to these emerging spaces in academia, and include Gladson Dungdung’s powerful writings (see the article by Gladson Dungdung et al. in this volume) and, more recently, the works of Jiten Yumnam.<sup>19</sup> As Ganesh Devy notes:

It is only during the last twenty years that various tribal voices and works have started making their presence felt. Thus, Kochereti from Kerala and Alma Kabutri from the North surprised readers at almost the same time as L. Khiangte’s anthology of Mizo literature, Desmond Kharmaplang’s anthology of Khasi literature, and Govind Chatak’s anthology of Garhwali literature appeared in English and Hindi translation, respectively.<sup>20</sup>

Jacinta Kerketta’s poetry, where she bemoans the fate of Saranda forest criss-crossed with mines and the impact of mining in the region on local communities, is important to reference here. To quote from her writings:

Vultures gather on a feasting spree  
And streams of bloody tears,  
run down the cheeks of rivers.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Maythe S.-W. Han, ‘Toward a reflexive anthropology’, *Gender, Work and Organisation*, [https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/gwao.12755?saml\\_referrer](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/gwao.12755?saml_referrer), [accessed 11 July 2022].

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Han, ‘Towards a reflexive anthropology’, p. 10.

<sup>19</sup> See Gladson Dungdung, *Mission Saranda. A War for Natural Resources in India*, Bir Buru Omipay Media and Entertainment LLP, Ranchi, 2015; Gladson Dungdung, *Endless Cry in the Red Corridor* Bir Buru Omipay Media and Entertainment LLP, Ranchi, 2017; and Gladson Dungdung, *Adivasis and their Forest*, Adivasi Publications, Ranchi, 2019. Dungdung’s *Endless Cry in the Red Corridor* was launched at the 25th European Conference on South Asian Studies (ECSAS) Paris, France, 24–27 July 2018 at a meeting where he was present. Also see Jiten Yumnam, *Development Aggression. Rethinking India’s Neoliberal Development in Manipur*, YAOL Publishing, Delhi, 2021.

<sup>20</sup> Ganesh G. Devy, ‘Indigenous languages’, available at: [https://www.india-seminar.com/2009/601/601\\_ganesh\\_n\\_devy.htm](https://www.india-seminar.com/2009/601/601_ganesh_n_devy.htm), [accessed 11 July 2022].

<sup>21</sup> Jacinta Kerketta, *Angor*, Adivaani, Kolkata, 2016. In this context, see Felix Padel and Samarendra Das, *Out of This Earth: East Indian Adivasis and the Aluminium Cartel*, Orient BlackSwan, Hyderabad, 2010, which provides a global history of bauxite mining and aluminium production, their impact on the environments and peoples of eastern India, and a detailed account of resistance to mining in Orissa.

With this recent assertion of Adivasi voices, historians reconstructing and rewriting histories of Adivasi protest have needed to reflect on and engage with the voices of the Adivasis which, in Ivy Hansdak's words, have been 'shrouded in polite silence for too long'.<sup>22</sup> Adivasi scholars, as Bhangya Bhukya has pointed out, have begun to increasingly emphasize the importance of an alternative archive—oral narratives—that would help to overcome the deficiency of the colonial archive, and offer important insights into the lived history of Adivasi communities.<sup>23</sup> This new turn emphasizes the need to move beyond analysing just 'the claustrophobic confines' of Adivasi identity which was imposed on them by 'the colonial administrator, the colonial anthropologist, the missionary'<sup>24</sup> and to rethink the production of knowledge about Adivasi by unpacking majoritarian voices which silence the marginal ones.

Most articles in this collection cut across the colonial and post-colonial time frames; move beyond just an engagement with the colonial archive; and bring to the fore Adivasi experiences and modes of negotiation with the everyday. Our contributors—academics writing from diverse disciplinary perspectives and activists working on contentious issues on the ground—bring to this special issue a richness of perspective as they reflect on Adivasi worlds and engage with a variety of issues.

### The context

Adivasis, or the approximately 80–100 million people officially declared as Scheduled Tribes under the Indian Constitution,<sup>25</sup> have been subjected to much scholarly and public debate. The term 'Adivasi', translatable as 'original inhabitants', came into use for the first time in 1938 in a political context, with the formation of the Adivasi Sabha in Jharkhand.<sup>26</sup> Although in

<sup>22</sup> Ivy Imogene Hansdak, 'Is Tribal Identity Relevant in Today's World?', Inaugural Speech, Report for the ICSSR- sponsored two-day national conference 'Tribes in Transition-II: Reaffirming Indigenous Identity Through Narrative', organized by the Department of English and Outreach Programme, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, 27–28 February 2017, available at <https://indiantribalheritage.org/?p=23032>, [accessed 11 July 2022].

<sup>23</sup> Bhukya, *Subjugated Nomads*, pp. 19–20.

<sup>24</sup> Hansdak, 'Is Tribal Identity Relevant in Today's World?'.

<sup>25</sup> Various communities across India have been clubbed together under the official categories of Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST). Belonging to the category of SC and ST enables one to partake of 15 per cent and 7.5 per cent 'reservations' in government sector jobs and public universities. As per the Constitution, the Indian state recognizes about 744 STs; as per the 2011 Census, they comprise little more than 8.6 per cent of the population.

<sup>26</sup> David Hardiman, *The Coming of the Devi*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1987, p. 15; and Sanjoy Bosu Mullick, 'Introduction', in Ram Dayal Munda and Sanjoy Bosu Mullick (eds), *The Jharkhand Movement: Indigenous People's Struggle for Autonomy in India*, IWGIA Document No. 108, Copenhagen, 2003, pp. iv–xvii. As Virginius Xaxa has argued, Adivasis, through bonds of emotion, view themselves as belonging to the same community irrespective of whether a group or a segment of it is listed or not in the Constitution as 'Scheduled Tribe' (see Virginius Xaxa, 'Tribes as Indigenous people of India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 34, no. 51, December 18–24, 1999, p. 3595). Moreover, while tribal communities confined to the Fifth Schedule areas in eastern, central, western, and

demographically enumerating the Adivasi population, references are made to available data on Scheduled Tribes,<sup>27</sup> Adivasi, as a term, is distinct from Scheduled Tribes.<sup>28</sup> In fact, Adivasis from Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and Odisha, who went to Assam in the nineteenth century to work on the British tea plantations, are not recognized as Scheduled Tribes in areas governed by the Sixth Schedule.<sup>29</sup> This brings up the critical question of the choice of the term 'Adivasi' over the contending categories of 'tribe', 'Scheduled Tribe', and 'Indigenous People', terms that are often interchangeably used in common parlance, especially when apprehensions about the possibility of Adivasi Studies have been expressed, pointing towards problems in the use of the term 'Adivasi' itself. These contending terms, it needs to be pointed out, are products of distinct genealogies and, therefore, for academics and non-academics, the choice of which nomenclature to use is usually a careful and conscious one.

One can also argue that the inability to arrive at a pan-Indian Adivasi self has been responsible for the disaggregated nature of Adivasi politics. At the same time, the literal meaning of Adivasi as 'original inhabitants' enables these communities, along with tribal communities in the Northeast, to position themselves, strategically and politically, as indigenous people in the global arena. Today, different social groups define themselves as Adivasi and stake their claim to material and symbolic resources, imparting to the term a legitimacy that is difficult to ignore, but which needs to be reviewed, embroiled as it is in a host of historical and representational contests and controversies.<sup>30</sup> There is, after all, a specific politics behind bestowing a forced conceptual unity on categories that have their own sets of limitations.

### Adivasi historiographies

In academic discourse, particularly from the 1980s, Adivasi, as a term, has been increasingly used, though in varied contexts. David Hardiman, one of the earliest to privilege Adivasi over tribe, argues that the term 'Adivasi' relates to a

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southern India identify themselves with the politically assertive term 'Adivasi', for those living in the northeastern part of India and governed by Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, the category of 'Scheduled Tribe' or 'tribe' is acceptable in the pan-Indian context.

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Alpa Shah, Jens Lerche, Richard Axelby, Dale Benbabaali, Brendan Donegan, Jayaseelan Raj and Vikramaditya Thakur, *Ground Down by Growth: Tribe, Caste, Class and Inequality in Twenty-First Century India*, Pluto Press, London, 2018.

<sup>28</sup> In states under the Fifth Schedule—Andhra Pradesh, Jharkhand, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Orissa and Rajasthan—the governor protects the rights of the Adivasis, especially their land rights, and intervenes in the development of the Scheduled areas. In states under Sixth Schedule—Assam, Tripura, Meghalaya, and Mizoram—district councils and autonomous regional councils have the legislative and executive powers on land transfer and use, forest use, water resources, local customs, and culture. Certain judicial powers are also given to these bodies.

<sup>29</sup> Tribal communities in the Northeast have historically enjoyed a greater degree of economic and political autonomy, resulting in relatively higher levels of education, employment, and health facilities

<sup>30</sup> Rycroft and Dasgupta, 'Indigenous pasts and the politics of belonging', p. 2.

particular historical development: the subjugation to colonial authority during the nineteenth century of a wide variety of communities that had been relatively free from the control of outsiders before colonial rule, and their shared experience of resistance, which incorporated a consciousness of the 'Adivasi' against the 'outsider'.<sup>31</sup> Virginius Xaxa talks about 'Adivasi consciousness': the realization of Adivasis that they have no power whatsoever over 'anything' (land, forests, rivers, resources) that lies in the territory that they inhabit, arguing that it is this 'aspect of marginalization that is to be taken note of while designating a group as Adivasi'.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, Vinita Damodaran, Felix Padel, and Samarendra Das link the Adivasi with the idea of indigeneity in the context of the growing poverty and exploitation of these communities in the colonial and post-colonial period, which saw 'the marginalization and proletarianization of many forest-based communities and the demise of their traditional livelihood gain pace all over the world'.<sup>33</sup> Nirmal Kumar Mahato seeks to understand Adivasi in terms of values, identities, and knowledge systems within a unified indigenous world view.<sup>34</sup> Amita Baviskar locates the importance of the term in the context of a liberalized political economy that has led to new kinds of social exclusion and new forms of collectivization.<sup>35</sup> Others see the Adivasi as not just situated in the experience of subjugation and difference, but embedded in a politics of representation. Crispin Bates and Alpa Shah underline the necessity for a historically, socially, and politically focused approach to understand the ways in which particular forms of resistance are considered as Adivasi at particular points in time.<sup>36</sup> Sangeeta Dasgupta and Uday Chandra see the Adivasi today as a modern subject negotiating with modern state power,<sup>37</sup> displaying, as Tanika Sarkar has pointed out, plural identities that are 'radically contingent, impermanent, changeable habitations'.<sup>38</sup> Daniel J. Rycroft and Sangeeta Dasgupta emphasize the need to recognize the politics of 'becoming Adivasi' which helps identify the

<sup>31</sup> Hardiman discards 'tribe' as 'an English word which has no historical equivalent', and for its 'strong evolutionist connotations' (see Hardiman, *The Coming of the Devi*, pp. 13–15).

<sup>32</sup> Xaxa, 'Tribes as Indigenous people of India', pp. 3589–3595.

<sup>33</sup> Vinita Damodaran, 'Colonial constructions of the "tribe" in India: the case of Chotanagpur', *The Indian Historical Review*, XXXIII, no. 1, 2006, pp. 44–75. On them has been wrought, argue Felix Padel and Samarendra Das, a 'cultural genocide' or the killing of people's culture by uprooting them from their ancestral lands (see Felix Padel, *Sacrificing People: Invasions of a Tribal Landscape*, Orient BlackSwan, New Delhi, 2011).

<sup>34</sup> Nirmal Mahto, *Sorrow Songs of the Woods*, Primus Books, New Delhi, 2020.

<sup>35</sup> Amita Baviskar, 'Red in tooth and claw? Searching for class in struggles over nature', in Raka Ray and Mary Fainsood Katzenstein (eds), *Social Movements in India: Poverty, Power, and Politics*, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, New York, 2005, pp. 161–178

<sup>36</sup> Crispin Bates and Alpa Shah, 'Introduction', in Crispin Bates and Alpa Shah (eds), *Savage Attack: Tribal Insurgency in India*, Social Science Press, New Delhi, 2014, p. 2.

<sup>37</sup> Sangeeta Dasgupta, 'Reordering a world: the Tana Bhagat Movement in Chhotanagpur, 1914–19', *Studies in History*, 15, no. 1, 1999, pp. 1–41; and Uday Chandra, 'Flaming fields and forest fires: agrarian transformations and the making of Birsa Munda's rebellion', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 53, no. 1, January–March 2016, pp. 69–98.

<sup>38</sup> T. Sarkar, 'Rebellion as modern self-fashioning: a Santal movement in colonial Bengal', in Rycroft and Dasgupta (eds), *The Politics of Belonging in India*, pp. 66–67.

multiplicity of events, sites, and representations through which the concept of the Adivasi is, and has been, constructed and negotiated,<sup>39</sup> and accommodate what Sarkar refers to as ‘the range of multiple histories around the singular subject of the Adivasi’.<sup>40</sup>

It is important to note here that writings on Adivasis and Adivasi issues have a long lineage that can be drawn upon. Although Adivasi as a term emerged much later, writings on tribal communities can be traced from the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, from the times of the East India Company and the British Raj. As travellers, colonial administrators, missionaries, and anthropologists made sense of the landscape and the people they encountered, they described customs and documented culture, in the process constructing difference as well as analysing it.<sup>41</sup> An examination of the colonial discourse on tribes over a long period reveals, as Damodaran argues, that the explicitly racist views on the assimilation and civilization of ‘backward peoples’, which had been vehemently expressed in the early and mid-nineteenth century, were giving way to more humanistic considerations that started to be expressed in the middle and latter half of the nineteenth century in the reports of fair-minded officers and missionaries, and through special legislation.<sup>42</sup>

It is important to note here that there were remarkable continuities between colonial and national anthropological endeavours, such as the People of India project by K. S. Singh in 1994 where the similarity with H. H. Risley’s project in 1908<sup>43</sup> was the use of biological data, including cephalic and nasal indexes, reminiscent of racialized colonial categories, to group people.<sup>44</sup> It is interesting to note that the last of the survey organizations to be established, starting with the Survey of India, Geological Survey of India, Botanical Survey of India, and Zoological Survey of India, was the Anthropological Survey of India which was set up in December 1945. Singh emphasizes ‘the intensive lobbying by administrator-anthropologists—including J. P. Mills, J. H. Hutton, W. V. Grigson, W. G. Archer with anthropologists like Verrier Elwin and C. von Furer-Haimendorf—over 15 years to create a

<sup>39</sup> Rycroft and Dasgupta, ‘Indigenous pasts and the politics of belonging’, p. 2.

<sup>40</sup> Tanika Sarkar, ‘View from outside the field: an afterword’, *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 53, no. 1, January–March 2016, pp. 155–57.

<sup>41</sup> Thomas Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995; and Dasgupta, *Reordering Adivasi Worlds*. It may be noted that many members of the civil service were also ethnographers both in colonial and post-colonial India: Valentine Ball and Edward Tuite Dalton in the 1860s; H. H. Risley in the 1880s, 1890s, and 1900s; William Archer and John Henry Hutton in the 1930s and 1940s; Christopher von Haimendorf in the 1950s; and Kumar Suresh Singh in the 1960s. Often in communication with noted Indian anthropologists of the twentieth century such as Sarat Chandra Roy, Lakshminarayanapuram Krishna Ananthakrishna Iyer, and Ayinapalli Aiyappan, all of whom provided a remarkably detailed historical and ethnographic knowledge of the communities they studied, they were not mere tools of colonialism.

<sup>42</sup> Damodaran, ‘Colonial constructions of the “tribe” in India’.

<sup>43</sup> Herbert Hope Risley, *The People of India*, Thacker, Spink and Co., Calcutta; W. Thacker and Co, London, 1908 (1st edn).

<sup>44</sup> Damodaran, ‘Colonial constructions of the “tribe” in India’.

special dispensation for the tribes under the Government of India Act of 1935 and through various suggestions and proposals including those for the creation of a Crown Colony in the North East and a protectorate for the tribals'.<sup>45</sup> (See the article by Katja Müller in this volume.)

In the period immediately after Independence, however, tribe, unlike caste, was emerging as a peripheral concern. Tribes were seen as an entity that either hindered the progress of the nation and were therefore to be assimilated within it or, alternatively, as a unique entity that added to the cultural plurality of the nation and therefore had to be preserved and nurtured. Its distance from ideas of modernity and progress had relegated it to the world of the primitive.<sup>46</sup> It was in order to counter this image that Jaipal Singh Munda, leader of the Jharkhand Party, sarcastically stated during the Constituent Assembly debates on the Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Constitution: 'I am very sorry to disappoint ... that, in supporting the Fifth Schedule, I did not dress in my bows and arrows, the loin cloth, feathers, earrings, my drum and my flute ...'<sup>47</sup> Bishop Dr Nirmal Minz, a public intellectual and activist, expressed a similar sentiment: 'Garv se kaho hum adivasihain (Say with pride, I am an Adivasi)'.<sup>48</sup> (See the article by Saagar Tewari in this volume.)

Debates on the tribal question continued throughout the 1960s,<sup>49</sup> when the predicament of distinguishing between caste and tribe had begun to haunt anthropologists, who now contested the idea that tribal communities were bounded and isolated. Among those who expressed disquiet were F. G. Bailey, Surajit Sinha, N. K. Bose, S. C. Dube, and Andre Beteille.<sup>50</sup> As

<sup>45</sup> K. S. Singh, a perspective on ASI: <https://india-seminar.com/2000/495/495%20k.%20suresh%20singh.htm>, [accessed August 2022].

<sup>46</sup> Verrier Elwin was cautious about the integration of tribes into the mainstream and believed that religious conversion 'destroys tribal unity, strips the people of age-old moral sanctions, separates them from the mass of their fellow-countrymen and ... leads to a decadence that is as pathetic as it is deplorable' (see Verrier Elwin, *The Aborigines*, London, New York, H. Milford, Oxford University Press, 1944). Govind Sadashiv Ghurye, in contrast, believed that aboriginal tribes were backward Hindus. In 1943, Ghurye attacked Elwin for his views on the preservation of the 'tribal way of life' through state-enforced isolation from Hindus (see Govind Sadashiv Ghurye, *The Aborigines, So-called and their Future*, D.R. Gadgil for the Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics, Poona, 1943; republished as *The Scheduled Tribes*, Popular Book Depot, Bombay, 1959). By the late 1940s, interestingly, Elwin had changed his mind, calling for Hindu organizations to pass resolutions accepting the major aboriginal communities as Kshatriya. For details, see Archana Prasad, *Against Ecological Romanticism: Verrier Elwin and the Making of an Anti-modern Tribal Identity*, Three Essays Collective, New Delhi, 2003.

<sup>47</sup> *Constituent Assembly of India Debates* (Proceedings), 9,132,219, available at [https://www.constitutionofindia.net/constitution\\_assembly\\_debates](https://www.constitutionofindia.net/constitution_assembly_debates), [accessed 12 July 2022].

<sup>48</sup> Joseph Mariyanus Kujur and Sonajharia Minz, 'Introduction', in Joseph Mariyanus Kujur and Sonajharia Minz (eds), *Indigenous People of India, Problems and Prospects*, APH Publishing, New Delhi, 2007.

<sup>49</sup> Madan Mohan Joshi, *Bastar. India's Sleeping Giant*, People's Publishing House, Delhi, 1967.

<sup>50</sup> See Frederick George Bailey, "'Tribe" and "caste" in India', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 5, no. 1, 1961, pp. 7–19; Surajit Sinha, 'Tribe-caste and Tribe-peasant continua in central India', *Man In India*, 45, no. 1, January–March 1965, pp. 57–83; Nirmal Kumar Bose, *Tribal Life in India*, National Book Trust of India, New Delhi 1971; Shyama Charan Dube, 'Introduction', in Shyama Charan Dube (ed.), *Tribal Heritage of India*, Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi, 1977, p. 2; and

Bailey wrote, the ‘Tribe–Caste Continuum is a polar ideal type of construction, which implies that no known society precisely corresponds to the description of the extreme ends, but all fall near one end or the other of the poles or in-between’.<sup>51</sup> Andre Beteille emphasized the importance of moving away from established ‘text-book definitions of the tribe’.<sup>52</sup>

Others have also questioned the idea of isolation associated with tribal communities. Brian Morris, in his study of the Hill Pandaram, explores the relationship between tribal communities in the Western Ghats and their neighbours in the plains through long networks of trading relationships.<sup>53</sup> Elsewhere for western India, Sumit Guha shows that the Bhils, like the Kolis, ‘were not isolated remnant populations savagely defending themselves against encroaching civilization’. Rather, they were deeply integrated into the political economy of medieval India.<sup>54</sup> Marine Carrin discusses female priesthood in Bengal on the frontier between tribal and ‘low caste’ society, and thus provides a window into a world of a syncretic popular Hinduism built on social marginality, subaltern assertion, and the politics of gender.<sup>55</sup> However, despite these important interventions, Virginius Xaxa’s is a voice of caution when he suggests that tribes need to be studied in their own right and not just with reference to mainstream Hindu society.<sup>56</sup> (See the article by Marine Carrin in this volume.)

By the 1990s, however, these questions were reframed in terms of whether the tribe was a colonial construct, and how far the discipline of anthropology was implicated in this construction.<sup>57</sup> African and Pacific specialists responded

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Andre Beteille, ‘Tribe and peasantry’, in *Six Essays in Comparative Sociology*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, New York, 1974, pp. 58–74. This shift in the 1960s, Surajit Sinha points out, was because Indian anthropology and sociology moved under the influence of American anthropology, leading to micro-studies of culture change.

<sup>51</sup> Bailey, ‘“Tribe” and “caste” in India’, pp. 7–19.

<sup>52</sup> Beteille, ‘Tribe and peasantry’, p. 68.

<sup>53</sup> Brian Morris, *Forest Traders: A Socio-Economic Study of the Hill Pandaram*, Athlone Press, London, 1982.

<sup>54</sup> Sumit Guha, *Environment and Ethnicity in India, 1200–1900*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999.

<sup>55</sup> Marine Carrin, *Children of the Goddess: Devotion and Female Priesthood in Bengal*, Primus Books, Delhi, 2018.

<sup>56</sup> Virginius Xaxa, ‘Transformation of tribes in India: terms of discourse’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 34, no. 24, 12–18 June 1999, pp. 1519–1524.

<sup>57</sup> See Susan B.C. Devalle, *Discourses of Ethnicity: Culture and Protest in Jharkhand*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 1992; Binoy Bhushan Chaudhuri, ‘The myth of the tribe? The question reconsidered’, *The Calcutta Historical Journal*, 16, no. 1, 1994, pp. 125–156; Crispin Bates, ‘Race, caste and tribe: The early origins of anthropometry’, *Edinburgh Papers in South Asian Studies*, no. 3, 1995, pp. 1–34; Felix Padel, *The Sacrifice of Human Being: British Rule and the Konds of Orissa*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1995; Nandini Sundar, *Subalterns and Sovereigns: An Anthropological History of Bastar, 1854–1996*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1997; Ajay Skaria, ‘Shades of wildness: tribe, caste and gender in western India’, *Journal of Asian Studies*, 56, no. 3, August 1997, pp. 726–745; Ajay Skaria, *Hybrid Histories: Forests, Frontiers and Wildness in Western India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1999; Guha, *Environment and Ethnicity*; Damodaran, ‘Colonial constructions of the “tribe” in India’; Willem van Schendel, ‘The dangers of belonging: tribes, indigenous peoples and homelands in South Asia’, in Rycroft and Dasgupta (eds), *The Politics of Belonging in India*, pp. 19–43; Uday Chandra, ‘Liberalism and its

to some of these debates within the discipline of anthropology, debunking the colonial stereotype of tribe as misleading and inaccurate in understanding realities. The debate moved forward with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples; scholars came to be increasingly perceived as advocating particular political interests.<sup>58</sup> Initial academic discussions on the concept of tribe in India oscillated between two extreme positions. On the one hand were scholars like Susana Devalle,<sup>59</sup> Ajay Skaria,<sup>60</sup> and Sumit Guha,<sup>61</sup> who argued that tribe is a ‘colonial category, ahistorical and sociologically groundless’,<sup>62</sup> ‘a product of colonial theories and practices’. The tribe–caste binary, argued Guha, emerged out of late colonial racial ethnology which transformed Indian society’s understanding of itself.<sup>63</sup> The operative categories in pre-colonial Indian society, Guha argued, were not caste and tribe.<sup>64</sup> In contrast, Damodaran argued that colonial epistemology—even as it drew upon eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European notions of race, colonial environmental ideas, and a humanitarian concern—aligned itself with Brahmanical notions of caste, values, and laws to underpin the category of tribe.<sup>65</sup> Uday Chandra traces a ‘tension between the ‘constitutional ideal of liberal citizenship and the disturbing reality of tribal subjecthood produced by colonial and post-colonial Indian states’.<sup>66</sup> ‘Primitive populations’, he argues, were, paradoxically, subjects of both *improvement* and *protection*; the idea of primitivism—with both its continuities and changes—was an ideology of rule from its origins in Victorian India to the post-colonial present.<sup>67</sup> Townsend Middleton, however, argues that the practices of colonial recognition were constantly shifting; its operatives worked in dialogue with anthropological and proto-anthropological thinkers in the European world.<sup>68</sup> (See the article by Sangeeta Dasgupta in this volume.)

### Resistance histories

While colonial ethnography, missionary narratives, and anthropological texts were describing communities and defining categories, British administrators

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other: The politics of primitivism in colonial and postcolonial Indian law’, *Law and Society Review*, 47, no. 1, 2013, pp. 135–168; and Townsend Middleton, *The Demands of Recognition: State Anthropology and Ethnopolitics in Darjeeling*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2016.

<sup>58</sup> Bengt G. Karlsson and Tanka Bahadur Subba, ‘Introduction’, in Bengt G. Karlsson and Tanka Bahadur Subba (eds), *Indigeneity in India*, Kegan Paul, London, 2006, pp. 1–17.

<sup>59</sup> Devalle, *Discourses of Ethnicity*.

<sup>60</sup> Skaria, ‘Shades of wildness’.

<sup>61</sup> Guha, *Environment and Ethnicity*.

<sup>62</sup> Devalle, *Discourses of Ethnicity*, p. 50.

<sup>63</sup> Guha, *Environment and Ethnicity*, pp. 10–29.

<sup>64</sup> Sumit Guha, *Beyond Caste: Identity and Power in South Asia, Past and Present*, Brill Academic Publishers, Leiden, 2014.

<sup>65</sup> Damodaran, ‘Colonial constructions of the “tribe” in India’, p. 44.

<sup>66</sup> Chandra, ‘Liberalism and its other’, pp. 135–68.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>68</sup> Middleton, *The Demands of Recognition*, p. 60.

on the ground believed that they had to reckon with irrational primitives who thought that bullets would turn into water, bloodthirsty rascals who were forever on the verge of rebellion. Even in the 1960s, when historians sought to restore Adivasis to their rightful place in history, there was a continuity with the premises of earlier nationalist narratives: an Adivasi movement was assessed in terms of its contribution to the nation and its making. Adivasi protest was initially millenarian with dreams of a utopian present; it assumed an agrarian dimension when it was confronted by an interference in their customary rights; it became political only after integration with Congress politics.<sup>69</sup>

By the 1980s, historiographies of resistance in post-colonial ethnographic scholarship in universities tried to be critical and reflexive. Ranajit Guha, the founder of the Subaltern Studies project, in his 'The prose of counter insurgency', wrote about the ways in which colonial power silenced the historical record of the Santals by representing their popular resistance as pathologies, problems of order, or symptoms of religious fanaticism. An opposition to the triumvirate—the *sarkari*, *sahukari*, and zamindari nexus (collusion between the state, moneylender, and landlord)—imparted to Adivasis a collective consciousness against the outsider.<sup>70</sup> The later Subaltern Studies project, however, moved away from this perspective, drawing more heavily on postmodernism Subaltern Studies, with more of a focus on how subalternity was constructed and less on finding subaltern voices.<sup>71</sup>

In the more recent historiographical turn, the quest for writing Adivasi histories has opened up alternate ways of understanding Adivasi pasts. (See the article by Anandaroop Sen in this volume.) As Tanika Sarkar writes, there is no 'true, essential core identity' in the designation of selfhood of the 'Adivasi rebel' as subaltern historians had suggested. Rather, what can be demonstrated is 'the fragility of all naming' as the 'rebel' displayed plural identities.<sup>72</sup> Sangeeta Dasgupta argues for the need to question the representation of Adivasis as homogenous communities, always united in their opposition to non-Adivasis, and recognize the internal conflicts that such representations occlude.<sup>73</sup> Patterns of migrations of Adivasi communities determined claims to land and ritual privileges; cleavages within Adivasi communities were strengthened and reordered with colonial intervention. (See the article by Philipp Zehmisch in this volume.) Sanjukta Das Gupta questions the supposed communal nature of Adivasi landownership and argues that the village-based social organization of the Hos was partly designed to ensure the control of the founders of the village over village resources.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>69</sup> Kumar Suresh Singh, *The Dust-Storm and the Hanging Mist: A Study of Birsa Munda and His Movement in Chotanagpur (1874–1901)*, Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, Calcutta, 1966.

<sup>70</sup> Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1983, p. 8.

<sup>71</sup> See, for example, Ramchandra Guha, 'Subaltern and Bhadrakalok Studies', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 30, no. 19, August 1999, pp. 2056–8; and Sumit Sarkar, 'The decline of the subalterns in subaltern history', in *Writing Social History*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1997, pp. 82–108.

<sup>72</sup> Sarkar, 'Rebellion as modern self-fashioning', pp. 66–67.

<sup>73</sup> Dasgupta 'Reordering a world'. See also Dasgupta, *Reordering Adivasi Worlds*.

<sup>74</sup> Das Gupta, *Adivasis and the Raj*, 2011.

The ecological basis of Adivasi protests has been underlined in some of the resistance literature.<sup>75</sup> A historically nuanced approach, for example, is not about making the case for isolated forest communities in the past. Many of the communities we are concerned with here were actively engaged with trading in an earlier pre-colonial period and there were a succession of immigrant cultures in the sub-continent over the centuries, as has been established by researchers. Studies of Adivasi languages and archaeological and anthropological evidence have yielded important new insights into the nature of historical migration patterns in South and Southeast Asia. All this makes the case for distinctive cultures and identities. More recently, James Scott has persuasively argued, using the term 'Zomia', that the hills in South and Southeast Asia were populated increasingly during periods of migration when state subjects fled valley kingdoms due to forced labour, taxes, or wars—an effect of state making and state expansion that resulted in the formation of what he calls 'new resistant identities reformulated in locations in the hills'.<sup>76</sup> He goes on to argue that the continuity of the ethnic cultures living in frontier regions in East Asia can be seen to provide a counter-narrative to the traditional story about modernity. These are interesting and important arguments. One can similarly argue that the resistance to the growing marginalization of many of these forest-based communities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and their struggle against the relentless and predatory nature of colonial capital and its post-colonial guises and exploitation of the forest frontier and of land and resources, need to be reconceptualized in the context of a new and emancipatory Adivasi Studies.<sup>77</sup> In the context of rapid social and economic change, one also needs to analyse fragmented identities and new cultural positionings.<sup>78</sup> One can argue in this context that the postmodern attack on the idea of a unified subject has rendered the notion of an emancipatory politics problematic, with

<sup>75</sup> Vinita Damodaran, 'Indigenous agency: customary rights and tribal protection in eastern India, 1830-1930', *History Workshop Journal*, 76, Issue 1, Autumn 2013, pp. 85-110.

<sup>76</sup> James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2009.

<sup>77</sup> James Bodley has observed that 'the revisionists assault on the idea of the tribe and the wilderness idea come at the historical moment when the global cultures unsustainable cultural imperative of perpetual capital accumulation is reducing the earths stocks of water, soil, forests, and fisheries to dangerously low levels and disrupting ecosystems and natural cycles on an unprecedented scale' (see Damodaran, 'Colonial constructions of the "tribe" in India').

<sup>78</sup> Ecological questions had emerged as one of the important themes in traditional Adivasi historiography. Indigenous people of India's attitude to the environment explored this relationship between Adivasis and nature in a useful collection in 1992 (Geeti Sen, *Indigenous Vision: Peoples of India Attitudes to the Environment*, White Lotus Press, New Delhi, 1992). Das Kornel, in his work on tribal communities in Koraput focused on indigenous knowledge in Koraput (see Das Kornel, *Tribal Crop-livestock Systems in South-east India*, Manohar, Delhi, 2006). In an ethno-historical study in the 1980s, Ajay Pratap questioned the isolation of the Pahariya by examining their changing relationship to the market, landlessness, bush fallows, property, and hierarchy (see Ajay Pratap, *The Hoe and the Axe. An Ethnohistory of Shifting Cultivation in Eastern India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2000). A stream of works on tribal forest management followed (see Vinita Damodaran, 'History, landscape and indigeneity in Chotanagpur, 1850-1980', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 25, no. 2, 2002, p. 93).

the argument that the identity of the Adivasi subject rests on flimsy grounds. In the context of Adivasi resistance, the writings of Dungdung et al. strongly challenge this interpretation. (See the article by Gladson Dungdung et al. in this volume.)

### Land, legality, and precarity

The relationship to the state and its legal framework is important here. Adivasi communities have often been involved in contestations in law courts, particularly in relation to land. As Marine Carrin has argued, being a Santal means having a very particular colonial history and a specific position in the intricate relationship between and discourse of statehood and citizenship.<sup>79</sup> Different understandings of land rights, and the use of 'lawfare' by private interests<sup>80</sup> since the colonial period, continue to undermine Adivasi livelihoods. In 1921 William Archer recorded the following narrative in Chotanagpur:

When asked 'Where are your title deeds?' ... [members of this movement] replied 'The answer is my spade, my axe, my ploughshare are my title deeds ... ploughing is the writing of the golden pen on golden land'. To the argument 'Your lands have been auctioned for arrears of rent and purchased by another', they replied: 'When a man buys a mat he rolls it up and takes it away; similarly unless the purchaser has rolled up my land and taken it away how can he be said to have purchased them?'<sup>81</sup>

The largely rural and Adivasi communities in India have been most affected by the ways in which laws that impact on their ability to access, use, and own resources have been historically and legally framed. The land struggles in eastern India, for example, have resulted in some unique tenure laws like the Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act of 1908 which was a product of Adivasi movements such as the Birsa Munda rebellion in the late nineteenth century. However, their success here was undermined by the forest laws in the region which were imposed from above by the state and thus more difficult to challenge. The usurpation of common natural resources over land by the state or private interests have had a major impact on people's lives both in the colonial period and now. Many scholars have commented on post-colonial continuities in terms of ecological control and resistance in India. The state ownership of forests and the application of the legal principle of 'eminent domain' have 'continued to erode the customary collective rights of local communities to commons whilst the classification of forests based on the principles of conservation and commercial use ... have deprived the rural poor of timber, fodder,

<sup>79</sup> Peter Berger and Frank Heidemann (eds), *The Modern Anthropology of India: Ethnography, Themes and Theory*, Routledge, London, 2013. Also see Marine Carrin (ed), *Brill's Encyclopedia of the Religions of the Indigenous People of South Asia*, Handbook of Oriental Studies series. Section 2: South Asia, vol. 36, Brill, Leiden, 2021.

<sup>80</sup> Nandini Sundar (ed.), *Legal Grounds: Natural Resources, Identity, and the Law in Jharkhand*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2007.

<sup>81</sup> Damodaran, 'History, landscape and indigeneity', p. 93.

firewood, forest lands and produce'.<sup>82</sup> Local norms and practices are flouted and the extensive powers of the Forest Department over the lives and livelihoods of local populations have resulted in the forced displacement of forest-based communities from national parks and wildlife sanctuaries. Usurpation has been achieved through a complex network of Forest Acts, laws concerning minor forest produce, common lands, industrial and agrarian laws, and policies that have enabled the post-colonial state to make these lands available to specific private industries, which has had an enduring impact on land and Adivasi labour in factories. (See the article by Christian Strümpell in this volume.)

Understanding of legal entitlements or rights as legally defined bundles, for example in relation to common property, has been vital and resulted in what one writer has described as 'practices in and beyond legal institutions and how law has emerged as a critical area of struggle between different actors' in specific contexts in colonial India. This is particularly important given the crisis in the legal system in India today and the way in which law is overlooked in the context of sustained land grabs by mining companies, enshrining the protection of private interests at all costs though 'lawfare' or the use of law as a medium of control in predominantly Adivasi areas. By examining legal norms as they emerged in specific contexts, one can examine the ways in which rights to use, own, and access resources have been framed by local communities in dialogue with the state. Subaltern resistance has taken the form of legal and popular struggles. (See the articles by Sohini Sengupta and Dalel Benbabaali in this volume.)

It can be suggested that it is an environmental history perspective that lends credence to the field of Adivasi Studies.<sup>83</sup> Given the increasing marginalization of Adivasi communities, another useful perspective for us to consider in this context is Judith Butler's conceptualization of precarity, whereby precarity is unevenly distributed thus making some more vulnerable than others. Neoliberalism, environmental crises, or war are key drivers of precarity. Butler also argues that vulnerability is inherently connected to, but may not automatically imply, precarity, that is, vulnerability as a shared and interdependent condition.<sup>84,85</sup> Damodaran has argued elsewhere for the ways in

<sup>82</sup> Sundar (ed.), *Legal Grounds*.

<sup>83</sup> Richard Grove, Vinita Damodaran and Satpal Sangwan, *Nature and the Orient. The Environmental History of South and South East Asia*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1998.

<sup>84</sup> Judith Butler's focus 'has been primarily on global inequalities—some racist, some capitalist, some nationalist—that have historically maximised the precariousness of some populations and minimised that of others'. It is this unequal allocation of precarity that, for Butler, forms the point of departure 'for progressive or left politics in ways that continue to exceed and traverse the categories of identity' (see Judith Butler quoted in Mari Ruti, 'The ethics of precarity: Judith Butler's reluctant universalism', in Maurits van Bever Donker, Ross Truscott, Gary Minkley and Premesh Lalu (eds), *Remains of the Social: Desiring the Post-Apartheid*, Wits University Press, Johannesburg, 2017).

<sup>85</sup> Given the heterogeneity of precarity as a condition, this concept is well supplemented by the concept of resilience, which also brings out varied responses and outcomes from different individuals or groups. Resilience in this research, however, is taken as a 'dynamic' notion that not only allows for reducing risk and vulnerability, but also sheds light on causal processes. Here, risk and vulnerability is understood not as opposed to resilience but rather as two sides of the same coin.

which certain Adivasi groups in eastern India were rendered more precarious and vulnerable to famine (which had long plagued communities of the plains) in the late nineteenth century, resulting in some of the first famine-related deaths in the region.<sup>86</sup>

The gender implications for increasing precarity have also been explored by some Adivasi scholars. The violence against Adivasi women needs to be seen in the context of the breakdown of the ecological moral economy. There was a widely held notion among local communities that the economic and environmental changes under colonial rule and the deforestation that had brought about endemic social disorder and disease were the result of the workings of malevolent forces. As Marine Carrin notes, quoting Bodding's work among the Santals in the 1920s, the discourse on the cause of disease and disorder focused on the action of witches, malevolent *bongas*, and the transgression of taboo.<sup>87</sup> The association of the malevolent *bonga* with particular women was the immediate reason for the targeting of such possessed women. One can argue that the rise in witch-hunting in the latter half of the nineteenth century was linked to the breakdown of social norms and the increasing pressures on the community because of colonial interventions. These continue to be recorded in the post-colonial period.

### The current volume

The contributors to this volume, who include both academics and activists, broadly address the themes sketched above on categories and concepts, the politics of identity formation by both the state and communities, place and place making, memory and migration, which are all critical to contemporary Adivasi experiences and merit serious discussion. It is hoped that by bringing into view specific contexts of Adivasi engagements with modernity, the articles in this volume will fill this lacuna on the multiple worlds of the Adivasi and bring a strong sense of history, ecology, migration, identity, and politics into the discussion.

Sangeeta Dasgupta's article traces nineteenth-century colonial representations of the tribe with special reference to the Oraons of Chhotanagpur. She demonstrates how fluid ways of describing communities and social groups were, by the end of the nineteenth century, erased and descriptive ways of understanding the tribe transformed when the term was defined in an all-India official report—the Census Report of 1901. While tracing a pattern in the shifts within official understanding, she argues that these were related to the working of official minds and changing assumptions; the tensions within

<sup>86</sup> Vinita Damodaran, 'Famine in a forest tract, ecological change and the causes of the 1897 famine in Chotanagpur, northern India', *Environment and History*, 1, no. 2, June 1995.

<sup>87</sup> Marine Carrin, 'Inner Frontier: Santal Responses to Acculturation', Working Paper, Michelsen Institute, Bergen, 1990. See also Vinita Damodaran, 'Gender, forests and famine in 19th century Chotanagpur', *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 9, no. 2, 2002. For an excellent study on women and forests in Jharkhand, see Govind Kelkar and Dev Nathan, *Gender and Tribe: Women, Land and Forests in Jharkhand*, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1991. See also Shashank Shekhar Sinha, *Restless Mothers and Turbulent Daughters: Situating Tribes in Gender Studies*, Stree, Kolkata, 2005.

the discipline of anthropology and its application in the colony; the shades of meaning within ideologies of governance and the imperatives of rule; the changing role of Adivasi agency; and dialogues and interactions with 'native' informants and correspondents along with personal observations of local practices. Categories and imaginaries—both Western and indigenous—were drawn upon, but recast, as colonial knowledge of the peoples of Chhotanagpur came to be constituted. We need, then, to move beyond the colonial past and critically read the foundational texts of colonial ethnography that are used even today by bureaucrats, judges, pleaders, activists, and academics, and by Adivasis themselves.

Katja Müller's article is an analysis of colonial photographs taken by the anthropologist Egon von Eickstedt, who went to British India in the 1920s and 1930s. Müller traces the life history of the German anthropologist and explores the Dresden ethnographic museum's archive of his collection of about 12,000 photographic images of Adivasi communities, which are mounted on index cards and sorted into categories, and about 2,000 objects representing Adivasi culture. She discusses the response of Adivasis to some of the objects and photographs that were part of an exhibition at the Leipzig ethnographic museum and the Museum of Voice of the Adivasi Academy in Tejgadh, Gujarat, in 2012. In the photographs, it is primarily Eickstedt's voice that one can hear, although the Adivasis, in a primarily unequal power structure, did express sentiments; in the archive of the photographs at Dresden, organized according to his cataloguing and description, his voice predominates and the voice of the Adivasi is almost silenced. But when contemporary Adivasis were shown Eickstedt's photographs and the museum installation of objects collected by him at the Leipzig ethnographic museum and voiced their disagreements at how they had been represented, Adivasi voices were reinscribed onto Eickstedt's anthropological project. Their voices were louder still when, in the event organized at Tejgadh, they saw Eickstedt's photographs as images of their ancestors, carried these in a ritual ceremony, and placed them in their homes in close proximity to images of their gods and the photographs of their deceased. The lost voice of the Adivasi in an anthropological project of colonial times is thus strongly expressed in the present. Müller thus highlights what a decolonial perspective can bring to colonial collections.

Taking forward the importance of understanding colonial categories, Marine Carrin argues in her article that the colonial category of 'tribe', which transmuted relatively easily into the transnational category of 'indigenous', is a distinctly Euro-American narrative of progressive liberation defined by international agencies and best avoided. Carrin advocates the importance of a culture-specific notion of indigeneity as constructed by the Santals of Jharkhand in the second half of the nineteenth century which takes into account their own trajectory of political subjectivity and draws upon myths of creation, village stories, and folktales largely drawn from the missionary archive. Santal indigenous knowledge, she argues, becomes a resource for the politics of representation and a strong affirmation of Adivasi identity. Located at the interface of orality and writing, it imparts to the Santals a historical consciousness and a shared identity, intimately relates to the forest,

embedded as it is in a contiguity between humans, animals, and plants, and displays a new imagining against dispossession and memory loss. In privileging indigenous knowledge as a departure point, Carrin argues that indigenous people can exercise their agency by producing strategies of resistance not simply in terms of protest but also by forging new ideas.

In Ruby Hembrom's article, the decolonial perspective is further emphasized as she argues for the critical importance of the need to address Adivasis' own perceptions of the self. As founder, publisher, and director of *adivaani* (the first voices), an archiving and publishing outfit of and by Adivasis, Hembrom expresses this sentiment when she talks about reclaiming the reproduction of Adivasi knowledge through the lens of an Adivasi. Deliberately translating Adivasi as the 'indigenous peoples of India', she writes that Adivasis have always been the objects of writing; these accounts have been the outsiders' view, not of them and by them. Hembrom writes off the importance of colonial archival records in a single stroke when she states: 'we were living documents ourselves'. Being an Adivasi herself, Hembrom's article is part auto-ethnographic; it reflects on her own inclusion in the issues, articulations, and struggles of her peoples. The act of writing and Indigenous literature, she argues, are the tools to resist cultural displacement and loss of traditional ways of being, thinking, and expression. Even if displaced, Adivasis are still owners and carriers of their stories and are the ones most appropriate to retell them in non-conventional ways, often in contravention of what writing cultures expect or are accustomed to. Writing and orality, therefore, are practices of both resistance and resurgence.

The point that the experience of tribal communities is embedded in specific contexts is also outlined in Philipp Zehmisch's article on the Andaman Islands, which explores the contested notion of 'indigeneity' and Scheduled Tribe status, through an analysis of Andamanese communities, who live on ancestral lands and who are culturally, socially, and economically 'different' to other migrant communities. Here, he argues that state authorities and activists reject the Ranchis' demands for affirmative action as Adivasis from elsewhere but not of the Andamans. The article allows us to explore alternative ways of thinking through the notion of indigeneity and the production of new forms of precarity. By focusing on the subaltern history of labour migration, it fills a lacunae in debates on tribal migration, and the reception and production of new forms of subalternity.

Anandaroop Sen's article deals with the production of subalternity by the Raj in the colonial frontier of northeastern India in 1872 through colonial expeditionary violence, and ideas of chieftdom and community among the Lushais. He argues for a category of governance conceived in the expeditionary violence and reared in colonial law. He persuasively argues that, by committing suicide, the two Lushai leaders Liengpunga and Khalkam who killed themselves in the prison at Hazaribagh were engaged in an act within a field that had produced them as certain kind of persons. He outlines the brutal and punitive measures employed by the colonial state, despite the narrative of protectionism

Saagar Tewari's article is on Adivasi engagements with the state and state making in the 1940s. As he charts out some of the processes by which the

Constituent Assembly drew upon colonial ideas of protective provisions for tribal populations and wove them into the fabric of the Indian Constitution, he argues that it was the assertion of Adivasi voices that compelled a change in Congress politics. The final framing of tribal welfare policy through the draft and subsequent incorporation of the Fifth and Sixth Schedules into the Constitution of India, Tewari shows, was influenced by the wider political dynamics and negotiations of the time in which the role of tribal agency was seminal. In this context, he discusses the role of the various communist-led movements in tribal areas, and the Jharkhand agitation by the Adivasi Mahasabha under Jaipal Singh Munda's leadership which gave tribal demands a certain 'visibility' in the constitutional dynamics played out between 1947–1950. Under pressure from several sides, the rulers of the independent Indian nation-state undertook to devise a new administrative paradigm for governing tribal areas which differed significantly from the governor-centric one enshrined in the Government of India Act, 1935. Thus, as he points out, even though the colonial discourse on tribal people was appropriated, there was one crucial distinction: representational democracy through elections was now given pride of place.

Sohini Sengupta's article focuses on the precarious lives of Binjhal communities of central India in recent times, drawing on the theme of the remembered landscape and on the classic work of Pierre Nora, *Realm of memory*<sup>88</sup> to analyse states of abjection and memories of sovereignty among Adivasi people. It also explores plural sources of evidence, including civil suit notices and deeds of ancestors, in Adivasi accounts. Focusing on landscape and memory as the basis for claims making, the article makes a powerful intervention in the literature on land rights by revealing the complexity of land tenures, legal rights, legal pluralism, and the production of precarity over the *longue duree*.

The theme of resistance in the context of the post-colonial state is the subject of the article led by Gladson Dungdung and co-authored with Felix Padel and Vinita Damodaran, where trauma, testimony, and witnessing in the context of the violence of the post-colonial state is explored through a detailed and granular analysis of movements of resistance: the *jungle katai andolan*, the Niyamgiri Surakhya Samiti, and the Pathalgadi movement. Adivasi agency, witnessing, and first-person narrative by Dungdung, who is an Adivasi activist, dominate the analysis of this article which seeks to foreground his powerful testimony against the expropriation of Adivasi land and resources in the face of extraordinary state violence. The article offers a powerful decolonial and contemporary perspective on resistance.

Dalel Benbabaali's article shifts the focus on resistance to South India where she outlines another resistance movement and the way in which Adivasis seek autonomy as a response to their dispossession and to the accumulation of capital that is taking place, at their expense, in a resource-rich tribal territory.

<sup>88</sup> The seven volume collaborative project led by Pierre Nora in 1993 on French national memory when the phrase 'site of memory' entered the dictionary. See Pierre Nora, *Realms of memory, rethinking the French past*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1998.

Based on a case study of the Bhadrachalam in the Scheduled Area of Telangana, the factors leading to land alienation are analysed to uncover a story of agricultural colonization and industrialization. She carefully outlines the processes of marginalization through rapid accumulation by dominant castes through exploitation of both nature and labour. Adivasis' resistance here is a way to reclaim control over their own resources and to preserve their distinct identity.

Finally, Christian Strümpell's article outlines the Adivasi encounter with a radically different modernity in the Rourkela steel plant racked with ethnic conflict. Upper caste managers routinely described Adivasis as *jangli* ('savage'), lacking education, and as hard drinkers, thus enabling them to place these workers in especially hazardous working conditions in the plant's coke ovens and blast furnaces. Although this has changed in the 1990s, he shows how Adivasi workers' struggle to prove their rightful place in the educated company workforce continues to be an uphill task. Here the working class experiences of migrant Adivasis are explored in the context of an industrialized township.

The richness of these articles, we hope, will generate new scholarship in Adivasi Studies. As a relatively young field that needs to create for itself a space and affirm itself as an intellectually productive one in the years to come, Adivasi Studies needs to delineate its markers, methods, and agenda; and its possibilities for dialogue with other fields like Dalit Studies and environmental history. Today, it is necessary to move beyond just discussions of terminology since academics engaging with it endorse the term 'Adivasi' as one that is politically meaningful in that it powerfully expresses not just dispossession and marginalization, but also hope and resilience. At the same time, we have argued for the contours of a new Adivasi Studies and an ethics of engagement that will ensure that the field is not only externally defined in a top-down manner, but also by Adivasi scholars and activists, whose contributions have hitherto not been recognized, setting fresh agendas. This should lead to a more inclusive and equitable academy.

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