

Adivasis: An In-Depth Look at Tribes, Rights and Justice in India

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SARA ABRAHAM SPOKE with Indian writer and commentator Shashank Kela in December 2014. Kela has published *A Rogue and Peasant Slave: Adivasi Resistance, 1800-2000* (Navayana Publishing, 2012), which attempts to put contemporary struggles in India in historical context. He writes occasionally on contemporary Indian politics in Kafila.org and Seminar.

Sara Abraham: Can we begin with you, firstly, introducing to us the adivasi or tribal populations of India. What is 'tribe' in the Indian social and cultural context?

Shashank Kela: There is a debate on this on two levels — in academia, and in struggles and movements, and the discourse, as one might expect, is contradictory. Some academics question the very notion of tribe as a category and whether any group in India can usefully be described as tribal. Here, I want to talk about an old argument used by the Hindu Right, which goes back more than 50 years and originates with one of the founding scholars of sociology in India, G.S. Ghurye.

In response to Verrier Elwin, an anthropologist who wrote some foundational ethnographic studies of tribal groups in Central India, and an outspoken defender of tribal cultures and their rights, Ghurye argued in the 1940s that there are no tribal people in India, only culturally backward Hindus.

That is the same argument used by the Hindu nationalist militant organization RSS today. It has been active since the middle 1980s in many adivasi regions — in Jharkhand, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh — and holds that there is nothing special about adivasi societies: they just happen to occupy forests, and that is their only distinguishing feature. They merely need cultural reeducation to become proper Hindus, and that is what the RSS is trying to do — to make them Hindus.

Essentially, the Hindu Right became interested in tribal societies when it felt that too many of them were converting to Christianity. Its aim is to Hinduize those who have not become Christian.

It does this in many ways — by running rudimentary one-teacher schools (in which children are culturally indoctrinated), building temples, encouraging adivasis to celebrate Hindu festivals in the usual manner, propagating vegetarianism, "reform" and all the rest.

It also boasts of reconverting Christianized adivasis, but this is largely a way of getting publicity and funding, and displaying its power at the local level, cowing the secular minded and, of course, minority groups.

As for Christianity, missionaries began working in Chotanagpur in the 1860s. Some pioneering scholarship on these cultures is the work of white missionaries, English and German. As is to be expected, Christianity tried to change tribal mores and values a good deal. But Catholicism also had a fairly high tolerance of social and cultural differences, partly because an indigenous tribal clergy soon emerged, who obviously saw things differently from white missionaries.

By the 1940s, halting attempts to try to recover tribal traditions buried by Christianity had begun.

Some of these tensions are visible in the Jharkhand movement.

SA: Was Ghurye a member of the RSS?

SK: He was, I think, a fairly orthodox Gandhian nationalist. He was opposed to anti-Brahmin movements in Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra and carried on a polemic against Naga separatists in the North-East. Oddly enough, or perhaps not so oddly, he saw acts of assertion by subordinate social groups as threats to India's unity.

What is "Tribal"?

I agree that the term "tribe" is imprecise and cloudy, but that does not mean that it is useless and that there are no major differences between adivasi/tribal societies and the agrarian order (based, above all, on caste).

I would also disagree with the opposite position traditionally held by anthropologists which holds that adivasi societies were completely distinct from the agrarian order. By this I mean the interrelated combination of castes, occupations and religions visible in the Indian countryside. The relationship is more complex ...

In comparison, there is no dispute that indigenous cultures in North America were separate from the settlers who arrived from Europe. In India the situation is more complicated in that there were many points of contact over the centuries, and tribal societies were not as sharply marked off from the agrarian order. There were channels of trade, exchange of goods, cultural contact, and a certain amount of seepage.

One of India's most famous historians, D.D. Kosambi, argued that a caste-based structure, seen as the defining feature of Indian (and more particularly Hindu) society, was created as settled agriculture expanded over the peninsula from the Indo-Gangetic heartland. It was the representatives of this order who conquered groups not unlike today's tribal cultures (or rather those that existed in the early 20th century, for they have changed considerably since then) or assimilated them.

This is not to say that proto-tribal groups became Dalit or plebeian castes. Kosambi's argument is much more sophisticated. He believes that the upper layers of these societies were assimilated into the upper castes, that integration or assimilation followed a hierarchical, differential logic. These are all plausible arguments.

SA: How does the Indian Constitution tackle the fact of the presence as well as the rights of the adivasi population? This population is over 100 million persons, or about 8% of the Indian population.

SK: The Indian constitution defined two important demographic categories — Scheduled Castes (principally Dalits) and Scheduled Tribes (or adivasi societies) — both entitled to protection in the form of positive discrimination [affirmative action — ed.] in government jobs and education (and other forms of protective legislation).

The Constitution does not set out any criteria of what is a tribe, or how these groups should be identified. It [is] left to state governments to draw up the lists. This list drawing was, in fact, mostly uncontroversial. For instance, Bhil sub-groups in Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat are all classified as scheduled tribes.

For groups at the margins (those less clearly marked off from the agrarian order), disputes over

classification sometimes arose (in the shape of demands for inclusion) and sometimes went to the courts. But all, or almost all, of India's major tribal groups and sub-groups were included without fuss and bother in the list of scheduled tribes.

This goes to confirm the distinction between adivasis and Hindus — there is a sufficiently large margin of difference which was recognized by both sides.

SA: Adivasis not only have distinct social structures, cultures and histories, but have a distinctive history of struggle, as detailed in your book.

SK: The 19th century saw an uninterrupted sequence of adivasi rebellions, all of which were suppressed without any great difficulty. But what is striking is that they kept flaring up — sometimes explicitly directed against the colonial state, more often against non-adivasi immigrants, landlords, moneylenders etc.

The basic reason was that the natural frontier that had, in a sense, protected adivasi societies was abolished during this period; the colonial state's military capacity and efficiency was much greater than that of pre-modern Indian kingdoms and empires, and so was its reach and penetration into the daily life of its subjects (something I discuss in my book).

Seizure and Dispossession

From the late 18th century, non-adivasis began pouring (and that is not too strong a word) into what had been compact and isolated regions occupied by adivasi societies, taking over their land by force and fraud, cutting down the forest, establishing rights to revenue and tax.

The state encouraged and abetted this. In the mid-19th century, it enclosed huge tracts of forest and declared that the people who lived in them had no rights except those it was disposed to grant. The result was dispossession on an enormous scale and tension that played itself out as battles against representatives of the state — officers, clerks, policemen and soldiers. Remember that the mechanism of colonial government was largely staffed by Indians.

In some cases, in south India, for example, tribal cultures were completely overwhelmed and destroyed, their members reduced to landless laborers or agricultural serfs. This tragedy of the south is hardly discussed.

The Western Ghats are a unique ecosystem, one of the world's biodiversity hotspots. This chain of mountains was once largely occupied by hunting and gathering societies — until tea and coffee were introduced into the region as commercial crops by colonial planters with the active encouragement of the state.

The result was enormous ecological devastation as hundreds of square kilometers of forest were destroyed in order to establish plantations. These plantations pulled in hundreds and thousands of non-adivasi settlers from the plains as tea pickers and also as peasants. The indigenous cultures — indigenous to that ecosystem — were swamped and destroyed.

This example also shows the range of tribal societies in India — from hunter gatherers along the Western Ghats to forest-based peasant communities in Chotanagpur and western India.

SA: What were the forms of racism that developed in relation to adivasi societies?

SK: The majority of Indians can go through life without encountering an adivasi. Those who live cheek by jowl with them exhibit a clear form of cultural racism in my experience. Adivasis are

regarded as slightly akin to animals, with connotations of barbarism. This kind of racism continues even when they become Christian or call themselves Hindu.

It tends to be a local (or regional) phenomenon. You can also see it at work when the Indian state fights the Maoists (since most Maoists in India happen to be adivasis. The reverse, incidentally, is not true — only a tiny fraction of adivasis happen to be Maoists).

When the police go into Maoist-controlled regions, you have ordinary adivasi villagers caught in the crossfire and treated with great brutality — rapes, beatings, torture, mutilation. I think that these atrocities happen the more readily because the local population is regarded as being somehow different, not in the same category as “us.”

A couple of years ago, a photo appeared in *The Hindu*, one of India’s major English language newspapers: it depicted a so-called Maoist rebel, a woman, killed in a military operation. Her body was slung from a pole — hands and feet tied to it, and carried on the shoulders of two porters, in much the same way a hog is carried to slaughter. This photograph was published as a factual tidbit.

A few people I know wrote letters to the newspaper criticizing the way the image had been carried, without comment or criticism. The fact that it was a woman makes it even worse. I don’t know if those letters were published. A minor example, but one that shows the prevailing attitudes ...

SA: Let us look at another side of the adivasi presence in Indian public life — sports.

SK: In the golden age of Indian hockey, the game was taken up by adivasi communities in Chotanagpur — I don’t know why or how. They produced many fine players: Jaipal Singh, a Munda, won an Olympic gold medal for India in 1928. He owed his chance to an Anglican clergyman who helped him get a scholarship to England, where he lived for a while.

In some parts of the country, there was a segment of adivasis who could rise a bit (although a glass ceiling was always in place) whereas Dalits were more uniformly oppressed. Adivasis managed to hold on to some land, had villages of their own, their own headmen or chiefs, traditional priests, even rich men. There are a few districts in India that still have adivasi majorities. In other words, some adivasis had opportunities to get ahead economically long before Dalits obtained that chance.

SA: How have adivasi identities changed over time with the tremendous shifts in their ways of living?

SK: The paradox of India is that adivasis in different parts of the country have a strong sense of their distinctive identity — even as its cultural content has been steadily hollowed out. A Bhil, for example, will call himself a Bhil, an adivasi. In cultural practice, however, he or she might not differ too much from a poor Hindu peasant.

There is a distinctive language or dialect, but cultural production never takes place in it: it remains a spoken language. Cultural practices to do with religion, attitudes to nature — even to other groups — tend to converge.

This is because the material basis of those practices has largely vanished. Adivasi cultures emerged, for the most part, in a particular symbiosis of field and forest. They were embedded in a collective vision in which the forest plays a very important part. Over the last 200 years, most of these forests have disappeared (or else adivasi groups have been excluded from them).

Adivasi households are left with small plots of land on which they simply cannot grow enough to feed themselves, and thus are forced to migrate in search of work for six months of the year in order to

survive.

I'm exaggerating a bit of course ... There are still adivasi communities in forests or within touching distance of it. And they cling to traditional cultural and social practices long after the forest has ceased to play an important part in their lives. One of the most refreshing things about them is their distance from the deadening caste hierarchy (they are not completely immune, alas, from it).

When I first went to western Madhya Pradesh in 1993, the villages in which I worked were set amidst thin forest. Much of "traditional" Bhil culture could be seen (I don't know how old it was, but it was certainly, as they say, different!) — festivals, songs, myths, religion, social mores, a strong sense of egalitarianism.

By the time I left in 2004, many of these practices had been affected, suffered erosion. There are two reasons for this — the tragic, irreversible disappearance of the forest through timber cutting and the bringing of marginal land under cultivation, and seasonal migration in search of work.

Many if not most adivasis (the young and able-bodied) in the region must travel hundreds of kilometers in search of work and stay away from their villages from anywhere from four to eight months of the year. Under those conditions it is impossible to expect any culture to survive without damage.

Conservation or Exclusion?

SA: What has been the reaction of environmentalists, if you will, to adivasi attachment to forests?

SK: Adivasi societies have largely been expelled from India's last remaining wildernesses in the name of conservation. For some years now, there has been a concerted drive to evict villagers from national parks and sanctuaries, to remove all human presence from protected areas. (Villages are allowed to remain (with many restrictions) in so-called buffer forests, but are removed from the notified or designated core zones of protected areas.)

Ecologists and environmentalists, with very few exceptions, support this policy on the grounds that there are so few undisturbed habitats left that it is vital to preserve them by keeping them free of human interference.

In some cases the argument becomes complicated because certain habitats such as grasslands are created by human interference (burning the undergrowth) ... Villagers are forbidden to set fires but the forest department does so in order to maintain an optimum landscape for tigers in Kanha, for example.

There is a certain logic to the argument of keeping protected areas free of human activity (since this has not one dimension but many). Having said that, there remain large swathes of forest, which are not classified as protected areas, and are important in terms of biodiversity. In regions like Bastar, adivasi communities have played a role in preserving them.

Because of the association of Maoism with adivasi groups, and the strong Maoist presence in the region, it became a no-go area for industry and the developmental activities of the state, which involve an enormous amount of ecological destruction.

In India, unfortunately, "development" does not imply schools and hospitals, but mining, uncontrolled industrialization (or real estate development), loss of land, pollution, ecological devastation with scant regard for local communities ... No wonder that it is actively resisted.

Now, of course, the state is trying to push into south Bastar, seeking to defeat the Maoists in order to open the region up to its version of development. If that happens hundreds of square kilometers of forest will be chopped down again.

Even in places without any Maoist presence there are instances of adivasi communities coming together to say: we refuse to be displaced, to bear the costs of “development” any longer. These movements are constitutionalist and peaceful. They say in essence: leave us alone on our land. As long as that happens, there is some chance that the forests around them will survive.

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that subsistence agriculture also damages forests. Adivasi communities do chop down trees to build houses, for firewood, to supplement their incomes; they do convert forest into farmland. The fact that a powerful network of interests is also involved in cutting and selling timber (the so-called timber mafia), comprising corrupt officials and traders, does not change that reality.

If forests are to survive, adivasi concerns must be addressed in some way (of course it is not only adivasi communities that have a symbiotic relation to the forest: in the Himalayas there are Hindu, Muslim and Buddhist castes and groups that have a similar relationship).

Ideally speaking, there should be a three-way dialogue among environmentalists, adivasi communities and policy makers. Unfortunately there is no sign of that happening: the bridges have yet to be built.

One problem, of course, is that ecologists, scientists and environmentalists tend to see their work as somehow apolitical. But decisions about land use in a poor, overpopulated country, where communities have lived in or close to forests for generations, are, in the end, a matter of politics.

Fortunately there is a small but (hopefully) growing community of conservationists who recognize that protecting habitats and wildlife is close to impossible without giving local communities a stake in the process in some way. One can only hope that this perspective will develop further.

SA: Are adivasi students active on the environmental front?

SK: I would say that adivasi student politics (in Jharkhand, for example) tends to be firmly focused upon reservations or “positive discrimination” policies (routes to getting employment, both private and public). In other words, they are looking for conventional middle-class jobs. They don’t see their future as being on the land any longer — few people in India do, where small scale agriculture is in a permanent state of crisis (large scale farmers growing cash crops do well, of course).

But there are also land-based movements which these students support. There have been quite a few, in eastern India especially: the struggle against Vedanta’s bauxite mines and factories in Orissa, against the acquisition of land for industries in Kalinganagar (also in Orissa). Before that, there was a well known campaign against a proposal by the Indian army to take over a large tract of land for a field firing range in Netrahat in Jharkhand.

Maoists and Adivasis

SA: You have mentioned the Maoists in a couple of places in this interview, as being integrated with the adivasis in parts of central India. Do you then disagree with the arguments being put forward now on how their communities are caught in the middle — as innocent victims — of the armed fight between the Maoists and the state?

SK: I think the position is more complicated than that, and getting more so by the day. When the

Maoists first entered the forests of south Bastar in the early 1980s they laid down strong roots there: that, I think, is beyond dispute. In time they became a very real power. They set up a small guerrilla army (composed mainly of adivasis, who joined them willingly), established administrative structures, and succeeded in holding back extractive “development” for more than two decades.

For this to happen, a large degree of popular consent was obviously necessary. Now, of course, they are no longer a small band who came to help, they have become an organized power in themselves.

The state was not terribly interested in what was happening in this region — until the late 1990s when the economies of India and China began growing at faster and faster clips. After that, and especially after 2005, it decided to break the power of the Maoists with the aim of milking the resources, especially the mineral resources, of this region.

The state entered with paramilitary forces, helicopters, combing operations, area domination exercises and what have you. It financed and encouraged a rogue militia composed of unemployed adivasi youth, which it armed, quite illegally, with guns and set loose upon their compatriots with orders to rape, burn, kill — the infamous Salwa Judum operation. In other words, it sought to divide adivasi society down the middle.

For the first time, Bastar became a battleground, and the state began to peddle a version of Bush’s doctrine: either you are for us, or with the Maoists. The Maoists responded with ferocity — for them it was a question of survival — and there were some atrocities committed by them too. But the primary responsibility for the carnage in Bastar, the virtual breakdown of Gond society, rests squarely with the state and the way it has conducted its war ...

The problem with the Maoists, in my view at least, is that although they have been present in India in some form or another for more than forty years (the first attempted insurrections took place in West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh in the late 1960s), they possess no creative vision of India’s future, and nor have they developed any reasoned position, indeed any position at all, on the future of adivasi societies (and subsistence economies) within it.

There is an awful lot of jargon, but precious little debate or creative thinking — certainly nothing of the kind the Zapatistas in Mexico have displayed, for example.

For that reason alone I believe that Indian Maoism is a dead end. It has been adopted by adivasi communities essentially as a defensive strategy, to protect themselves against the depredations of development. But the Maoist leadership is dominated by non-adivasis, and the party as a whole has shown no capacity to learn and rethink old nostrums and formulas in terms of contemporary global realities.

What India needs — needs desperately in my view — is some form of green or green-pink politics. In other words, a political discourse that takes into account the very difficult environmental questions of today — from climate change to mass extinctions, the necessity of conserving nature, along with a radical critique of consumerism and mindless, endless growth.

But these are middle-class concerns, and the concerns of a very small fraction of the middle-class though they have been around for a long time (I’m thinking of Rudolf Bahro’s prescient critique of consumer culture and the industrial economy in the 1970s). They must somehow be fused with the problems faced by poor communities — especially adivasi cultures who have, or used to have, some kind of organic relationship to the natural habitat (like so many indigenous cultures of North and South America) and a real stake in preserving it.

Environmentalism has to be fused with the quest for social justice, with restoration and renovation,

with a new conception of labor, a far-reaching critique of consumerism and unchecked, uncontrolled growth.

This has been said before, I know, and said better, but for India it is the only hope. Finally, these concerns and struggles have to come together at the global level, for it is at that level that change must come.

Sara Abraham interviews Shashank Kela

P.S.

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<https://solidarity-us.org>