

**CHOTRO: LEARNING FROM THE INDIGENOUS**GEOFFREY V. DAVIS  
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Accepted: 15-10-2018**ABSTRACT**

The *Chotro* project was established jointly by the Bhasha Research and Publication Centre in Baroda and the European Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (EACLALS). Founded initially to document the linguistic, literary, and artistic heritage of tribal communities, Bhasha has established an academy for the promotion of tribal studies and the education of the marginalised tribal people of India, the adivasis. *Chotro*, which emerged from these activities, aimed to situate adivasis in the context of indigenous peoples across the world with whom they have much in common but little, if any, contact. Conceived as a cross-cultural, interdisciplinary forum, *Chotro* ‘brought together’ – for that is the meaning of the word in the Bhil language – indigenous people from India and elsewhere with activists and scholars from many countries working in such diverse fields as anthropology, sociology, literature, linguistics, history, music, museum studies, and human rights. Four *Chotro* gatherings were convened which addressed marginalisation, social deprivation, lack of access to education, loss of traditional lands, knowledge systems, oral traditions, endangered languages, and the representation of the indigenous in performance and the visual arts. *Chotro* thus illustrated one way in which scholars may contribute to social and cultural activism.

**KEYWORDS:** Adivasi; Bhasha; Devy; *Chotro*; Activism; Tribal Studies; Indigeneity**RESUMEN** *Chotro: aprender de los indígenas*

El proyecto *Chotro* se creó en colaboración con el Bhasha Research and Publication Centre, situado en Baroda, y la European Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (EACLALS). Inicialmente fundado para documentar el legado lingüístico, literario, cultural y artístico de las comunidades tribales, *Bhasha* ha permitido crear un espacio académico para la promoción de los estudios tribales y la educación de las comunidades tribales marginales en la India, los adivasis. El proyecto *Chotro*, que creció a raíz de esta actividad, se centró en localizar a los adivasis dentro del contexto de los pueblos indígenas alrededor del mundo, con quienes tienen mucho en común, pero apenas ningún contacto. Concebido como un proyecto intercultural e interdisciplinario, *Chotro* reunió (haciendo honor a su significado en la lengua bhil) a indígenas procedentes de la India y de otras partes del mundo, así como a activistas y académicos de diversos países especialistas en disciplinas tan diversas como antropología, sociología, literatura, lingüística, historia, música, museología y derechos humanos. Se llevaron a cabo cuatro reuniones en las que se debatió sobre la marginación social, la falta de acceso a la educación, la pérdida de tradiciones, los sistemas de conocimiento, la tradición oral, las lenguas amenazadas y la representación de la población indígena en las artes escénicas y visuales. Gracias al proyecto *Chotro* los académicos pudieron demostrar su aportación al activismo social y cultural.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** adivasi; bhasha; Devy; *Chotro*; activismo; estudios tribales; indígenas

In his introduction to *Literature for Our Times: Postcolonial Studies in the Twenty-First Century* Bill Ashcroft asks, “What is the field of post-colonial studies beginning to look like in the twenty-first century?” (Ashcroft, 2012: xv). He points out that that compendious volume – which contains proceedings from the 14th Triennial Conference of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies held in Vancouver in 2007 – represents the particularly “wide range of contemporary post-colonial concerns”. He detects amongst postcolonial scholars “a pushing into ever more expansive intellectual territory” (Ashcroft, 2012: xvi) and takes up Julie Thompson Klein’s argument, that “at present new knowledge is most often produced by boundary-crossing in the form of interdisciplinary and cross-cultural research” (Ashcroft, 2012: xix). And indeed, there is considerable evidence that, in Ashcroft’s words, scholars are “venturing across boundaries of all kinds – not just disciplinary, but cultural, racial, ethnic and linguistic boundaries” (Ashcroft, 2012: xix). One example to which he refers is the way in which “innovative explorations of existing research areas” are being expanded, especially in the case of research on indigenous societies (Ashcroft, 2012: xxii).<sup>1</sup>

Such expansion of the field of enquiry of postcolonial studies, whether it be in the direction of indigeneity, ecocriticism, or transculturality has engendered much debate. One critic whose writings have for me proved particularly illuminating on the way that such developments impact on the priorities and activities of an organisation like ACLALS has been Paul Sharrad, a passionate advocate of the ethical responsibility of literary scholarship and the importance of culture in processes of social change, who has embedded in his analyses of Indian writing in English perceptive reflections on the nature of postcolonial literary studies and their relationship to political and social realities. He reminds us that

We cannot afford to be bogged down only in exercises in academic cleverness or yet more visits to colonial discourse and literary ‘writing back’. Nor can we let ourselves as critics of culture and power be stymied by our theorizing so that difference and deconstruction disable the kind of agency implicit in universals such as human rights (Sharrad, 2012: 53).

In this paper I would, therefore, like to describe how the European branch of ACLALS joined with an Indian NGO on an innovative project which involved the hosting of four international, interdisciplinary meetings with indigenous people, social activists working with them, and

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<sup>1</sup> He refers in particular to the indigenous scholar Jeannette Armstrong’s analysis of the relationship between the experience of the land and the world view and language of the Syilx of Okanagan, British Columbia, Canada.

scholars from across the world. The project demonstrates one way in which literary studies may profitably be allied with social and cultural activism.

Firstly, I shall provide some background information. India numbers among its vast population just over one hundred million tribal people who (as of 2011) constituted 8.4% of the population.<sup>2</sup> Many of them are traditionally forest dwellers. Known as adivasis, they have “remained on the margins of the social, economic and political march of independent India” as Vibha Chauhan puts it (Chauhan, 2009: 56); impoverished and alienated. They occupy the lowest rung on the ladder of development, over half of them live below the poverty line, their literacy rate is barely half that of the general population and is particularly poor in the case of women. Furthermore, as they live in rural areas they are increasingly vulnerable to encroachment by industrial and mining interests on tribal land, including sacred sites. The issues with which they have to contend are, thus, demonstrably similar to those faced by indigenous communities across the world.

In outlining the basic problem facing those who concern themselves with bettering the lot of such tribal people Ganesh Devy, with whom I have been working with over the last decade, has stated:

It is indeed a matter of great concern for every sensitive citizen of India that the social and economic situation of the adivasis should remain plagued with underdevelopment, starvation and lack of opportunities for progress. On the other hand, the general condition of life in the centres of urban concentration has been so dehumanizing that one may easily feel attracted to the grace and simplicity of the adivasi culture. Any policy for welfare and development drafted for the adivasis will be required to reconcile the two positions (Devy, 2004: 3).

He further argues that the adivasis should be allowed “to speak for themselves”, pointing out that “whether or not to continue the traditional way of life, whether or not to modernize and accept the values and life styles of the technology driven industrial society should be a choice that adivasis themselves have to make” (Devy, 2004: 3). Devy’s own aim is simply to provide a platform for this to happen.

Much inspired by Gandhi, the Bengali writer and activist, Mahasweta Devi, and by the anthropologist Verrier Elwin, he took the decision to resign his professorship of English at the University in Baroda and to commit himself to the cause of the adivasis. This seems very much in the mold of Elwin’s own earlier forsaking of an academic life, where he wrote:

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<sup>2</sup> The statistical source is: Demographic Status of Scheduled Tribe Population and its Distribution. [www.tribal.nic.in/ST/StatisticalProfileofSTs2013.pdf](http://www.tribal.nic.in/ST/StatisticalProfileofSTs2013.pdf)

I knew that India was a poor country and much as I looked forward to a donnish career at Oxford, I had begun to feel that the academic life was not enough. I was filled with a desire to do something to make reparation for what my country and my class had done to India (Elwin, 2009: 1).

For Devy, it would also seem that a “donnish career” was not enough, and has, modestly, described his own move as follows:

My activism was not triggered off by an ideological understanding of the society, it was also not born out of my altruistic or charitable instinct. Quite strangely, it developed out of my fascination for languages other than the ones sponsored by the state. (Devy, 2009a: x)

That concern with the languages of India, which has been at the heart of all he has undertaken to date, also inspired him to embrace a far larger issue, which Rajeswari Sunder Rajan has characterised thus: “Devy’s mission is to show [...] the relevance and value of the Adivasi world view in contemporary India” (Rajan, 2009: 4).

An idea of Devy’s thinking on adivasis, based on his many years of working with them as a teacher and activist in such areas as education, health, artistic expression and microfinance, may be gained from the essays in his book *A Nomad called Thief* (2006). Conscious of the fact that the majority of Indians are ignorant of the social structures, knowledge systems and culture of tribal people, Devy believes that “there is much in the adivasi way of life that the country needs to emulate”, which is borne out, not least, by his assertion that he has personally “never ceased to learn from them” (Devy, 2006: 4). Thus Devy praises the adivasis’ sense of community welfare, their preservation of indigenous knowledge and culture, their lack of a caste system, their harmonious relationship with the natural world and their careful husbanding of the environment.

Devy is painfully aware of the deprivation and marginalization which the adivasi have suffered, first under the colonial Criminal Tribes Act and, later, under the hardly less discriminatory post-Independence Habitual Offenders Act. He points to the dangers threatened by the fact that “most deposits of minerals [lie] in Adivasi areas, and the locations of all big dams [like the Narmada] [which are] close to their habitations” (Devy, 2006:12). He condemns their loss of rights over the forests which are their habitat, the lack of recognition of their languages in the Constitution, the absence of any provision for their artistic practices (Devy, 2006:13), and the contempt with which they have generally been regarded as primitive (Devy, 2006: 6 & 7). He is severely critical of those social and economic forces which compel them to migrate to the cities and consign them to such long-standing practices as bonded

labour. And he deplores the fact that they are largely deprived of primary education and primary healthcare.

In an effort to remedy such deprivation, Devy calls for the creation of adivasi academies and the formation of self-help groups to render the villages more viable, and he believes in initiating–development “from within” (Devy, 2006: 141) rather than swelling the ranks of exploited labourers in Indian cities.

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The first major step towards the realisation of this “mission” was the foundation of a Research and Publication Centre at Baroda in 1996. This organisation was called Bhasha, a term usually translated as ‘language’, ‘speech’ or ‘voice’. The establishment of Bhasha, which began in a very modest fashion operating as it still does out of a small suburban house, was to have far-reaching consequences. The organisation’s objectives were set out in an initial statement as the “documentation of linguistic, literary and artistic heritage of tribal communities in India and publish[ing] documented materials” as well as the establishment of “a campus for creating an institute for the promotion of tribal languages, literature, arts and culture with a view to initiating formal education in the area of conservation of tribal imagination” (Devy, 2004: 5).

Bhasha sought to realise the first of these aims through the inauguration of a publication programme which set out to pioneer the dissemination of literary and educational materials in tribal languages such as translations from the oral tradition, dictionaries, grammar books, and textbooks for primary and secondary education as well as little magazines in tribal languages.<sup>3</sup> This entailed designing scripts for use in hitherto unscripted languages. In association with the Central Institute of Indian Languages in Mysore, Bhasha also prepared a series of pictorial glossaries in six Bhili languages spoken in Gujarat for use in tribal village schools. Overall, Bhasha has brought out publications in nineteen non-scheduled languages (Rathwi, Garasia, Chaudhari, Dungri Bhili, Panchmahali Bhili, Kunkna Bhili, Gamit, Wanjhari, Madari, Naiki, Bhandu, Ahirani, Dehwali, Gor Banjara, Pavri, Chattisgarhi, Garhwali, Khasi, Kinnari, Mizo, Saora and Warli).

Concerned as it is for the diversity of India’s languages and the preservation of endangered languages, Bhasha has undertaken the massive task of preparing a *People’s Linguistic Survey*

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<sup>3</sup> Devy has edited a useful anthology of translations of writings by adivasis under the title *Painted Words. An Anthology of Tribal Literature* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2002).

of India, whose prime aims are to “provide an overview of the living languages of India” and to “build bridges among diverse language communities, and thereby to strengthen the foundations of multilingual, multicultural Indian society”. This project, which involves a vast team of collaborators across the country, is the first such survey since India’s independence. It is currently being published in fifty volumes, some of which are additionally appearing in Hindi and Marathi translations. Forty-two volumes of the collection have already appeared.

A second major project has been the digitalisation of the holdings of all the eighteen tribal museums across India, which resulted in the publication of a National Inventory of Tribal Art.<sup>4</sup>

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The second step in Bhasha’s development got underway when the government of Gujarat assigned them a plot of land at the village of Tejgadh, which lies on the border of the states of Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh, some ninety kilometres to the east of Baroda and whose surrounding area is inhabited largely by tribal people. Working with the help of Karen Grover, a well-known Baroda architect who offered his services free of charge, work soon began there on the design and building of an Adivasi Academy. This initiative was, primarily, intended to provide primary and secondary education and to function as a training and research institution, but is also being considered to house a future museum of tribal arts and a library. This Academy aspires to become a centre of learning in Tribal Studies focusing on “the history, culture, metaphysics, arts, languages, medicine, economy, development and traditions” (Devy, 2004: 6) of the adivasis and, in realising this aim, it would seek to evolve new methodologies of learning and research, making particular use of oral traditions, performing arts, handicrafts and visual arts. Since its inception, it has added sustainable agriculture and women’s development to its curriculum. Crucial to this project was the concern that “study and research undertaken at the Academy [should be translated] into action oriented interventions for empowerment of marginalised communities” (Devy, 2004: 6). The Academy has expanded rapidly: a residential block has been added, and a clinic manned by volunteer doctors has been set up to deal with health issues such as sickle cell anaemia, which is widespread in the area. Bhasha’s work in health, which has involved an effort to relate

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<sup>4</sup> See *Tribal Arts in India*. The National Inventory of Tribal Museums project (Baroda: Bhasha Publications, 2012).

modern medicine to the tribals' understanding of health, has been extended to numerous surrounding villages and has created much good will.

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My own involvement with the Bhasha Research Centre began when, some years ago, Devy invited me to come to India to take up a Visiting Fellowship there. I gladly accepted, although I suppose, like some of those who had preceded me, I did wonder what my own particular contribution might be to the work of such an NGO. At first, I imagined I would find myself teaching elementary English grammar to tribal children, but this was not to be. A decision was rendered somewhat easier by the fact that those invited to Bhasha are initially given the opportunity to observe the work of the organisation and to involve themselves where it seems appropriate in its activities. These are extremely diverse, so you attend the daily business meetings with the staff of the NGO, some of whom are tribals and whose involvement at Bhasha has had a transformative effect on their lives. The duties of the volunteers involve helping with the publications programme, meeting officials responsible for education and tribal affairs, going into the field with volunteer doctors at their clinic, attending meetings with organisations such as the National Consortium of Tribal Museums or with an array of Gujarati-speaking poets. As a foreign guest, you might find yourself being asked to hand out certificates to talented, but illiterate, young men who have completed a course of study in ceramics at the Academy entirely through oral tuition, or to present a finely bound copy of the *Mahabharata* to an aged poet on his retirement. In this way, you become familiar with many aspects of the organisation's work in quite a short space of time, a process Devy described in conversation with me appropriately enough as "letting the visiting fellows run riot".

The combination of scholarship and social activism which represent the twin poles of Bhasha's work prompts much reflection about how one might involve oneself practically and usefully at Bhasha, but of course it also soon causes one to question the efficacy of one's own activities in one's own country. As Rajan has written of Devy's example, "I am constrained [...] by my sense that his renunciation of an academic career in favour of full-time commitment to social work is a reproach to those of us who pursue our careers in greener pastures abroad" (Rajan, 2009: xiii). Many of those who have encountered Devy will have felt the same. I certainly did.

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The problem of how I might best make a meaningful contribution was largely solved when we decided to jointly organise a conference, which we hoped would be innovative in both form and content. Since at the time I was on the board of European ACLALS, Devy assumed I had the relevant experience and would be able to publicise the event through the association and gain the support of members for it. For me this was rather like being given a licence to invite all my colleagues to India to share in the kind of life-enhancing experience I seemed to have slipped into! It also represented a welcome opportunity for a literary organisation like ACLALS to embark on an innovative experiment working with an NGO in the field and to bring its expertise to an area with which it has some points of contact but which is patently more rooted in social and developmental issues than are our regular concerns. The conference project took on the character of a joint effort between Bhasha and the European branch of ACLALS, particularly since, as it turned out, a significant number of members from our own and other branches of ACLALS, as well as a good number of scholars from African countries, have been able to take up the opportunity to participate in the conferences over the years.

The specific plan was that we would host a meeting which would be international, cross-cultural and interdisciplinary. It would not, however, as Devy has written, be “designed for expanding the frontiers of any specific field of knowledge, it was organised as an exercise in reducing our collective ignorance about the communities generally described as ‘indigenous’” (Devy, 2009b: xii). We would call it *Chotro*, a term which in the Bhili language “implies ‘a place where villagers gather’, ‘a public platform’, and ‘a centre for dispute resolution’” (Devy, 2009b: xii). It would enable the voice of the tribals to be heard, its aim being to ‘bring together’ indigenous people from many parts of the world, activists working with them and scholars interested in their culture. From Bhasha’s perspective, its significance would be that it would situate the tribal people of India, the adivasis, with whom and on whose behalf they had then been working for more than a decade, firmly in the context of indigenous peoples across the world with whom they have so much in common but little if any contact. It was also hoped that such a meeting would facilitate bringing the tribal oral tradition and literature of India into comparative perspective with indigenous oral traditions and literatures elsewhere.

From the perspective of the overseas participants such a meeting would, in many cases perhaps for the first time, enable them to familiarise themselves with the tribal people of India and to view their languages, their oral traditions, their history and cultures in the comparative



context of their own work on other indigenous peoples and in postcolonial studies generally. And for some, who were perhaps not specialists in indigenous cultures at all, it would provide a timely opportunity to look beyond the more familiar pastures of postcolonial literatures and to learn something of what the indigenous peoples of the world have to tell us of their lives and culture. In the steps of Jared Diamond, we would effectively be asking, “What can we learn from traditional societies?” (Diamond, 2012). For many who came from outside India it was surely true, too, that the history, social reality and cultural practices of the adivasis were little known, certainly by comparison with those of the Aboriginals of Australia, the Maori of New Zealand or the First Nations of Canada, who increasingly figure on the curricula of schools and universities.

From the outset, it was our intention that the kind of network *Chotro* was attempting to establish should not be oriented solely to literary studies, in spite of Devy’s background in English and mine in ACLALS. From the start, it was conceived as an interdisciplinary forum. It should bring together scholars working in literature and orality, linguistics and history, music and film, anthropology and ethnography, social studies and political science, museum studies and human rights. This diverse approach to indigeneity was designed to take us considerably beyond the familiar pastures of Anglophone postcolonial studies. It was hoped that such a focus would also contribute to further opening up a rewarding field of study, which has begun to take root in various parts of the world. Sustained through all four *Chotros*, this approach encouraged an extraordinarily broad range of perspectives from scholars and activists working on and with indigenous societies in places as diverse as Australia and New Zealand, Botswana and Malawi, Kenya and Ghana, Egypt and Mexico, Guatemala and Bolivia. This great cultural diversity of *Chotro* constitutes the unique interest both of the project and of the six volumes of essays which subsequently emerged from it.<sup>5</sup>

*Chotro* soon proved to be very much an on-going project. There were four such meetings. Intended to be places of encounter with indigenous peoples, the *Chotros* did benefit greatly from their input. For the record, the first, whose wide-ranging theme was “Indigenous Peoples in the Postcolonial World: Language, Literature, Culture and Society,” took place in Delhi in 2008 with the active support of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts and it brought together some two hundred participants from more than twenty countries, including indigenous people from Africa and Asia, Australia, Canada and Aotearoa/New Zealand. The

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<sup>5</sup> The titles are listed in the Works Cited.

second *Chotro* a year later met at the Adivasi Academy in Tejgadh and focused on “Nomadic Communities in the Postcolonial World: Culture – Expression – Rights”. For the participants this meeting took on very much the character of a learning journey, not only because one of its most memorable sessions was held in Gandhi’s ashram at Ahmedabad, but also since it enabled them to engage with the adivasi community at grassroots level and to witness the practical work Bhasha was doing in education, health care and museology. For those who had not previously visited Tejgadh, this second *Chotro* proved a remarkable opportunity to reflect on the practical realisation of much of what we think and write about in postcolonial studies, but also perhaps to reconsider some of what we teach in the light of the experience gained there. Two further *Chotros* followed. The third in 2010 took place at Delhi University and subsequently in the splendid setting of Chail Palace near Simla, the former summer capital of the British Raj, in the foothills of the Himalayas. Its theme was “Local Knowledge – Global Translations: The Imagination & the Images of Indigenous Communities in the Twenty-First Century.” The fourth *Chotro*, in early 2012, then returned to Baroda and Tejgadh and had a strongly linguistic focus formulated as “Imagining the Intangible: Languages, Literature and Visual Arts of the Indigenous.” It saw the launching of the first volumes of the massive *People’s Linguistic Survey of India* and was, appropriately enough, attended by speakers of innumerable languages.

The success of the first four *Chotros* led us to consider hosting a fifth, but this was not to be. Our Indian hosts felt that the political and cultural climate under a Hindu Nationalist government led by Narendra Modi would not be favourable to their holding such an event. Nor, unfortunately, did the idea of locating it in another country come to fruition.

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The *Chotro* gatherings enabled participants to address such diverse literary and cultural topics as orature, stories of origin, creation myths, knowledge systems, life histories, storytelling and folk tales, poetry, drama and performance, aesthetics, endangered languages and language death, language development and scripts, publishing in and translation from aboriginal and tribal languages and the marginalization of tribal cultural expression. They also engaged with political and social issues such as subaltern history, human rights, nomadism, migration, environmental degradation and trauma and healing. Collectively, the participants provided a

cross-cultural and transnational perspective on indigenous cultures; they revealed historical, social and cultural commonalities between indigenous societies across the world and, importantly, their papers displayed, to quote our co-editor Kalyan Chakravarty, “an undercurrent of an idea of seeing indigenous and tribal people as agents rather than objects of change” (Chakravarty, 2011: xxiii).

The range of issues *Chotro* participants engaged with was so great that I cannot refer to more than a few here. Since *Chotro* had been in its genesis a literary project, the field of literature was correspondingly well represented. The work of the late Mahasweta Devi, described by one contributor as a “bridge to the tribal world” (Prakash, 2011: 281), featured prominently. The work of familiar postcolonial writers, such as Ngũgĩ, Walcott, Zakes Mda, and Bessie Head, was featured, but so too were many lesser known figures, among them Canadian First Nations writers Tomson Highway, Beatrice Culleton, and Lee Maracle, and Africans Matsemela Manaka, Steve Chimombo, Unity Dow and Grace Ogot.

The African oral tradition figured particularly prominently with contributions on topics as diverse as resistance to patriarchy as articulated in Zulu women’s songs or the San mythology of the |Xam narratives of Southern Africa. The social function of folk tales was exemplified in the issue of gender relations in Maasai oral texts. Traditional cultural practices, whether they be circumcision songs of the Babukusu people of Kenya or the preservation of the sacred sites of the Vhavenda of South Africa, were seen to function as survival strategies.

Language development proved a major concern. Several African participants drew attention to the endangerment of languages such as Itsekiri, Igbo, and Urhobo in Nigeria and Yaaku in Kenya. An East African pointed out how reading and writing skills in Kikuyu have seriously declined under pressure from English and KiSwahili.

In the case of Aboriginal Australian writing, speakers analysed such works as the poetry of Lisa Bellear, Romaine Moreton and Kerry Reed-Gilbert, the novels of Alexis Wright, and the life histories of Sally Morgan and Doris Kartinyeri. They showed how films such as Noyce’s *Rabbit-Proof Fence* and Thornton’s *Samson and Delilah* had heightened awareness of the plight of Aboriginals. They focused on the importance of indigenous cultural festivals as sites of cultural assertion and on the example of collaborative pedagogical projects between academic institutions and Aboriginal communities. They also tackled the larger issues of nation and community, gender violence, and Aboriginal solidarity with asylum seekers.

A major focus of the *Chotro* meetings was, of course, on the adivasis themselves, and, accordingly, they provided the opportunity to gain an impression of the Adivasi way of life, to hear evidence of the extent of their marginalisation in Indian society, and to become aware of the parallels between their social situation and that of indigenous peoples elsewhere in the world. But they also served to exemplify Adivasi agency and to showcase Adivasi cultural heritage and their many forms of cultural expression, especially through their languages, literature, oral traditions, music and dance.

The way of life of tribal communities was presented in anthropological and sociological contributions from the example of many different peoples across India – the Andaman islanders, the Bondas of Orissa, the Paliyan of Kerala, the Nagas of the North-East, the Rathwa Barela of Madhya Pradesh, the Kuravars of Tamil Nadu, and many more. Their cultural and spiritual values, their social problems, their co-existence with nature and their plight at the hands of modern Indian society were all addressed.

Adivasi knowledge is preserved in their orature, and so much attention was paid to this mode of cultural expression. Contributors focused, for example, on the aphorisms of the Lambadas, the traditional songs of the Bodo community of the Northeast, the ballad forms of the Irulas of Tamil Nadu, and the folklore of Garhwal.

Ramnika Gupta spoke forcefully of the emergence of Adivasi literature in many Indian languages. “The writing of the tribal people,” he stated, “is a testament to their agony and their trials. It is also a medium through which they try to find solutions to their problems. Their writing is an expression of their revolutionary spirit against the ‘established’ who have conspired to kill their culture and control their resources” (Gupta, 2009: 191). Thus, for instance, one contributor addressed the experience of Keralan tribals in the first novel and the first oral life history by adivasis to appear in Malayalam, while another analysed notions of home in the poetry of what she termed “the insurgent-infested north-eastern regions” (Narjinari, 2013: 250).

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At all the *Chotros* issues affecting indigenous peoples world-wide were frequently apparent, among them were existential threats to the survival of indigenous communities, language endangerment, the need to maintain cultural heritage and traditional practices, the ongoing

importance of indigenous cultural expression and, particularly, the oral tradition and, in many cases, resistance.

The *Chotros* offered evolving perspectives on indigenous cultures and empirical modes of learning about indigeneity. They helped to sharpen the focus on the lives and culture of the adivasis in India, to contextualise their situation within the broader perspective of indigeneity worldwide, and to reflect on some of the numerous economic, social, political and ecological issues threatening their livelihoods, for which solutions must still be found.

*Chotro* provided an opportunity to learn something of what indigenous peoples have to tell us about their lives, and illustrates one way in which literary scholars, working together, may contribute to social and cultural activism. Through participating in the *Chotro* project and grasping the opportunity to reconcile our literary scholarship with our social conscience, members of ACLALS and others hopefully helped to raise consciousness about the situation of the adivasis in India and to build a foundation on which valuable work towards the betterment of the plight of indigenous peoples everywhere can be undertaken.

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