

Savage Attack: Adivasis and Insurgency in India

Crispin Bates & Alpa Shah

The *New Yorker* once carried a cartoon in which two young black children are facing off about mixed origins. One says to the other, "I am black, my father was African-American, and my grandfather was a Negro". Reading the literature on "tribal" groups one gets the same sense of a shifting nomenclature and changing political understandings of a particular identity without any real clarity emerging. Who or what is a tribal? The palette of options is large. As a political self definition, *adivasi* appears to be the preferred category. The constitutional category of Scheduled Tribe has become the means through which access to preferential opportunity dispensed by the state is made available. Gandhian categories like *girijan* now appear sentimental and are found in school textbooks still governed by a notion of paternalistic sentimentality. But that is only the tip of the problem. It is the very category of "tribal" that is still unresolved: is it a residual category from an earlier civilizational teleology: a colonial construct of the unsettled groups not amenable to being settled on land; an anthropological fantasy of primitiveness; a category of resistance to encroachments on forest i.e. peasant:field as tribal:forest? This is the first problem. The second problem is that at different conjunctures the "tribal" has been taken up in Indian history writing and from AR Desai; Ranajit Guha and the Subaltern Studies; Crispin Bates; Nandini Sundar, Felix Padel, Ajay Skaria and Sumit Guha; there have been intense moments of theoretical explication. These bursts of activity have not helped to complicate the notion of "tribal", or indeed its usefulness within the larger academic field. Like that other lethargic, elastic category-Sanskritisation- the category of "tribal" lives on encompassing everyone from the Naga IAS officer to the Konds flattening sociology and history.

This volume is interesting in that it represents the different moments and theoretical tendencies in the consideration of this category. Some of the authors are more aware of the history of the category and some less so and the Introduction does make a valiant job of trying to work with a concept that has less an academic and more a political value. This is an excellent collection of essays, except for two. Atluri Muraly's is a reprise of the work that he did in the 1980s without much of an awareness of the increasing sophistication of the field. Sangeeta Dasgupta's essay revisits the Tana Bhagat movement and while it suggests internal differentiation and multiple understandings is very much within the paradigm of an earlier historiography. This first part of the essay takes us through some of the recent literature but the substantive part still deals with a hypostasised idea of the "tribal". Some of the essays like the ones by Luisa Steur, Alpa Shah and Christian Strumpell are exemplary in managing the intersecting discourses within which the category is located and there is a distinctly contemporary feel to them. By this I mean, we see the category of "tribal" as work-in-progress, amidst competing and complementary discourses of identity, radical politics, organised party ideology and state vocabularies. Satadru Sen and Vishwajit Pandya write in complete command of their terrain and Sen's deployment of Denig is very productive in problematising the earlier engagement of the EIC with the Andamans as opposed to the later occupation by the British. Pandya deals with the clash of understandings that continues to haunt the interface between government, tourist and the "noble savage": each playing out a role that has been scripted for them over the past 100 years. Raphael Rousseau's

is an unusual essay that does, to my mind, an unusual intellectual history of colonial perception of the Kond religion that is informed by the Scottish Enlightenment. Amit Desai does an intellectual history of another kind, in revisiting David Hardiman's work on Dangi religion to raise the issue of whether we should look at religion as a form of agency or a form of ideological domination. And as with Luisa, Alpa, Christian et al he looks at seeming clusters as disaggregated by different attitudes to agency and passivity. The "tribal" within an older historiography came into his/her own only in rebellion; the only mode of political activity comprehensible to the liberal-bourgeois imagination (witness Ranajit Guha's tortuous discussions on the political, pre political and the always already political).

However, the troubling question for me is what allows the putting together of groups with diverse cosmologies and cultures from Jharkhand, the "north east", Andamans, Central India, Western India and Kerala into one category of analysis? Is it the fact that the state sees them all as "tribal": primitives consigned, to borrow a phrase, to "the waiting room of history"? Or is it that a globalising discourse of indigeneity then becomes the blanket that provides cover. And regardless of whether one is on the side of the state and its redemptive developmentalism or global emancipatory rhetorics the ontological question remains. Who or what is a "tribal" and is it more a matter of context and the generation of conjunctural, pragmatic affiliations with a category that we are speaking of? Can we as academics with a social conscience take as objects of study the prospective fantasies of Maoists and the state? The traits listed in the 1952 Report of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes Commission include isolation, racial characteristics, use of 'tribal dialects', 'animism', 'primitive', economic activities, non-vegetarian eating habits, naked or seminaked dress, nomadism, and propensity to drink and dance. This might be risible, but what exactly is the unity in the category of adivasi that allows such a volume to be put together. I think that this issue is one of identity as much as political economy and the volume doesn't address this sufficiently.

Finally, while there is a sense of a larger discourse of indigeneity or the savage attack by the state as generating an idea that militates against the idea of isolation as a characteristic, the essay by Gunnel Cederlof raises another problem. There has been considerable work emerging in the last five years on the north east from Delhi and Jawaharlal Nehru Universities (See forthcoming volume edited by Neeladri Bhattacharya OUP) which has particularly nuanced the idea of a "north east" and its putative unities. Cederlof does not push the suggestions by Ludden (and she does not cite the work of William van Schendel on zomia) which no longer allow us to assume that being tribal is a matter of being confined territorially. I personally think that Gunnels own historical record does not allow an easy adjustment with the theme of the volume or the idea of the tribal, given the presence of transregional kingdoms, state extraction of agrarian revenue and the engagement with larger empires like the Mughal and the Burmese. She needs to rethink the paper and I think the editors need to address themselves to the hard task of providing a working set of characteristics on Who is a tribal?

I would recommend the volume for publication as it is. While this is gratuitous advice, dropping the essays by Murali, Cederlof and Dasgupta would tighten the volume and also make it more sophisticated. Or perhaps they could rewrite their essays with a sense of the literature.