

BOOK REVIEW

Bodhi, S. R. and Jojo, B. (Eds). *The Problematics of Tribal Integration: Voices from India's Alternative Centers*, ISBN 978-81-929930-3-4 Hyderabad: The Shared Mirror, 2019

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The current nation-state of India came into formation on the lands, forests, mountains, waterways, and islands of approximately 700 Indigenous communities spread across all 28 states and 8 union territories. These communities have historically been studied through an outsider's lens, rendering them objects of study within a framework rooted in colonial epistemology and led to their invisibility. However, there exists a growing assertion of Indigenous voices advocating for their own epistemology. The aim of this movement is to deconstruct the dominance of colonial epistemology and advocate for approaches rooted in perspectives that acknowledge the world's richness in diverse contexts rather than imposing a singular universal viewpoint. An example of such an attempt is The Tribal Intellectual Collective India (TICI), an academic community engaging with multiple intersecting realities and focusing definitively on Tribal epistemology, which differs from the mainstream. These inclusive approaches pave the way for embracing diversity and recognizing the significance of Indigenous

epistemologies. TICI was formed in 2012 and nurtures scholarship for decolonisation in multiple ways, including through annual workshops, seminars, and the publication of three journals: *Journal of Tribal Intellectual Collective India*, *Indian Journal of Dalit and Tribal Studies and Action*, and *Indian Journal of Dalit and Tribal Social Work*¹.

The editors of this book, Dr. Bodhi SR and Dr. Bipin Jojo, also serve as National Co-Conveners of the Tribal Intellectual Collective India (TICI). Both currently work as Professors at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai and have written extensively on decoloniality, decolonial social work, diversity-dialogue practice, Navayana Buddhism, tribal issues of governance, land, forest, tribal policies, education, and migration. Many but not all of the contributors to this collection are also scholars from tribal backgrounds and members of TICI.

I am Shankar Bhil (he, him), and I hold an undergraduate degree in B.A. in Sociology, a subject that helped me unravel the human experience through a critical lens and understand it better, especially in the context of my own community. I am currently working towards my M.A. in Development Studies at Azim Premji University, Bangalore. My home is situated in the forest of Satpura Hills, Khandesh, which is a region in the western state of Maharashtra and the traditional lands of the Bhil Indigenous community. Bhils are one of the largest tribal ethnic communities

¹ For more information, see <https://ticilandproject.wordpress.com/tici-journals/>

of western and central India, spread across Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. The name 'Bhil' is derived from the word 'billu', signifying 'bow.' We are renowned for exceptional archery skills and profound knowledge of our forests and other lands. Bhils are officially designated as the Scheduled Tribes (ST) in the 1947 Indian constitution. This classification system has its roots in British colonisation which perceived indigenous peoples as backward and criminal and ruthlessly exploited their labour and land. While Bhils continually resisted British colonialism, they remain one of the most socially and economically disadvantaged communities in independent India. Communities with ST status are entitled to positive discrimination under the Constitution in relation to free and/or subsidised education, admission quotas in higher education and public sector employment and political representation.

Last year, as part of the Indigenous Students Forum at Azim Premji University in Bangalore, we commemorated the 147th birth anniversary of Dharti Aaba Birsa Munda, a remarkable tribal freedom fighter who valiantly fought against British colonialism and diku². To mark the occasion, a guest lecture was delivered by Dr. SR Bodhi on the theme of 'Adivasi Standpoint and Adivasi Epistemologies'. During this event, Dr. Bodhi also donated his books to the university library. Despite having a prior interest in comprehending our contemporary Adivasi (indigenous) situation, this lecture provided a specific direction for my future pursuits. Moreover, this book, authored by Adivasi scholars, instills in me a

² Outsiders are known as 'Dikus'

profound sense of belonging. It affirms that we are not stagnant in time and that we assert our indigenous knowledge from our unique perspectives.

The edited collection consists of 19 chapters which provide insights into historical and contemporary struggles by Indigenous communities for their rights to land and self-determination. The majority of chapters pertain to current issues faced by indigenous communities in northeastern regions of India. The introductory chapter by the editors orients the reader towards comprehending the processes and challenges associated with integrating tribal communities and their land within the administrative framework of India. The book aims to serve as an attempt to foster an 'emancipatory discourse' that opposes theoretical and methodological frameworks prescribing knowledge production as an objective or universal process. They argue that such a belief system constitutes ontological violence against Indigenous peoples, advocating for the disruption of Western and caste-based frameworks that portray tribes as 'timid' forest dwellers, 'savages,' 'primitives,' 'uncivilized,' or 'backward.' This disruption aims to challenge the portrayal of tribes as passive recipients of knowledge generated by dominant societies. Tribes residing in independent or semi-independent conditions are not permitted to maintain their autonomy. The concern raised by these scholars is that emphasis on integrating these tribes into the mainstream often results in their economic and social exploitation, leading to marginalization. Of greater significance is the risk of losing their culture, language, way of life, and identity.

The first section includes two chapters related to the theme of Problematizing the Discourse and Context. This section endeavors to problematize the discourses surrounding the integration of tribes from colonial times to post-independence India. The term integration here refers to the British colonial and postcolonial state premise that assimilation of tribals into mainstream economy and culture is the only solution to their purportedly backward conditions. The next section is themed The Frame of Reference and consists of four chapters which scrutinize the frame of integration across different state policies, constitutional provisions, and diverse developmental models aimed at the upliftment of Adivasis in India. The third section contains 11 chapters that speak to the theme of concrete conditions and dynamics. These chapters delve into the socio-cultural values, practices, and the diverse realities experienced by Adivasis across different regions of India. It also explores the evolving dynamics within tribal societies, emphasizing their endeavors in negotiating for autonomy, self-governance, and agency through various movements aimed at asserting their rights. The last section, titled 'Tribal/Adivasi Dialogues', comprises two transcripts of a speech and a dialogue delivered by two elders from the tribal/Adivasi communities, which possess significant historical value in understanding the struggle of the tribes for the land and their culture.

In Chapter 1, Virginius Xaxa traces the relationship of tribal communities with a national or Indian identity from colonial times through independent India to the present. Despite their diverse

lifestyles, they share a common experience of exclusion from other social groups and have been compelled to live on the periphery of national development. In his exploration of the sacrifices made by Indigenous peoples in embracing this myth, Xaxa emphasizes their assimilation into a singular, 'integrated' national identity causes them to lose their identity. He underscores how tribal communities, in this process, become alienated from their distinctive cultures- language and traditions, religious practices, land and environment etc.

In Chapter 2, Bodhi S.R. and Raile R. Zipao delve into the historical contestations around processes of integration between states and tribes in independent India, across North East India, the mainland, Himalayan regions, and island enclaves. The chapter draws extensively on the speeches of Jaipal Singh Munda, the sole tribal/Adivasi representative in the 1946-50 Constituent Assembly as well as constitutional provisions that reflect the tribals' struggle for autonomy and identity.

In Chapter 3, Monica Sakhrani makes historical links between the administration of tribes in British and independent India. The author highlights three paradoxes that emerge from the contradictions in India's policy relating to tribes and constitutional provisions for these scheduled tribe communities. The first paradox is created by the way in which the Indian Constitution recognizes individual and community citizenship rights, which separate Tribal individuals from their community. The second is created by the contradiction between Article 297, which vests all

national resources (land, forest, minerals, and resources in the ocean) and Article 372, which permits the continuance of colonial laws. The third paradox that confronts us is the tension between the state's overarching ideology of pan-Indian Hinduism and the aspirations of the tribal communities for recognition and self-determination.

In Chapter 4, Bhagya Bhukya identifies how Nationalist and Marxist historians have distorted the history of Adivasi struggles and contributed to large-scale erasure of Adivasi anti-colonial resistance. He highlights how tribal freedom fighters such as Birsa Munda and Rani Gaidinliu have been relegated to the periphery and non-Indigenous figures like Alluri Sitaram Raju, who belonged to the Other Backward Castes (OBC) have been elevated into history as 'champions' of tribal communities.

In Chapter 5, Rimi Tadu thinks through the geopolitics of the NEFA (North East Frontier Areas), now known as Arunachal Pradesh, which has faced cultural interference since British rule. Tadu examines post-independence laws utilized to govern economic interactions between communities living in the hill and plain regions which have facilitated state expansion in the name of tribal assimilation and integration. The discussion is informed by interviews with communities living in the Tanii Valley of Arunachal Pradesh. Through memories of occupation and oppression in the region. Tadu sheds light on how the state reshaped documentation of historical accounts of the formation of the state of Arunachal Pradesh.

In Chapter 6, Venkatesh Vaditya focuses on the debate between the first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru and anthropologist, Verrier Elwin, regarding the development of Adivasi communities. While Nehru advocated for a 'national ideology' to unite all of Indian society, Elwin favored an isolationist approach and a separate development model for the highly vulnerable Adivasi population. Given the harm neo-liberalism has inflicted upon tribal communities, Vaditya calls for adopting Elwin's approach to secure Adivasi struggles for self-determination captured in the political slogan 'jal-jamin-jangal', which in the language of Hindi translates to rights to water, land and forest.

In Chapter 7, J.J. Roy Burman explores the significance of sacred groves as cultural symbols of tribal political assertion. Burman delves into how tribal communities worldwide have symbolically employed sacred groves to strengthen their social cohesion, guide their quests for autonomy, and affirm their right to self-determination. This chapter presents valuable insights into the cultural practices and worldviews of tribal societies and elucidates the challenges these societies encounter upon integration into mainstream society.

In Chapter 8, Shyamal Bikash Chakma aims to dismantle the prevailing discourse of environmental conservation in India, which overlooks the rights and concerns of tribal communities. The chapter draws on an extensive literature review of conservation discourse in India combined with empirical data from national

parks and sanctuaries. Chakma concludes that wildlife conservation initiatives on Indigenous communities in India have deprived communities of their natural resources and significantly contributed to tribal displacement.

In Chapter 9, Richard Kamei focuses on the political strategy of collective bargaining, which remains unfamiliar within tribal communities. Kamei investigates this concept in the context of the indigenous alcohol industry, which operates in Rongmei tribes inhabiting the northeastern state of Manipur. Liquor has been ingrained in the way of life among indigenous tribal communities, woven into festivals, marriage celebrations, and death ceremonies. However, when the sale of alcohol was prohibited in Manipur, women assumed the role of brewing liquor to sustain their families and also constituted a primary livelihood source. These women found themselves negotiating with their families, village authorities, and the state machinery (specifically, the excise department) to persist in their daily task of brewing alcohol. Kamei's examination focuses on the complexity of the collective negotiation process undertaken by women from this tribe to secure their own space within their community.

In Chapter 10, Joseph Riamei critically analyzes current approaches to tribal governance and political participation in the multicultural/multiethnic North Eastern states. Riamei identifies the challenges and violence experienced by Indigenous peoples under the dominant governance model that is centered on the political and administrative unit of state governments. Riamei

stresses the urgent need for a substantial restructuring of the governance framework centered on Indigenous knowledge, autonomy, and development.

In Chapter 11, Kerlihok L. Buam focuses on the Jaintia Hills autonomous District Council in the state of Meghalaya and its role in protecting tribal culture, land and identity. The author advocates for the preservation and safeguarding of Jaintia culture – a traditional responsibility of the Autonomous District Council. The culture and practices of indigenous tribes are deeply rooted in their connection to the land. However, marketisation and mismanagement by the District Council have weakened this bond and devastated the Narpuh forest region through unregulated limestone mining and cement production. Even though rules prohibit selling tribal land to non-tribal people, the Councils haven't protected communal lands or formalized traditional land systems. Instead, these rules have enabled wealthier tribal individuals who also head these district councils to own most of the land.

In Chapter 12, Jagmohan Boro discusses the political endeavors of the Rabha community in the northeastern state of Assam. The Rabhas, viewed as early inhabitants of the Brahmaputra valley, have been mobilizing politically since the early eighties to demand political autonomy. However, the State government has deflected these demands by manipulating the politics within this multi-ethnic community.

In Chapter 13, Batskhem Myrboh focuses on the issue of non-tribal migration in Meghalaya, which has witnessed a sustained influx of such outsiders. The author identifies the political and economic problems created for Indigenous tribal populations, namely the Khasis, Jaintias, and Garos, Myrboh, as a result of land occupation by non-tribal migrant settlers.

In Chapter 14, Vulli Dhanaraju historicizes British colonial hegemony in the southeastern region of what is now the state of Andhra Pradesh. The author studies the administration of tribal regions in Andhra Pradesh from 1776 to 1947. Which established an administrative apparatus and forest policies in order to preserve forest resources by halting practices like shifting cultivation. The aim was to exploit forest wealth for projects like railways, shipyards, roads, and buildings. These colonial land revenue policies had a detrimental effect on Indigenous tribal economy and society at the time leading to displacement and loss of livelihood. As such, the current administration of the tribal regions in Independent India appears to be no different from colonial times.

Chapter 15, by Pandurang Bhoje, focuses on Adivasis in the western state of Maharashtra, who face the brunt of a state-led economic development process which has increased inequity and alienated Adivasis from their own habitats. Bhoje provides an overview of current social and political movements and organizations across different geographic areas of the state. Key findings include that ideologies like Marxism and Hindutva often

drive movements led by non-Adivasi leaders and activists in Adivasi regions to extend their influence into Adivasi territories. In addition, movements led by Adivasi leaders concentrate on addressing Adivasi exploitation by non-Adivasis, advocating for Adivasi land rights, and addressing issues related to irrigation, forests, and the broader spectrum of Adivasi rights.

Chapter 16, by the late activist-scholar Abhay Xaxa, discusses Adivasis' rights when faced with mining by multinational corporations in regions designated as Fifth Scheduled Areas by the Indian Constitution. - The Fifth Schedule of the Indian constitution provides for the self-administration of tribal areas in ten states in India, including Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Rajasthan, and Telangana. Despite this Constitutional protection, local governments have colluded with multinational mining corporations to erode forest rights and avoid transparent and accountable policy-making for the development of these impoverished regions of India.

Chapter 17, by Niraj Lakra, provides a critical examination of the year 2016 revision of the Chotanagpur Tenancy (CNT) Act, 1908, and the Santhal Pargana Tenancy (SPT) Act, 1949 by the BJP government of Jharkhand, which came to power in the year 2014. Lakra argues that the revision was advantageous to industrialists who deprived Adivasi peoples of land and their ways of life. He questions the ongoing neo-liberal model of development through

which the Indian state has acquired Adivasi land and undermined tribal self-governance and autonomy.

Chapter 18 consists of a 2008 speech by John F. Kharshiing, Spokesperson of the Federation of Khasi States to the First General Assembly of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, was organized by the Indian Confederation of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples (ICITP) and the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai to understand the 'Politics of Identity and Tribal Resistance' focusing on historical evolution and articulation of indigenous tribal voices in India. Kharshiing's address raises critical issues of political autonomy and self-determination of the Indigenous people of these regions, which have persisted since Meghalaya was formed as an independent state in 1972. This speech advocates for the building of a positive relationship between indigenous communities and the state based upon international human rights law and consensual politics to uphold harmony and stability in post-colonial India. It contends that the approval of India's constitution should rely on the consent and active participation of indigenous groups.

Chapter 19 features a dialogue between Saneka Munda and Bipin Jojo, Munda is one of the few living participants of the Khuntkati land rights movement, which fought for land rights for Indigenous people in the central Indian region of Chotanagpur. The Munda community believe that 'God has created this earth, and we have cultivated the soil through our own efforts' (pg. 297). This movement opposed the oppressive British tax system through non-violent civil disobedience. Lasting for 10 years between 1929—and

1939, the movement did not succeed in securing the Khuntkati rights, and the struggle continues to this date.

Despite my attempts here, it is not possible to cover the richness of this volume. As Adivasis, we've grown weary of being reduced to mere subjects of examination in someone else's truth narratives. This book is a critical part of that endeavor in offering readers the knowledge to disrupt Western frameworks and engages with Adivasi/tribal episteme and is a pioneering effort by academics of tribal backgrounds, uniquely centers on the critical issue of integrating tribes into the mainstream—a process that has perpetuated their exploitation from the colonial era to the present day. It will be of great value to those who study and teach about Indigenous cultures and movements in India as well as the wider community worldwide.