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Luisa Steur: *Traveling models of indigenism and Kerala's emergent 'adivasi' politics*

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# Traveling models of indigenism and Kerala's emergent 'adivasi' politics

**Luisa Steur**

School of Oriental and African Studies, ls43@soas.ac.uk

## Abstract

Indigenism in the South Indian state of Kerala today is as much about claims for redistribution and democratization as about cultural recognition. This paper explores the many complex and contested ideological currents that hide behind the general cachet of global indigenism and starts by proposing a theoretical approach that draws attention to the more subaltern currents in the field. It then moves on to distinguish *four travelling models* of indigenism that have partly come to shape the field previously dominated by class discourse, followed by a description of the expression of these travelling models in different indigenist ideologies in Kerala. I conclude with the argument that it is precisely in the *lack* of consensus on the ground on what indigenism means that there is hope that the present wave of indigenist mobilization can contribute towards reviving and deepening democracy rather than merely reinforcing cultural stereotypes in Kerala, and elsewhere.

KEYWORDS: indigenism, politics, activism, ideology, Kerala

## Introduction

Since the last quarter of the twentieth century, many people previously involved in socialist politics have joined movements for indigenous rights. This is often interpreted as a liberatory moment, whereby due to a 'cunning of history' (Turner 2005), globalization has, despite its negative impact on people's livelihoods, also enabled 'a revolt against the forces of cultural uniformity and against the appropriation of indigenous peoples' sovereignty by states' (Niezen 2003: 2). With both the desire and now also the means to pose a 'post-liberal challenge' to 'ethnonational homogeneity' (Yashar 2005: 298), people flock towards the international legal framework for indigenous rights, the only place to appeal for the right to cultural autonomy and self-government rather than mere integration into the wider national polity (Kymlicka 2008). What seems to be at stake for an increasing number of people around the world – whether always already considered *indigenous* or only recently emerging as such – is the desire to be recognized as belonging to a historically unique culture and deserving the right to legal sovereignty.

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Not everyone agrees, however, on this reading of indigenous movements. Whereas June Nash (2001), for instance, sees the Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas as a 'quest for autonomy' motivated by 'Mayan visions' and an entirely different cultural universe of values, Neil Harvey (1998) – paying more attention to the movements that the Zapatista rebellion grew out of and the political-economic tensions driving it – sees it as a 'struggle for land and democracy'. Or whereas, for instance, Deborah Yashar sees the indigenist movement in Bolivia and the rise of Evo Morales as the country's first indigenous president as based on 'an ethnic discourse about cultural rights and autonomy' (2005: 185), Kathy Gordon sees the movement much more as 'rooted in the left and class-based politics' with Evo Morales widely known in Bolivia as a Trotskyite who uses his 'indigenous' identity to make his 'left-wig politics more palatable in the international arena' (2009: 8). As the case study from Kerala in this paper will show, there is no consensus on what indigenism is about in this South Indian state either.

### **Critical approaches toward indigenism: Articulation and hegemony**

Many scholars have been uneasy about the celebratory announcement of recognition-centered identity politics under the banner of indigenism. One worry has been the fact that today's progressive indigenous movements seem to be tapping into the same discursive repertoires as majoritarian, racist *indigenous* movements such as the British National Party (Kuper 2003) or Hindutva nationalists (Baviskar 2007). Though it is arguably misleading to equate majoritarian *indigenous* movements, attempting to assert racist privilege, with movements of dispossessed people trying to 'resist discrimination and achieve progress towards equality' (Kenrick and Lewis 2004), the culturalist turn that many activists have followed instead of an ineffective or discredited class agenda is not without consequence. A way of studying these consequences more concretely has been through theoretically-informed ethnographies that are sensitive to the 'frictions' (Tsing 2007) – a combination of grip and irritation – that discourses of indigeneity produce for political subjects and that reveal the limits to the political aspirations that can be articulated within the 'indigenous slot' (Li 2000). The wider framework informing such research is that of 'articulation' theory, tracing the hegemonic processes behind political claim-making by looking at how ideological elements cohere into a certain discourse and are in turn taken up by certain political subjects (Hall 1996: 141–2).

It is particularly the latter element of *articulation* – the relation between the discourse of indigenism and political subjects – that most research has focused on. Alpa Shah, for instance, argues that in fact many young *adivasis* (or *tribals*) in Jharkhand stay away from indigenous identity politics as they prefer a life of seasonal migration to brick kilns over the puritanically 'indigenous' moral climate at home that frames such migration as 'a threat to the purity and regulation of the social and sexual tribal citizen' (2007: 1824). In other cases, ordinary *adivasis* can be seen not so much to retreat from the politics of indigenism themselves as see this politics leave them. Amita Baviskar (1998) for instance discusses how the imagery of ecologically noble savages in danger of perishing outside

their habitat – a discourse that was deployed by urban middle-class activists to oppose the building of the Narmada Dam – eventually became self-fulfilling as it left the poorer, uneducated class of *adivasi* farmers in a desperate situation when the dam was built and no alternative livelihood strategies had been imagined. Kaushik Ghosh (2006), in a similar case of the Koel Karo Dam, describes the ‘awkwardness of fit’ between transnational discourses with the specific contexts of ‘indigenism’ in India. He argues that the former has produced a nucleus of new political leaders who no longer need to be involved with the everyday struggles of land and territory but are continually encouraged ‘to perform and fit the paradigms of a transnational ‘indigenous’ subjectivity that has little resonance in the localities occupied by such populations in India’ (Ghosh 2006: 502).

Tania Li (2000), in a comparative study of two similar groups in the Indonesian country-side, only one of which took up the label of indigeneity, shows that the process through which transnational frames become applicable – or inapplicable – to political subjects often has little to do with substantive differences between political localities but rather depends ‘upon the regimes of representation that preconfigure what can be found there, together with the processes of dialogue and contestation through which identifications are made on the ground’ (2000: 153-54). Ethnographies such as these show there are clear limits to issues that can be said within the discourse of indigenism, that it does not always take root and that, when it does, it can often further marginalize the poorest. They show there is friction between local and global actors, and activist and ordinary people’s understandings of indigenous identity. These ethnographies often prompt the conclusion that there is a serious problem in ‘the erosion of prior principles of mobilization and politicization’ that come with the juridification of resistance and the hegemony of cultural identity in shaping collective action in ‘the neoliberal moment’ (Comaroff & Comaroff 2009: 139).

Without denying this, it also seems that anthropological analysis should not push the hegemony of legal culturalism even further by only studying one side of the problematic of articulation – that of the frictions produced between indigenist discourse and political subjects – and neglect the study of how ‘ideological elements cohere into a certain discourse’ (Hall 1996: 141–2). Seeing the latter as a hegemonic process allows us to realize that dominant discourses often hide subaltern ideological elements that are more directly enabling to their political subjects. In other words, whereas the abovementioned critical ethnographies have demonstrated how hegemony works to produce certain contexts and issues of which the subaltern cannot speak, I would like to take a look at the other side of the coin where in fact the superaltern cannot hear. This possibility can be probed not so much by asking which realities articulate with indigenism but rather what alternative articulations of indigenism are covered by the hegemonic circulating interpretations of indigenism. Hegemony, in the words of William Roseberry, makes ‘the words ... used by subordinate populations to talk about ... or resist their domination [become] shaped by the process of domination itself’ (Roseberry 1994: 361). Yet on the other hand, as Roseberry himself emphasises, hegemony is never sharply demarcated, nor absolute. It is in this that the Gramscian approach to hegemony, in whose tradition Hall and Roseberry work, distinguishes itself from Foucauldian analyses of hegemony that stress its totalizing and normalizing effects. Following a Gramscian theory of hegemony, it is therefore possible

to look not just at the disarticulation or domination of hegemonic discourses over local realities but also to more closely listen to the talk that is relatively more resistant in adapting to dominant discourse. Before I discuss some of these subaltern indigenist currents in the case of Kerala, I will first however look at the related *travelling models* of indigenism at the global level.

### **The travelling models of indigenism**

Out of the reconfiguration of the Left in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century from more explicit class politics towards identity-based routes to emancipation and redistribution, various *travelling models* of indigenous voice have emerged. Usually only those speaking a language closest to the culturalist and legalist discourses that are gaining political momentum are recognized. It may be possible however to distinguish and describe these ‘travelling models’ of indigenous voice with more attention to subaltern interpretation and Anna Tsing’s distinction of three travelling models of indigenous voice may be a useful starting point for this.

The first she distinguishes (2007: 42-5) is concerned primarily with sovereignty and redress. It originates in a Canada-New Zealand axis, initiated by official government visits but continued in the cooperation of New Zealand Maori and indigenous – or soon-to-be-called *First Nations* – leaders in Canada in trying to use treaty rights and government settlements in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries to obtain political purchase. In the course of the 1970s, this axis grew to include indigenous people from the US, Australia and northern Europe, who together organized meetings such as the *International Treaty Council* (1974) to seek UN recognition for tribal treaties.

Tsing’s second model is that of ‘pluri-ethnic autonomy’, originating in the first Inter-American Indigenist Congress in Patzcuaro, Mexico, in 1940, where scholars and political figures from both continents met and a critical discussion on indigenism began. Along this inter-American axis, a radical critique later developed of the official assimilationist policy of *indigenismo* in Mexico. Demands for civil rights, cultural rights, class struggle and political freedom meanwhile were tabled by the Red Power movement in the US. Rather than accepting assimilation, activists seeking pluri-ethnic autonomy demanded a democratic reform of their nation-states through indigenous autonomy. As in the case of the Zapatistas, these struggles seek ‘to expand the possibilities of the nation, not withdraw from it’ (Tsing 2007: 48).

Thirdly, Tsing (2007) distinguishes the model of ‘environmental stewardship’, led by ‘forest dwellers’ – or often in fact their ‘non-native’ representatives – who have neither the purchase of national inclusion nor the precedence of treaty rights. This political current had difficulty taking off because in Brazil – where it originated – international environmentalists and Indians were obstructed by accusations against them as being ‘foreign’ and ‘unpatriotic’. It was only with the break-down of the myth of development in the 1980s and the moment of solidarity between the rural poor and Indians, that global environmentalist-indigenous alliances became legitimate and possible. Enthused by the success of this alliance in the late 1980s in the Brazilian Amazon, international advocates

for forest dwellers' rights also set up camp in other places of environmental interest, notably the Sarawak in Malaysia.

Besides the overlap and convergence between the three models, Tsing also identifies certain *nodes of tension* within each model. Regarding the first model, she points out that the rhetoric of sovereignty is seldom effective. Particularly in countries that only relatively recently gained national sovereignty themselves, sovereignty is 'too precious to be handed out to small groups within the nation' (certainly where this is suspected to be at the command of foreign powers). Where it is successful, as in the US, it produces its own problems as the legal process of being recognized tends to disenfranchise non-recognized tribes as well as people of mixed origin.

'Pluri-ethnic autonomy' also has its tensions, particularly in the fact that the language of autonomous indigeneity does not work out equally well for differently positioned subaltern groups and is sometimes even claimed by elites themselves. Tsing however finds the network around 'environmental stewardship' most problematic as it can lead to a 'natural resource tug-of-war' (2007: 55) in more than one way: firstly, it can pit conservationists' aims of pure human-less 'nature' (a modern bourgeois fantasy) against indigenous people who actually want to live off the land; secondly, it can produce a confrontation between the ideal of the 'self-determination' of indigenous elites to command over – and thus potential exploit – 'their' natural resources and the concerns of environmental groups. According to Tsing, this is mainly because it avoids the real issue that will always continue undermining environmental-indigenous utopias: the fact that 'capitalist resource use structures even the most oppositional design for people and nature in indigenous zones' (2007: 57).

Tsing's distinctions and her attention on *nodes of tension* are extremely useful. Yet there are other possible maps of the indigenist terrain. Jeffrey Sissons (2005), for instance, also distinguishes environmental indigenism, which he calls 'eco-indigenism', from other forms of indigenism but he does not distinguish sharply between the search for indigenous citizenship within the nation-state, as in many Latin American countries, and the quest for territorial sovereignty in separation from the nation-state as he sees the latter merely as an inevitable tendency in countries where – unlike in New Zealand or most of Latin America – indigenous people form a minority and will thus always only at most gain indigenous *minority* citizenship within the nation-state (Sissons 2005: 136–7). More explicitly than Tsing, moreover, Sissons sees eco-indigenism and sovereign indigenism as not just sometimes overlapping but functioning in the same international network, forming one global movement. He therefore worries all the more about the effect of the rising hegemony of eco-indigenism on the indigenous movement as a whole.

In comparison to Tsing, Sissons' approach alerts us more forcefully to the problem of hegemony within the global indigenist movement. At the same time, though, by focusing on a critique of what is perhaps the most oppressive trend within global indigenism, the alternative forms of indigenism become overly simplified or altogether ignored. I do think, for instance, there is a significant political – and not merely geographical – difference between Tsing's 'pluri-ethnic autonomy' and the quest for territorial sovereignty. As the aim of this paper is to pay closer attention to the more subaltern currents in the transnational field of indigenous politics, I would therefore like to suggest a less composite analysis of

global indigenism and define the four indigenist currents I see operating internationally according to the more critical interpretation given to them outside of hegemonic circuits of representation.

The first, which I would call *organic indigenism*, is close to Sissons' 'eco-indigenism' and Tsing's 'environmental stewardship', yet by calling it *organic* I ask more attention to what goes on behind the more romanticized environmentalist (noble savage) discourses and actually appeals to most ordinary people themselves. Organic indigenism is a way to not become living fossils of a past of *harmony with nature* but to project notions of environmental respect into a more modern future, similar to what many small farmers – sometimes equally represented as inhabiting a baseline, traditional stage of human history – dream of (see McMichael 2009: 206). It is a vision of being independent from the multinationals dictating global agriculture today and forming an essential and enervating part of wider society. Organic indigenism stresses the direct practical steps that can be taken towards such a political ideal, starting with the redistribution of land. The geography of this model does not neatly follow the axis set out by Western environmentalist NGOs but rather travels with alternative peasant movements, such as the *Via Campesina* and as part of the World Social Forum, with Mexico-India as a significant axis.

The second form of indigenous politics that emancipatory politics has shifted to I would call *autonomous indigenism* rather than sovereign indigenism, because activists are often all too aware of the trap of mimicking Western national sovereignty regimes. The majority – though sometimes not the leadership – of participants in autonomous indigenous movements is not so keen on literal legal treaties or exclusive tribal zones, but rather seeks greater control over their direct environment and voice in national politics. Many activists know all too well from personal experience that there are shady areas where the indigenous or the tribal inextricably blends into the non-indigenous or non-tribal and that processes of legal recognition can do a lot of violence to this reality. It is along the US-Australia axis that these politics indeed can perhaps best be seen as sovereignty-centred but the more subaltern versions of autonomous indigenism can be found in movements, and their international meetings, across Latin America, Africa and Asia.

Thirdly, I would suggest to consider what Tsing identified as 'pluri-ethnic autonomy' as *democratic indigenism* instead. Here indigenous people namely let go of strict ethnic references altogether and interpret indigeneity more in light of the historical experience of dispossession and exploitation. Before it clearly became autonomy-centred, the Red Power movement was for a while – for instance in 1968 when it closely cooperated with the Black Power movement and other minority and working-class organizations in the Poor People's March on Washington DC (Nagel 1997: 130) – demanding democratic reform of US politics more so than Native American sovereignty. This kind of 'red-black' alliance – between so-called indigenous people and formerly enslaved and other marginalized or exploited populations – is, as we will see, even more evident in South India and seems to travel mainly along the more radical wings of international human rights organizations.

Finally, *Communist indigenism* is a form that is perhaps most subaltern of the four as the more orthodox streams of both Communism and cultural indigenism tend to present themselves as absolute opposites. With usually few resources at their disposal, Communist

indigenists tend to lead a relatively marginalized existence today. The ideological current, travelling amongst the unorthodox, dissident branches of the Communist International, nevertheless has a strong historical basis. Theoretically, it starts from Marx's own latent doubts about the historical necessity of passing through capitalism before reaching communism and his ambivalent admiration for the primitive Russian village community (*mir*), Engels' study of the 'primitive Communism' of the gentile tribe and its egalitarian gender relations, and Lenin's argument in favour of self-determination regarding 'the nationalities question' (many of whom we now call indigenous people) in the Soviet Union. A particularly eloquent and revered exponent of Communist indigenism is Mariategui, a Marxist thinker and Communist Party leader in the 1920s in Peru, who defected from orthodoxy by taking great interest in ethnic and cultural indigenous issues, believing that ethnic observances will lend strength to, rather than detract energy from, the class struggle for a radical reorganization of the economy that was to begin with the issue of land (Mariategui [1928] 1971). He moreover, as most Communist indigenists today, saw in indigenous society a natural proclivity towards socialism. Sometimes, as in the case of Mariategui, the initiative for Communist indigenism lay with indigenous communities (see Becker 2009: 30), but in other cases, for instance in the efforts of Australian Communists to take up the cause of indigenous rights and support aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders in gaining greater control over their lives and communities (Boughton 2001), the initiative lay with non-indigenous Communists. Though its peak seems to have been in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Communist indigenism – the vision of indigenous people as the most revolutionary subjects, both because of their exploitation and because of their more *communist* ethos – continues to travel (though in third class) amongst the more radical, unorthodox fringes of Communist parties or movements.

The four axes of indigenism I distinguish certainly also have their *nodes of tension*, or particularly their hegemonic perversions. They moreover overlap in many ways. This will become clear in the following discussion of the concrete manifestations of these four models in Kerala. It is time to take a closer look at the ideological elements discernible in the emergent discourses of indigeneity in Kerala and how they relate to the four axes identified above. I must emphasise that though I analytically distinguish different ideological influences, I have tried not to manipulate my ethnographic material so as to be able to offer *ideal types* of each, and thus sometimes various ideological elements overlap even in short quotes of what activists say. In the reality of indigenist politics, precisely because of the hegemony of certain ideological drives, we will see that activists almost always mix together different ideological elements and emphasize one or the other according to the particular context in which they speak.

### **Organic indigenism**

Many activists in Kerala hold to the ideal of indigenous people as being less alienated from nature and each other and of leading the way for modern citizens to regain a healthier, more sustainable way of life. Of the various stands of indigenism, the ideology of organic indigenism is moreover the one claiming to be least ideological. It tries to stay away from

the political arena and rather pushes for direct action, centered primarily on acquiring and cultivating land. Organic indigenism also offers a redeeming critique of the life many *adivasis* are forced to live in the rural ghettos or *colonies* located on tiny pieces of land on the edge of villages: a suffocating and *unnatural* life full of internal quarrelling, domestic violence and alcoholism that are considered far from *adivasi culture*. For *adivasis* in such circumstances, organic indigenism holds out both an ideal for a better future and a more honourable identity, one that they can take pride in and set as an example to the rest of society. Although it is focused on the local, organic indigenism also purports to be a powerful counter to commercialized agriculture and multinational interests and a potential solution to climate change and environmental depletion. Proof for the greater environmental awareness of *adivasis* is given by the fact that they used to live in the forest for centuries without logging and depleting the area as contractors are now doing. They moreover continue to have a much greater knowledge of nature. In Kerala, the *adivasi* communities of agricultural labourers leading the indigenist movement are moreover known as expert paddy cultivators. Thus, they are able to ideologically link their current unemployment to Kerala's decreasing food sovereignty as it imports an embarrassing 80 percent of its rice from outside the state (see Jacob 2006).

C.K. Janu, often referred to as the *organic* leader of Kerala's main *adivasi* movement – the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha – was born to parents who were both agricultural labourers, working the paddy fields of local landlords and supplementing their meagre wages with food gathered in the forest. She herself worked most of her childhood as a maid in another family's household and later followed her parents' footsteps, becoming an agricultural labourer herself. Janu does not have any formal education but became literate later in life through a state-wide literacy campaign lead by Leftist activists in the 1980s. She also gained political literacy through becoming a member of the Communist Party's Farmers' Union. Yet she decided it was 'time for *adivasis* to start taking matters into their own hand' (quotes from interview 21 June 2006). As she eloquently says:

Here in Kerala, politicians have led the people beyond politics ... their ideologies have depoliticized the people; they have become blind slaves to political ideologies. In olden times, people were slaves to feudal lords. Now these landlords have vanished and so the people are blind followers of politicians. They think that without the help of politicians nothing can be done.

Janu gained her own piece of land precisely by occupying a government-owned plantation and she continued these activities with other communities, eventually leading a wave of land occupations in Northern Kerala. Most of her activism concentrates on the local level, though she has been on several international tours, some funded by the UNWIP, another (organized together with radical farmers' movements) by the alter-globalist movement People's Global Action. Part of Janu's charisma as a leader lies in her ability to articulate *adivasi* emancipation in a proud and practical manner that nevertheless strongly engages with wider farmers' concerns:



Consider the things that *adivasis* do these days ... it is for the existence of the world, nature, and human existence. Suppose, *adivasis* struggle for land, get land and start cultivating things that are needed for their daily subsistence ... tapioca, *chena* (elephant yam,) *chembu* (a kind of tuber), paddy ... they will not consume all of that ... some of it will reach the market and change the current ways of farming with multinationals' chemical insecticides, which brings all kinds of poison into our bodies. When our traditional products reach the market and people come and buy things there, they become linked to the struggle. Even their blood gets purified when they eat these vegetables. What the *adivasis* do and have done has wider results. Look at how it is for the good of all. And they call it just an '*adivasi* struggle'.

Despite claims to the contrary, most participants in the AGMS and other *adivasis* in Kerala, however, have no reason or even possibility of being more respectful of nature than others, nor are they necessarily that much closer to it. When organic indigenism becomes inflated by elite eco-indigenist exaggerations of indigenous harmony with nature, it becomes particularly problematic. In a piece in *Indigenous Affairs*, the influential publication of the International Working Group on Indigenous Affairs, Janu is tempted to take on a discourse similar to that of many NGO's focus on *biodiversity guardians* claiming that 'for us, the earth has no price – she is our mother – and the forest, our father'.

Sentimentalism that poses *adivasis* as somehow one with nature is, however, easy prey for groups opposing the movement. Nowhere was this clearer than during the most well-known occupation organized by the AGMS at Muthanga, a wildlife sanctuary in the north of Kerala (see Bijoy & Raman 2003). Though ideas about living in harmony with nature had been circulated by the AGMS leadership, the occupiers at Muthanga simply started to plow the earth and plant crops the way they were used to. They were worried about the AGMS' choice of occupying land in a nature reserve as wild elephants were posing a threat to newly planted crops and were terrifying the occupiers themselves. When these kind of stereotype-defying *facts* were *discovered* by a group of notables calling themselves the *Wayanad Environmental Protection Society*, an outraged 'spot investigation report' was sent to the government to 'disclose' that the *adivasis* present at Muthanga were in fact not 'real *adivasis*' but merely 'Janu and her gangmen' (see also Steur 2009). The tragic outcome was that the government eventually felt legitimized in violently suppressing the occupation, leading to two deaths and many permanently injured.

## **Autonomous indigenism**

The drive toward autonomy is an important undercurrent in Kerala's indigenist politics. It partly appeals to the elite *adivasi* communities – particularly the Kurichias – who continue to pride themselves on being amongst the first freedom fighters in India as warriors of Pazhassi Raj, the king who ruled the regions of Northern Kerala, against the British in 1787. For some of the traditionalists among them, it is primarily the desire to regain their imagined status as a ruling elite of the area that attracts them to indigenist initiatives. In contrast, lower-caste *adivasi* communities can also be seen to play with the ideas of auto-

nomous indigenism as the desire to be rid of the claims of those communities who used to have them as bonded. This feeling is still particularly strong among second-generation freed workers. As such, autonomous indigenism finds its expression, for instance, in one of the points of agreement signed between the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha and the Chief Minister of Kerala in 2001 for the state government to pass a cabinet resolution asking the Union government to declare the *adivasi areas* of Kerala *Scheduled Areas* by incorporating them under Schedule V of the Constitution. The latter allows a state's Governor to, upon advice and at least consultation with an established Tribal Advisory Council, prescribe rules in the scheduled area that are not necessarily applicable to the rest of the state. Such rules often include restrictions on the sale of land in such areas and against money-lending practices, but can also include other special laws suggested by the Tribal Advisory Council. It was also in this light that activists set up a check-point at the entrance to the area that the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha occupied at Muthanga wildlife sanctuary, mimicking the official state check-point at the general entrance of the sanctuary and signalling to outsiders to respect the *adivasi* settlement's self-rule.

Before their occupation of Muthanga, the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha had already been setting up informal self-governance structures or *oru sabhas* as a clan(*gothra*)-based, horizontal form of social organizing to counter the centralizing governance of the state and become self-organized. Autonomous indigenism resonates both with the Gandhian ideal of *panchayat raj* (village republics) and with the more recent *people's planning campaign* in Kerala, a government design to devolve significant authority and resources to the *panchayat* (municipal) level. Unlike these campaigns, the AGMS' is however much more culturally-based to prevent democracy from becoming simply local upper-caste rule. Each *clan* or *nation* has its own governance structure with six democratically elected representatives (an equal proportion of men and women) who can be revoked by the clan if necessary. It was also in this fashion that people at Muthanga organized themselves to form the basis for democratic self-governance.

Geethanandan, considered the main *strategic* leader of the AGMS, is perhaps one of the most outspoken proponents of autonomous indigenism. He is a highly-educated *dalit*, holding an MA in Marine Biology. He used to have a prestigious job in the Accountant General's office, which he left however to engage fully in unionizing workers in the unorganized sector. This apparently opened his eyes to the *caste question*:

The people I worked with ... their problems required a caste-based approach rather than a class-based one because the discrimination against them was mainly caste-based. The Left never had any satisfactory answer to caste-based problems (Interview 20 September 2005).

Though having been a leading member of the CPI(Marxist-Leninist), he has now sworn off all Communist ideology:

I have totally rejected or totally ... such Communist movement because they are centralized political systems, statist political systems, like the Brahminical state or the caste structure ... same thing is happening in the Communist

Party. Like the capitalist state ... whether it is the capitalist state or the Brahminical state or the Marxist state ... they are all statist orders ... this graded hierarchy and power structure is there. I would like to negate it.

*Autonomy* certainly in this respect also refers to the need for *adivasis* to organize outside of the co-opting networks of existing political parties. To become freer of the Kerala political scene, Geethanandan has travelled within India to other *adivasi* and *dalit* meetings and reads literature on the struggles of other indigenous groups around the world – notably the *Red Indians* of America and their quest for recognition as sovereign nations. Much of his language resonates with the terminology of sovereign indigenism in the US (as well as with old-fashioned Communist terminology), for example referring to different so-called *tribes* as *nations* fighting for a *homeland* under the guidance of C. K. Janu as a *nationalist leader*. *Autonomy* also however refers to decentralization as the main strategy towards liberation, and Geethanandan indeed strongly believes in the AGMS's drive to revive clan-based forms of organizing as 'a totally decentralized, or actually "non-centralized" form of activity.' He sees the process unfolding in Kerala, whereby *adivasis* are uniting and daring to put forward political leaders of their own, as a historic break-through in terms of the 'autonomy question' and the 'constitutional question'. He was one of the initiators of organizing a political party, the Rashtriya Maha Sabha, as a sister organization of the AGMS in order to make sure *adivasis* would have representatives in the state parliament and thus a political presence in Kerala.

There are nevertheless certain problems that autonomous indigenism poses. One is that autonomous indigenism, especially in connection to organizations based in the tribal state of North-East India, such as the National Front for Tribal Self-Rule, tends to raise the spectre of secessionism, which in turn invites particularly brutal suppression by states. A more internal problem is however that by organizing explicitly on a *clan* basis, it is undeniable that though the aim is to empower people to counter discrimination, the fault lines on the basis of which discrimination takes place in fact deepen. Rather than emphasising their distinctiveness and autonomy from surrounding communities, some of the *adivasis* I talked to preferred to work with and negotiate with neighbouring communities in order to become integrated as equal citizens into Kerala society. As community-based organizing does not guarantee for intra-community solidarity, it may in fact end up being a self-marginalizing strategy. This in any case was the fear some participants in the AGMS' Muthanga occupation expressed to me in reaction to the leadership's call to revert to *adivasi* traditions only, abandon going to church, visiting Hindu temples or sending children to outside schools. Though in principle autonomy does not imply cultural purity, in liberal states claims for autonomy or self-rule tend only to be tolerated if communities can demonstrate some degree of cultural *authenticity* (see Sonntag 2005), which places pressure on *adivasi* communities to start policing each other for such signs. Ideally autonomy gives people the right to determine (and change) their lives as they desire, but such *internal* autonomy is inevitably linked to relational autonomy and thus dependent on the recognition of others. It is a slippery slope from the quest for autonomy to transformation along the criteria set out for such *autonomy* by mainstream society. As Gerald Sider puts it, organized attempts

at achieving autonomy can often end up creating and solidifying the very state that bullies indigenous people into compliance (Sider 2003: xxvi) or, if the opposite strategy is chosen, it can lead people to become even more hard-pressed in the process of denying – and thus being denied – legal recognition or integration (ibid.: lxiii).

### **Democratic indigenism**

In South India, we find another version of indigenism that has its roots in the democratic movement led by *dalits* – the *outcastes* of India – and takes inspiration particularly from the *dalit* leader and father of the Indian constitution, Dr. Ambedkar (see Omvedt 1997). Democratic indigenism mixes the proud assertion of previously despised identities with an emphasis on equal opportunities in participating in modern society. It builds on the theory that *dalits* and *adivasis* belong to the same Dravidian culture or (*dark*) race that was subjugated by the invasion of Aryan Brahmins. The latter introduced a hierarchical caste system to the region that either, in the case of *dalits*, enslaved the original inhabitants or, in the case of *adivasis*, forced them to flee deep into the hills or forests so as to escape this ordeal. In this ideological framework, *dalits* and *adivasis* are in fact the same people as those normally called *dalits* (i.e. the Scheduled Castes/SCs) are also the original inhabitants of the area, whereas those known now as *adivasis* (i.e. the Scheduled Tribes/STs) are also among the most oppressed people of Kerala. For this reason, democratic indigenists have also pushed for the inclusion of *dalits* in the UN Working Group on Indigenous People. *Adivasis* are believed to be closer to the original egalitarian Dravidian culture, though they need their *dalit* brothers, who are closer to mainstream, casteist culture, to better strategically organize their struggle. For both groups, the main enemy is the Brahminical caste system, as either through encroachment or exploitation, caste is the primary source of oppression in Kerala. In this, democratic indigenism strongly condemns the Communist ideology that many *dalits* and *adivasis* in Kerala used to ally to for having in fact nurtured casteism precisely by propagating class as the primary social contradiction and assuming the evil of caste would simply wither away as society progressed. Both in order to take pride in a difficult and oppression-ridden history and to be able to confront the other main ideology on the Left (Communism), democratic indigenism thus formulates its aspirations towards equality and justice in a cultural discourse of indigeneity.

Ramakrishnan, a previous leader of the Adivasi Federation in North Kerala and now member of the Dalit Panthers, is a good example of a democratic indigenist. A Kuruma by origin – one of the two wealthier tribes in Northern Kerala – his family owned some land and worked hard as day labourers for their belief that their son ought to become educated. With the additional help of specific grants and benefits open to Scheduled Tribe students, Ramakrishnan indeed managed to do so: ‘My father and mother met my educational expenses through the money they raised by *kooli pani* [day labour]. And I received some meagre grants from the government also. During that period I mostly stayed in [government] tribal hostels.’

It was during his student days at St. Mary’s College in the city that he became attracted to human rights politics, which he continues to work for beside the government job at the Food Corporation of India he managed to secure through the quota for *Schedu-*

*led Tribes*. About his ideological inclination he says 'Its [the Dalit Panther's] ideology is Ambedkarism. We perceive dalit liberation through Ambedkarism. The term "dalit" in the context of our organization stands for all the oppressed. We use the term not just to represent a particular community.'

'Dalit' for him means 'oppressed ... that's the sense in which Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar used the term: your caste or religion don't matter, it's the intensity of oppression that counts.'

The reason for him leaving the Adivasi Federation was that he saw it as starting to over-represent Kuruma interests at the expense of Ambedkarite ideology. The Dalit Panthers, in contrast, do not stand only for tribes but for all the oppressed. They are well networked with human rights groups in the major Indian cities, particularly the Mumbai Dalit Panthers who in turn were strongly inspired (as the name already reveals) by the Black Panther movement in the US. It is an explicitly modern politics, focused on equal opportunities in education and employment for members of oppressed communities. As Ramakrishnan explains:

The world around us is changing and there is no point in *adivasis* sticking to a particular cultural pattern. Even other orthodox communities, like the Brahmins, have changed. See the world around us is moving fast. So the tribes should not think about going back to the old forest culture ... I won't agree with going back to traditional ways, though there are good adivasi rituals and arts. We should accept the changes that time brings.

One problem that democratic indigenism runs into is that government categorizations – the strict separation between *Scheduled Tribes* and *Scheduled Castes* – are often stronger than ideological commitments to a more unconventional reading of *dalit* and *adivasi* identity. Ironically, the fact that the ideological guru of democratic indigenism in India – Dr. Ambedkar – was himself the person to draft the constitution granting different rights and benefits to *Scheduled Castes* and *Scheduled Tribes* does not make this any easier. *Dalit* and *adivasi* identity moreover do not seem to shape the overall ideology to an equal extent. As Dr. Ambedkar himself did when arguing against the 'indifferentism' of the caste system that lead to 'the aborigines ... remain[ing] savages because they [the Hindus] had made no effort to civilize them, to give them medical aid, to reform them' (Ambedkar in Rodriguez 2002: 279), the critique of caste is often prioritized over a more appreciative understanding of *adivasi* life. It is, moreover, clear to most activists that there are so-called tribes whose political priority would be to get educational benefits, whereas there are ex-untouchable groups whose priority is gaining land. Nevertheless, activists often revert to the SC/ST distinction when the problem comes up of class distinctions (and thus differing priorities) within the movement. A consequence of this is in turn that SC movements tend to favour the so-called *creamy layer* amongst *dalits* whose primary concerns are reservation benefits (as land is no longer an issue to them), whereas ST movements tend to lose the solidarity from so-called *forward* tribes who, already having land and aspiring to other venues of emancipation, see no use in being with a movement centered merely on land rights.

## Communist indigenism

Communist indigenism in Kerala hardly emerges from the official Communist Party as the latter has largely (though not always) followed the orthodox line on the 'tribal question' that says ethnic identities are dividing the working-class and creating false consciousness. While the CPI(M) focused primarily on the urban proletariat as *the* revolutionary agent of history, more unorthodox communist factions had much greater faith in a rural uprisings, notably along the lines of Mao's peasant-based *people's war*. Particularly since the Naxalbari uprising in the late 1960s, radical communists in India started to pay greater attention to marginal, rural populations and for the first time, *tribals* came to be considered the most promising revolutionaries: they were at the same time the most exploited of proletarians – with nothing to lose but their chains – *and* less contaminated by a capitalist mind-set or compromised by capital's integrative power. Naxalbari was the village in West-Bengal where young radical communists came to support the local peasant population in their struggle, and in 1967 staged a violent uprising under the banner of *land to the tiller*. This place, where the various strands of Naxalism that exist today were born, was a predominantly tribal (Santhal) village and by now, with the resurgence of Naxalism in these areas, tribal areas are often seen as synonymous to Naxal areas. By the early 1970s, Naxalism had also reached Kerala, inspiring many of the more radical young Communist Party members to go into the country-side to live amongst the rural poor and support their struggles. Varghese, the young Christian settler and Communist Party member who followed this ideal and became the leader of the Naxalite movement in the seventies in Kerala mostly worked with adivasi agricultural labourers. Together, the more urban communist radicals and *adivasi* workers organized strikes as well as several attacks on police stations in Northern Kerala. During Indira Gandhi's Emergency period, Naxalism was however heavily suppressed. It seems the movement never quite regained its intellectual and political vitality, though today new Naxal factions, such as the Adivasi Liberation Front, have sprung up in the tribal areas of Kerala. Highly critical of the Communist Party, many of these groups focus on the *adivasi* as the primary revolutionary subject and indeed are often lead by *adivasis* themselves.

K. Vasu (interview 28 July 2009) is a good example of a communist indigenist. He was part of Varghese's struggle in the 1970s and suffered from heavy state suppression: for his involvement in an attack on a cruel landlord, who had murdered one of his *paniya* workers, he and a number of his comrades (eight *adivasis* among them) spent seven years in prison – in his case mostly in an isolation cell. Because of his lower-caste background (he is an *Izhava*), he has had only five years of formal education, but he is extremely well-read as he spent hours on end reading in the public village library set up by the Communist Party in his neighbourhood in Calicut. He now lives from the small umbrella store he runs, but still dedicates his life to activism. In the 1970s, when Mao's work was being translated into Malayalam for the first time, he became particularly interested in this ideology and its emphasis on organizing amongst the poorest in the rural areas rather than the official Communist focus on workers in the big cities. He moreover came to see caste oppression as the main contradiction in India:

In India, class is expressed through caste. See, water and ice, they are both made of the same substance but ice is solid and frozen whereas water is fluid. In Kerala, caste is the ice, class is like water. Any Communist should understand this clearly. But unfortunately they have not understood this at all.

He is disappointed not only with the main Communist Party, the CPI(M), but also with the new generation of Naxal groups that are often again led by upper-castes. Therefore, he is presently no longer affiliated with any particular party but strongly supports C.K. Janu:

I first noticed her when she came to Calicut with seventy *adivasi* women to hold a demonstration ... I could not believe it! I remember the *adivasi* men I worked with in the Thirunelli action [the killing of the landlord] ... we were getting ready to go, it was like our last supper – we did not know who would survive and who would die. It was in one of the *adiya* [*adivasi*] houses, about ten or twelve people were sitting around eating. There were two young *adivasi* men on each side of me whom I did not know. They had been told by Varghese to come and sit next to me ... but they did not want to, they were frightened of me. They went to sit beside me but slowly they moved back again to sit next to Varghese because they were afraid ... Now imagine, from this same community a woman leader emerges who comes down to the city with seventy *adivasi* women to protest! So in 1993, when Janu went to jail for her part in a land struggle, I went to interview her. The first thing I asked her was: 'Where do you come from?' 'Thrisilleri', she told me. I told her there were eight *adivasis* from Thrisilleri with me in jail and asked whether she knew them. 'Yes', she said, 'one of them, Kalan, was my uncle'. Janu herself does not know she is the ideological daughter of the Naxalite movement, she is brainwashed in a way that she will not give credit to the Naxalite movement.

Vasu tells of how many *adivasis* now remember the Naxal movement mostly by the police brutalities that followed in its wake. But it was due to the Naxals that *adivasis* managed to end the system of slave trade, that *adivasi* children went to school for the first time, that the land reform laws of the first communist government actually got implemented and that higher wages were paid. At present, Vasu is still active in organizing public debate and supporting the AGMS, trying to convince its leaders – who often stay at his home – of seeing the bigger picture:

Janu is not clear about the fact that you have to fight an ideological fight ... she thinks you can solve the question of land peacefully ... but the problem of landlessness will not be solved if some *adivasis* here and there get land and start leading middle-class lives. *Adivasis* belong to the 70% of Indians who are now even poorer than when the British left. Their main enemy is this feudal Savarna [uppercaste] ideology and for *adivasis* to become liberated that is what we need to fight.

In a place like Kerala where the CPI(M) is a dominant political party that tries to

co-opt any kind of Leftist initiatives that develop in the state into its network and where Naxals have to operate mostly underground, communist indigenism tends to be a rather isolated force in practice. Many intellectuals, like for instance Geethanandan, who used to be a (second-generation) Naxal, have distanced themselves from communism as it is too heavily associated with hypocrisy, the middle classes and a refusal to genuinely engage with oppressed identities other than *class*. It takes an extraordinarily clear-minded and determined activist like K. Venu to steer a middle way between orthodox communist and essentialist indigenism. More isolated Naxal adivasi movements like the present-day Adivasi Liberation Front hold to a rather unfruitful combination of class analysis and cultural rethinking whereby *tribals* simply take the place of the proletariat as revolutionary agents. As K. Venu moreover explains, most ex- or non-communist movements often strongly deny the legacy of communist organizing amongst, by and for *adivasis* and the basis communist movements have laid for present-day indigenist movements. Communist adivasi leaders, such as another uncle of Janu (also called Kalan), who was a critical and outspoken member of the CPI(M), are nowadays disavowed as mere dupes or at best the result of hypocritical symbolic gestures of the CPI(M). A similar discourse disavows Naxalite-adivasi cooperation, claiming that when adivasis joined this was either because they had no idea what Naxalism was about or were even forced into it through the threat of violence. The mutual hostility of ruling communism and new social movements plus the brutal repression of Naxalism in the late 1970s make Communist indigenism a particularly subaltern current in the ideological landscape of indigenism.

## **Conclusion**

Structural transformations that characterize the age of late capitalism – notably the shift from expanded reproduction to accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2005) – have often made explicit class-based mobilization ineffective and people therefore turn to internationally more powerful genres such as that of indigenism: ‘peasant activists became indigenous activists to utilize the international cachet of indigenous politics’ (Tsing 2007: 47). The success of indigenous movements thus often lies precisely in their ability to ‘bring together familiar demands for social justice and the language of indigenous rights’ (ibid.).

This paper discussed the different ideological varieties of these demands for social justice that I saw being articulated in the language of indigenism during my fieldwork in Kerala and linked them with certain transnational political influences. I did this in order to complicate and challenge the idea that the global rise of indigenism is necessarily about the spreading desire for cultural recognition and legal autonomy. On closer inspection, this reading seems to be merely a hegemonic interpretation of indigenism. Elite allies of organic indigenist movements tend to present a picture of indigenous people as living in harmony with nature, whereas on the ground these movements are primarily about getting land and resisting multinational encroachment. Other indigenist activists, who are more concerned with resisting the state as a concentration of power, become remodelled in hegemonic representations as seeking recognition of their authentic indigeneity from this very state. Other readings of indigeneity such as the current that re-interprets indigeneity



as an experience of oppression that can inspire the fight for democratic reform are often not even registered as belonging to the universe of indigenism because the essentialist *commonsensical* category of the *indigenous person* disqualifies such political reinterpretations. In the current conjuncture, communist indigenism is perhaps most overlooked of all as dominant interpretations of indigenism and communism construct these as two opposite ideologies even where they constantly appear together and where many contemporary indigenist leaders have a strong communist background.

It is thus not only a question of whether or not local realities articulate with indigenous identity discourses or not but also of whether local reinterpretations of indigenous identity politics manage to be heard at all. If indeed they are not and hegemonic interpretations of indigenous politics remain simply culturalist, a self-reinforcing cycle of dis-articulation is inevitable. For this reason, it matters whether or not indigenous movements are said to be primarily about claiming recognition for difference or are analysed in their full complexity, beyond hegemonic mirages. As the general frame of indigenism undoubtedly has a tendency towards reinforcing cultural stereotypes and pushing forward legally exclusivist solutions, it is all the more important to consider the contradictions and tensions within the global field of indigenism and to pay due attention to the more subaltern interpretations of indigenist politics.

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## **POVZETEK**

Avtohtonost v južni indijski državi Kerala je danes ravno toliko povezana z zahtevki za prerazporeditev in demokratizacijo kot je s kulturnim priznanjem. Prispevek raziskuje množico kompleksnih in nasprotujočih si ideoloških tokov, ki se skrivajo pod splošnim dežnikom globalne avtohtonosti in začinja s predlogom teoretskega pristopa, ki opozarja na bolj prikriti tokove na tem polju. Nato se premakne na razločevanje med štirimi potujočimi modeli avtohtonosti, ki so se delno izoblikovali na področju, ki ga je prej obvladoval razredni diskurz. Sledi opis izražanja teh potujočih modelov v različnih ideologijah avtohtonosti v Kerali. Zaključujem s trditvijo, da je ravno v pomanjkanju soglasja o tem, kaj avtohtonost pomeni, upanje, da lahko sedanji val mobilizacije avtohtonosti prispeva k oživitvi in poglobljanju demokracije, ne pa zgolj h krepitvi kulturnih stereotipov v Kerali in drugje.

**KLJUČNE BESEDE:** indigenism, politika, aktivizem, ideologija, Kerala

**CORRESPONDENCE:** LUISA STEUR, School of Oriental and African Studies, Department of Anthropology and Sociology, Russell Square, London, UK. E-mail: ls43@soas.ac.uk.