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'Lost innocents and the loss of innocence': interpreting *adivasi* movements in South Asia

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In discussing indigenous peoples movements in South Asia we are concerned with a range of movements that may be subsumed under the title of *adivasi* movements - *adivasi* being a term preferred by the participants in many of the movements themselves.[1] *Adivasi* has been adopted in recent years in India for political reasons similar to those found in Africa, where the term 'tribal' is no longer used because of its association with white racial supremacism and the divide and rule policies of colonial and post-colonial governments. Nonetheless this has not prevented the nineteenth century term 'tribal' continuing in use, especially amongst anthropologists and ethnographers within India, many of whom employ the term both as an an analytical category and simply as a label that can be attached to a variety of social and religious movements. In this there would not be any harm, but for the fact that many of the prejudices and misconceptions associated with the origins of the term have persisted as well. It is arguable that adivasi leaders and ideologues are not innocent of this, and that the very form of their identification and the trajectory of their political struggle, serves to reinforce rather than contradict the prejudices directed against them. The 'indigenous peoples' or adivasi movements in South Asia may even depend on such prejudices for their survival. Indeed, it is arguable that without such prejudices, recently as well as in the past, the adivasis as a community would not exist. The adivasis may thus be regarded as not so much the 'original' inhabitants of South Asia, but the very recent creation of colonial anthropology. Paradoxically, they might be seen as an invention rather than a victim of modernity.[2]

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[1] The word 'adivasi' is used in a dual sense in this paper. Firstly the concept as used by contemporary writers is deconstructed; secondly I use it myself as a purely descriptive category in the context of a discussion of the multiplicity of tribal societies and kingdoms to be found in pre-modern South Asia. Tribal kingdoms are the sites and products of political process and are a valid object of historical enquiry. However the term 'adivasi', I would argue, has no essential, ontological or analytical value.

For an outline of the large number of movements, formerly known as 'tribal movements' , with which we are concerned in this paper see K.S. Singh (ed.), *Tribal Movements in India*, vols. 1 & 2, (Delhi: Manohar, 1982).

[2] This point has been acknowledged in respect of the worldwide indigenous peoples' movement in the report of the Independent Commission on International Humanitarian Issues (ICIHI). This report admits

In India as a whole there are supposedly some 400 different 'tribes' which, depending on how you define them, account for more than 50 million of the population, concentrated in the centre and north-east of the country - a population now more commonly known not as 'tribals', but as the 'adivasis'. The Indian term 'adivasi' derives from the Hindi word '*adi* ', meaning 'beginning' or 'of earliest times', and the word '*vasi* ' meaning 'resident of' - the Hindi equivalent of the Latin term 'aborigine', meaning 'from the beginning', an equivalence that exists not through coincidence, but by design. The epithet was in fact invented by political activists in the area of Chotanagpur in the 1930's, an invention motivated not so much by the idea of abolishing the concept of the 'tribal' altogether (as was later attempted by nationalists in Africa), but rather with the aim of forging a new sense of identity among differing 'tribal' peoples - a tactic which has enjoyed considerable success, with the term subsequently becoming widely popularised.

It can be seen, however, that there is nothing at all 'indigenous' about the term, nor the people which it purports to describe. Indeed, it could be argued that the concept of the adivasi is a product of orientalism. Orientalism has not just been a problem in the western understanding of non-western societies, but a phenomenon that has deeply affected Indians themselves as they have incorporated into their own understanding of Indian society the statistical, canonical, materialistic and self-justificatory interpretations purveyed by colonial administrations. As a result India, over the generations, has in many aspects been re-made in the image invented for it by European colonialists.[3] In this the adivasi shares with other political movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries a vital debt to colonial prejudice. However, the consequence has been legitimising myths that establish claims to political power, not in terms of kings and shrines and the rituals of incorporation, as found in pre-modern adivasi societies, but in terms of very modern notions of property and contract, and using the titles, deeds and descriptions of Indian society established by British cartographic and socio-economic surveys of the mid

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there to be an 'overlap' between indigenous peoples and ethnic and minority groups, but argues that 'indigenous refers to peoples affected by the past 500 years of colonialism', describing them as 'an unresolved part of the legacy of colonialism'. Also cited in this report is the definition of the U.N. Working Group on Indigenous Populations, which insists on two further criteria: non-dominance, and self-definition. In other words they must still be the victims of colonialism in some shape or form and regard themselves principally in the light of this experience if they are to qualify as 'Indigenous Peoples'. The significance and ahistoricism of these definitions are far more profound than the authors themselves may have imagined. cf. ICIHI, *Indigenous Peoples: a global quest for justice*, (London: Zed Books, 1987), pp. 6-9. For a much broader view of the adivasi, rooted in both an historical and anthropological understanding of the subject, with which I am much more sympathetic, see K.S. Singh, *Tribal Society in India: an anthropo-historical perspective*, (Delhi: Manohar, 1985). Also the now rather more dated account in G.S. Ghurye, *The Scheduled Tribes of India*, (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1980).

[3] A useful discussion of Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, and how it has affected understanding of Indian society is to be found in R. Inden, *Imagining India*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990).

nineteenth century.[4] Through their repetitive use as instruments of control by colonial administrators, these ideas came to have a powerful meaning to the subject populations which they affected. And it is from these ideas, and the tempering of 'rights of conquest' by 'rights of occupation' in the British legal framework established in India, that we find the origin of the concept of the 'original inhabitant', and of the priority of their claims to landed property - a crucial constitutive development in the birth of the adivasi. [5]

Another important influence on the idea of the adivasi derived from a quite different direction: this was the idea of *equality*. It arose from pre-modern European origins and was brought to India, not by colonial administrators directly, but by Protestant evangelical missionaries. Merged with concepts of possession and ownership, there evolved under this influence a new, contractual notion of the relationship between the rulers and the ruled, and new claims to political representation amongst the population - claims that were rooted not in status and inherited influence, but in terms of equality and natural right.

Such claims issued forth in a number of forms in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One expression lay in the eruption of a variety of Muslim, Sikh and Hindu reform movements, anxious to revise and update their respective religions in order to meet, and in the light of, the challenge from the West. Amongst them were a number of low-caste, anti-Brahmin movements, which aimed to restructure Hinduism by abolishing the hierarchies of caste.[6] Later on, these movements often found a political voice during the nationalist upsurge of the inter-war years.[7] More recently still, the same demand for political representation has been expressed by groups that were on the margins of social and political agitations during the colonial period. Asserting rights to property and a share in political power, such political movements are to be seen amongst so-called 'indigenous peoples' throughout Africa, Asia and Latin America today. That amongst the 'adivasis' of South Asia is one of the oldest of them all.

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[4] On the nature of colonial epistemology and the mechanisms of colonial governance see B. Cohn, 'The Command of Language and the Language of Command', in R. Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies IV* , (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985), and 'The Invention of Authority in Victorian India', in E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983).

[5] See J.D.M. Derrett, *Religion, Law and the State in India,* (London: Faber & Faber, 1968), and D.A. Washbrook, 'Law, State and Agrarian society', *Modern Asian Studies*, 15, 3: 649-721, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

[6] For an overview see K.W. Jones, *The New Cambridge History of India, III.I: Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). An account of the creation of a lower-caste identity, influenced by the activity of Christian missionaries in 19th century western India, is to be found in R. O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985).

[7] For the untouchables, or dalits (meaning 'oppressed ones') as they are now known, the principal spokesman in the 1920's was B.R. Ambedkar and later on, in the 1930's, Mahatma Gandhi himself, who invented the somewhat patronising title of 'Harijans', or 'children of God', for members of this community.

The concept of the adivasi

According to the political activists who coined the word in the 1930's, the 'adivasis' are the original inhabitants of South Asia, and are entitled to special privileges; the bulk of the population today are described as 'Indo-Aryan' and are therefore considered as alien interlopers by adivasi activists .

The term Indo-Aryan itself derives from the popular (though now contentious) belief that the Indian civilization as we know it began only after the invasion of Aryan peoples from the north, some time around the second millenium B.C. [8] It was the Aryans, supposedly, who originated the Hindu religion, and accordingly in Brahminic ideology the adivasis, although having a special status, are often associated with the untouchables or harijans, amongst the lowliest section of society.[9] In the modern mind the two are also constructed in a similar fashion, in that both are regarded as 'backward communities', educationally, economically and socially, and because of this they have been made the beneficiaries of special legislation aimed at raising their status within the society of independent India.

So committed were the founders of modern India to the 'upliftment' of the adivasis that they are specifically mentioned in the constitution, which singles out the so-called 'scheduled' castes and tribes as in need of special regard and consideration because of their traditionally low status within Indian society. Accordingly, the government has since 1951 instituted a whole series of schemes including, most controversially, the reservation of posts in the government and universities for members of these communities in order to improve their position. In many cases, however, it is arguable that these attempts at positive discrimination (as with most 'instrumental' efforts at social engineering) have not solved but merely aggravated the problem of caste prejudice within Indian society, the policy having recently provoked a ferocious backlash amongst higher caste groups in Indian society and the revival of militant Hindu chauvinist political parties such as the Shiv Sena, Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the Bharatiya Janata Party.

These failures of reservation ought to have been no surprise, given the very flimsy rationale on which the policy was based. In particular, the grouping of adivasis and harijans together for the purposes of legislation as 'backward communities', was not only

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[8] A contestation of this theory may be found in C. Renfrew, *Archaeology and Language: the puzzle of Indo-European origins*, (London: Penguin, 1987). The idea originated in the writings of the eighteenth century Indologist, Sir Willliam Jones, see J. Leopold, 'The Aryan theory of race', *Indian Economic & Social History Review* [*IESHR*], 7, 2: 271-297, (Delhi: Sage, 1970).

[9] The idea of a 'pre-Aryan' golden age formed a basis for the rejection of caste amongst low-caste Hindus, as well as amongst the so-called adivasis. For the former, see R. O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology*, chs. 8 and 9.

anachronistic, but also historically inaccurate. For example, it can easily be shown that many groups within Indian society are highly economically disadvantaged, although neither adivasi or harijan. Equally, it is the case that many adivasis and harijans have either acquired, or have always had a high status and economic security (it being largely these elite sections amongst the scheduled groups that have monopolised many of the benefits conferred by discriminatory legislation).

In fact many of the so-called 'adivasis' were originally Hindus, and became adivasis either because of a decline in their economic position in society, or because, more recently, it has actually been to their advantage to call themselves 'adivasis'. A consequence has been that since the introduction of the policy of reservation, the number of adivasis in India as a proportion of the total population has actually increased from 5.3 % in 1951 to 7.3 % in 1971, a reverse of the steady trend of declining numbers in the pre-independence period. This phenomenon suggests very clearly that the category of the 'adivasi' or tribal, like so many social categories within Indian society, is a highly variable one, defined by associations of status and by economic factors that can change considerably over time.

The term 'tribal' has indeed been coined at times to describe anyone who practices slash and burn cultivation or hunting and gathering, regardless of their culture or for how long they have been doing this. A very good example of this are the Badaga, inhabitants of the Nilgiri Hills, described by the anthropologist Paul Hockings, who were regarded for a long time as 'tribals' for their practice of slash burn, although they were originally settled peasant cultivators of the Mysore plain until they were driven into the hills by warfare some time in the sixteenth century.[10] At the same time, whilst economics can play a part in defining a community, many settled farmers still call themselves 'adivasis', whilst there are many hunter-gatherers and slash and burn agriculturists in India today who call themselves 'Hindu'. From this we may conclude that 'adivasi' communities cannot be easily distinguished from Hindu peasant communities by their way of life. But then neither is it easy to describe the 'adivasis' by their religion, since Hinduism itself is so highly eclectic. Adivasis are often described simply as 'animists', but this does little justice to their religious beliefs, which can often be highly complex. Many supposedly Hindu gods, such as Kali (in Bengal) or the supposed incarnation of Vishnu at Jagannath in Puri, were also in fact originally tribal Gods, and are still regarded as such by many today. Discussions with a Brahmin pundit in Benares might give one the impression that Hinduism is a religion with coherent customs and rituals established over many centuries, about which the devout are dutiful and precise in their observance (an impression received

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[10] Paul Hockings, *Ancient Hindu Refugees: Badaga social history, 1550-1975*, (The Hague: Mouton, 1980); W. Ross King, *The Aboriginal Tribes of the Nilgiri Hills*, (London: Longmans, 1870).

by many early British scholars of Hinduism), but the reality as one sees it on the margins of Indian society is one of eclecticism, change, and frequent borrowings which makes it extremely difficult to be certain where one religion ends and another begins.[11]

In this respect Indian religions are like Indian languages with the boundaries of one frequently merging into another. The main source of consistency in both respects, indeed often the only source of consistency, is politics. More specifically, political power, manifest in the ability of the State, or one ruler or another, to insist on a particular language or a particular religion being the normative language or religion within the boundaries of a certain territory. This can be seen very clearly if one examines the history of particular 'adivasi' kingdoms, such as the central Indian kingdom of Bastar, or even simply by looking at modern South Asia, which has been fiercely divided over what language should be the language of government, or how the boundaries of states and nations should be drawn.[12]

In the state of Bastar the *lingua franca*, amongst all the 'adivasi' groups, was halbi, not because this was the most widely spoken, nor even because it was a local adivasi dialect, but simply because this was the language used by the bodyguard hired by the Raja or king of Bastar, who were a group of low caste Hindus - the Halbas. Likewise, the state religion involved the worship of the devi goddess Danteshwari at her shrine in Dantewada, to which human sacrifices were allegedly made. The Raja could not remain king unless he protected and supported this shrine, whilst at the same time the adivasis respected him because he was himself supposedly an earthly incarnation of the goddess (whose image was in the shrine) - a neat conundrum which legitimised all religious and political practices within the state.

Bastar might be regarded as exceptional in its political and religious rituals, given that the ruling dynasty was originally Hindu. Nonetheless the Hinduism of the ruling family was criss-crossed with tribal ritual in order to render it acceptable to the population, whilst Hindu ideas were similarly added to local religious customs. The result was that whilst the Raja viewed the devi at Dantewada as an incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu and his subjects as members of the army of the mythical monkey-god Hanuman, the adivasis regarded their Raja as an an incarnation of the Earth goddess Tallur Mattee, who could be propitiated only by offerings of animal and human blood. This is not as bizarre as it may seem. Accommodations and a multiplicity of symbols and meanings in religious ritual are

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[11] To argue so is not 'orientalist', as the same can be said of early western Christian society as well.

[12] This is a phenomenon that is by no means exclusive to South Asia. Examples of similarly constructed identities found elsewhere in the world are given in Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communties: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, (London: Verso, 1983).

usual in South Asia. At the same time, it may be added that the political arrangement in Bastar, although a product of conquest, was by no means uncommon.[13] In this particular kingdom, by necessity, religion was defined by politics and politics in turn by religion, in such a way that neither could be described as innate or essential. The same can also be said for the category of 'the adivasi'.

The adivasis as a 'backward community'

Before continuing with the very elusive problem of defining the adivasi, it is necessary to go back to the idea of the 'adivasis' and harijans both being 'backward communities', which is an important part of modern thinking on the subject. The term 'backward community' originated with British legislation which set up the earliest forms of quasi-representative government in India in the 1920's. Beginning with the Government of India Act of 1918, these early concessions by the British to Nationalist opinion in India allowed elected representatives to sit in provincial legislative assemblies which had the power to make laws in certain areas. These assemblies were also crowded with officials and other European nominees, supposedly on the justification that certain communities from certain 'scheduled areas' were either too backward or oppressed to be able to properly exercise a vote, and their representatives had therefore to be appointed by the administration (a policy frequently resorted to in central India).

It was for the same reason that separate seats were also established for different religious communities. By asserting that they could never co-operate the British made the conditions for their co-operation impossible. This was all part of what Indian nationalists called the British policy of 'divide and rule', and it was by using the same arguments and by appointing a large number of officials to represent the interests of minorities that the British were able to justify retaining a right of veto over nearly all the affairs of government.

Despite its roots in the political opportunism of a colonial regime, the view that 'adivasis' were somehow 'backward', and unable to represent themselves, has nonetheless stuck to this day, probably because the idea has been opportune and persuasive to more than a few. Indeed it is arguable that colonial perceptions and policies were not entirely invented *de novo*, but were an extension in some cases of Brahminical prejudices.[12]   More

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[13] The impact of colonialism, the nature of political and religious practice in Bastar, and its implications for the understanding of Hindu Kingship and of the relations between Caste and Tribe elsewhere in India, I have addressed in two as yet unpublished papers: ' "The invention of perdition": human sacrifice and British relations with the Indian kingdom of Bastar in the 19th century' and 'Dasehra and revolt: problems of legitimacy in 20th century Bastar', presented at the Centre d'Études de l'Inde et de l'Asie du Sud in the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme in Paris, April 1992.

importantly, since poverty was taken as a mark of 'backwardness', colonial anthropologists could readily find evidence of both, since by the time they were writing 'adivasi' societies were commonly in a state of crisis.

The economic difficulties for many of the so-called 'adivasi' communities in fact began in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries when the introduction of British conceptions of property rights and a European legal system deprived them of vast areas of land. The stereotype thus soon developed of the 'adivasi', like it did of the American Indian, as an uneducated, landless and poverty-stricken indigent. In reality, however, the majority of adivasis lived comfortable lives, at least until the colonial period, having control over large areas of land, having armies, an aristocracy, tax collection and judicial systems of one sort or another, and often enjoying lucrative trading relations with merchants (such as the Banjaras) and Hindu cultivators in the plains. Examples include the Ahom kingdom, which flourished in the north-east of India between the thirteenth and late eighteenth centuries, which had armies and a sophisticated irrigation system.[14] And in central India there were numerous 'adivasi' kingdoms which survived, in some cases, from medieval times right up until the nineteenth century.

Amongst the adivasi kingdoms of central India was that of Garha-Mandla, in the area of modern Jubbulpore and Mandla, which withstood numerous invasions from the north, being finally defeated by the Mughals in the mid sixteenth century after a battle in which the Queen, Durgavati, commanded an army purportedly including several hundred elephants. The account of this army was probably exaggerated since it derives from the Ain-i-akbari, the chronicles of the emperor Akbar, which (in common with other Mughal sources) tends to enlarge the opposing odds and hence the scale of the Emperor's victories (it is also unlikely that elephants were in any case of very great military use in the highlands of central India). But although there may not have been any war elephants, there were certainly large fortresses and defensive walls, constructed by the adivasis out of stone, and the remains of these can be seen today. Another 'adivasi' leader from central India, Bukht Buloond, also performed creditably in battles in the mid seventeenth century with the Emperor Aurangzeb, who eventually signed a treaty with him, accepting his conversion to Islam, rather than continue with the struggle. He too has left forts and other ruins to commemorate his rule.[15]

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[14] Surajit Sinha (ed.), *Tribal Polities and State Systems in Pre-colonial Eastern and North Eastern India*, (Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi, 1987)

[15] The ruins of these forts today are highly inaccessible, but photographs of them may be found in nineteenth century gazetteers, for example that for the Chhindwara district, published in 1867, which illustrates the ruins of Deogurh fort, to be found near the modern village of Deogarh. The keep of the Garha fortress, known as the Madan Mahal, also still crowns the range of hills along the foot of which the town of Jabalpur is built.

The 'adivasi' in history

The existence in the recent past of organised and powerful adivasi kingdoms within India should be no great surprise, since so-called 'tribal groups' have been important in the history of both Europe and Asia since ancient times. There are, indeed, numerous ruling dynasties which originated as invading tribal groups, such as the Manchu Chi'ing dynasty (which ruled China up until the beginning of this century), or the Khans in Persia. In India too, many of the dominant castes, such as the Jats of north India, or the Marathas of western India, were originally tribal groupings, and these tribal communities cut across caste associations as well as pre-dating them in many cases.[16] The problem is that most were non-literate cultures which, unlike the Mughals for example, have left no written records to tell us of their achievements - a problem similar to that faced by students of the predominantly oral civilizations of pre-modern Africa, Scandinavia and North America. The temptation has always existed therefore to regard these communities as 'backward', and to view them as in some way previous rather than parallel to our own or other contemporaneous civilizations. Either that, or historians have completely ignored them.

This temptation was particularly strong to European writers in the nineteenth century who were imbued with a sense of racial and cultural superiority and who were enthusiasts for the new theory of evolution, which seemed to explain the whole of the natural world to them and to justify their own pre-eminence.[17] That tribal peoples might be considered as evolutionary antecedents, as inferior examples of humanity, was confirmed by the ease with they were conquered. And the impression that they were somehow inferior or previous human specimens, legitimised the whole imperial enterprise, making conquest not merely a right of the fittest, but a duty, if the world was to be civilized and the evolution of man advanced.[18]

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[16] The classic text on this is R.G. Fox, *Kin, Clan, Raja and Rule: state-hinterland relations in pre-industrial India*, (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1971). See also Sunita Zaid, 'The Mughal State and tribes in seventeenth century Sind', *IESHR*, 26, 3: 343-362, (Delhi: Sage, 1989), and Chetan Singh, 'Conformity and conflict: tribes in the "agrarian system" of Mughal India', *IESHR*, 25, 3: 319-340, (Delhi: Sage,1988).

[17] Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man*, (New York: Pelican, 1984); G. Huizer and B. Mannheim (eds.), *The Politics of Anthropology: from colonialism and sexism toward a view from below*, (Mouton, The Hague: 1979). For examples see M.D. Biddis (ed.), *Images of Race*, (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1979).

[18] A classic of this school is J. Peggs, *India's Cries to British Humanity: an historical account of Suttee, Infanticide, Ghat Murders and Slavery in India*, 3rd edition (London: Simpkin & Marshall, 1832). This influential book, which brought the term 'juggernaut' among other things into the English language, was originally published as a series of pamphlets by the Coventry Society for the Suppression of Human Sacrifice in India.

These ideas persisted for a long time, despite their evident absurdity, and despite contestation by authors such as Thomas Huxley, mainly because they were very convenient. Apart from justifiying a European sense of superiority, the taxonomy of race and cultures also made the management of the imperial territories very much easier. In the search for collaborators in imperial rule, or culprits for the failures of the colonial government, the new 'science' of anthropology in particular was of enormous importance as it seemed to enable entire sections of society to be stigmatised or encouraged without one ever having to know in detail exactly who they were. In this way theories about supposedly 'criminal' tribes and so-called 'martial' races (such as the Sikhs) facilitated the understanding and the administration of vast territories which might otherwise have appeared utterly strange, chaotic and threatening.[19]

These ideas were then used as a basis for legislation such as the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, which subjected to restrictions whole sections of the Indian population who were judged to be a threat to peace and order.[20] Many of the problems of the people who call themselves 'adivasi' therefore originate from their having become just such an *object* of colonial policy. In this context, I have already mentioned the policy of 'divide and rule', but many of the tribal communities were also seriously affected by the range of policies adopted in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries aimed at settling the countryside in the wake of the colonial conquest.[21] By this is meant the new revenue systems, the law courts, and the Western legal concepts in the administration of land rights which were introduced at the beginning of the colonial period. Drawn as they were from European experience, where hunting and gathering, pastoral and other shifting forms of agricultural economy had long since been marginalised or extinguished, these concepts and institutions had the effect in India of destroying adivasi economic systems almost overnight.

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[19] See A. Kirk-Greene, ' "Damnosa Hereditas": ethnic ranking and the martial races imperative in Africa', *Ethnic & Racial Studies*, 3, 4: 393-414, (London, 1980). Also Talal Asad (ed.), *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*, (London: Ithaca, 1973); G.W. Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology*, (London: Macmillan, 1987); C. Fyfe, 'Race, empire and the historians', *Race & Class*, 33,4: 15-30, (London: Institute of Race Relations, 1992).

[20] S. Nigam, 'Disciplining and policing the "criminals by birth", parts 1 & 2', *IESHR*, 27, 2 & 3: 131-165 & 257-288, (Delhi: Sage, 1990); E.J. Gunthorpe, *Notes on Criminal Tribes Residing in or Frequenting the Bombay Presidency, Berar and the Central Provinces*, (Bombay: Govt. Press, 1882); J. Kennedy, *The Criminal Classes of India*, (Delhi, 1907, reprinted by Mittal Publications, 1985); Augustus Somerville, *Crime and Religious Beliefs in India*, (Calcutta: The Criminologist, 1929). What was convenient in India was also convenient in Africa, with the policy of 'indirect rule', amongst other things, producing very similar results: see L. Vail (ed.), *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa*, (London: James Currey, 1989) and T. Ranger, 'The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa', in E. Hobsbawm & T. Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*.

[21] See C.A. Bayly, *The New Cambridge History of India, II.I: Indian society and the Making of the British Empire*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1988), ch. 5.

Sometimes this was done deliberately out of a desire to encourage settled systems of agriculture which could more easily be taxed. Often, however, adivasis were thrown off their land and prevented from pursuing their traditional occupations simply through ignorance of their importance within the Indian economy. As a consequence, whole communities of adivasis were turned into migrants, sometimes almost overnight, being forced to roam the countryside in search of work, many of them ending in employment in the newly-established tea plantations in Assam, the coal mines, jute mills and steel factories of Bengal, or in far off destinations such as the sugar plantations of Jamaica, Mauritius and Fiji - these distant overseas destinations absorbing some two million of the Indian population between 1860 and 1920 (excluding the numbers which migrated to Malaysia and Sri Lanka).[22]

A common misconception held by colonial administrators was that, being 'primitive' societies the activities of the 'adivasis' were of little value, and unrelated to those of the settled tax-paying cultivators of the plains. However, the truth of the matter was that many so-called 'tribals', such as the Gonds of Deogurh in central India, had previously been plainsmen themselves, only later on being driven into the hills by warfare and the growing numbers of Hindu settlers. And even in the early nineteenth century the adivasis of central India had often continued to produce a range of important and valuable products upon which the plains people depended. These included iron ploughshares, made and sold to the peasants of the plains by a tribe called the Agaria.[23] The adivasis also produced and sold axeheads, myrobolams (dyes), wood, mahua (an alcoholic drink), cattle, silk, spices and tendu leaves (from which bidis, an Indian type of cigarette, were and continue to be made). These they exchanged for salt and grain which they obtained either directly from adjacent peasant communities, or by trading with the Banjaras, a trading group, whose caravans traversed the length and breadth of India in the days before the advent of railways.

Adivasi areas were vital for Banjaras because of the grazing they provided (as well being a source of young bullocks) and central India was traversed by two such Banjara routes, one beginning in Hyderabad and heading north through Burhanpur, and the other coming from the eastern coast in Orissa and passing up north though Garha-Mandla. This second caravan began loaded with salt, which the Banjaras then traded for grain, bullocks, raw silk, iron etc. in the adivasi areas before heading on to Mirzapur in the north of India. Even as late as the 1820's this trade was substantial, employing as many as 100,000 pack-

[22] C. Bates & M. Carter, 'Tribal migration in India and beyond', in G. Prakash (ed.), *The World of the Rural Labourer in Colonial India,* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992).

[23] V. Elwin, *The Agaria*, (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1942).

bullocks.[24] The impact of colonial policies was such, however, that this this trade had been completely extinguished by the 1860's, and the once prosperous Banjaras (who had helped supply the armies of the British during their wars with the Marathas and other Hindu princes), had by the end of the nineteenth century been reduced from their earlier position socially and economically on the boundaries between 'caste' and 'adivasi' society to the status of a wholly 'criminal tribe', known only for their 'vagrancy' and their propensity for thieving.[25]

The experience of the Banjaras mirrored that of many other 'adivasi' communities, and it is in this recent experience of impoverishment, and this only, that lies the conception of many of these communities as 'backward'. But even if backward, or economically 'irrelevant' as far as the British were concerned within the pattern of the colonial economy, the importance of 'adivasi' communities politically and socially continued well into the present century.

Although regarded by some British scholars as inferior to caste Hindus, the status of 'adivasis' in practice most often paralleled that of the Hindus, being regarded by most not so much as inferior as simply outside of the caste system. Nearly every Hindu village in central and northern India in fact depended (and still does) on locally resident adivasis, such as the Pardhans in Madhya Pradesh, to perform magic rites at certain times of the year and at marriage ceremonies, and who were also asked to drive out disease or the threat of poor crops.[26] In areas where they accounted for a large proportion of the population, adivasis furthermore often wielded considerable ritual and political power, being involved in the investiture of various kings and rulers throughout central India and Rajasthan.

Where such Hindu-tribal associations were broken, as in the nineteenth century Himalayan kingdom of Garhwal, the Raja was often no longer able to maintain his authority, or his kingdom.[27] Other, originally Hindu Rajas, sometimes had to adopt adivasi religions and forms of government completely in order to rule their territories.

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[24] J.T. Blunt, 'Narrative of a route from Chinargur to Yentragoodum...1795', in *Early European Travellers in the Nagpur Territories*, (Nagpur: Govt. Press, 1930). A more detailed discussion of this trade may be found in C. Bates, 'Tribalism, dependency and the sub-regional dynamics of economic change in central India,' in C.J. Dewey (ed.), *The State and the Market: studies in the economic and social history of the third world*, (Riverdale, U.S.A.: 1987).

[25] S. Nigam, *op. cit.* M. Radhakrishna, 'The criminal tribes act in Madras Presidency: implications for itinerant trading communities', *IESHR*, 26, 3: 269-296, (Delhi: Sage, 1989).

[26] Samrau Hivale, *The Pardhans of the Upper Narbada Valley*, (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1946)

[27] J.-C. Galey, 'Reconsidering Kingship in India: an ethnological perspective', in J.-C. Galey (ed.), *Kingship and the Kings*, (New York, Harwood Academic publishers, 1989). The status of the *gaddi* (or throne) in general and in the kingdom of Garhwal is discussed on pp. 166-185.

From this we may conclude that historians ought not think of 'Adivasi' and 'Hindu' kingdoms as being entirely distinct in form and structure. All too often however adivasi kingdoms are thought of as static and backward societies outside of the mainstream of Indian culture. That this is not so I believe to be very clearly illustrated by the case of the kingdom of Bastar - which was itself a relatively recent creation, having been founded by migrants, the family of Annam Deo, who were forced to move northwards into the highlands of central India in the early fourteenth century following the Muslim invasion of their homeland at Warangal in Andhra Pradesh.

Looking at 'tribal history' more generally some historians, such as Christopher Bayly, have argued that 'adivasis' were involved not only in the downfall of kingdoms, but of whole empires, the Muslim empires of the Ottomans and Safavids, as well as the Mughals falling prey to tribal incursions in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries during the periods of their decline.[28] And rebellious tribesmen caused as much trouble for the British as they did for their Mughal predecessors. Throughout central India in the 1820's they had to battle against hordes of raiding horsemen, probably unemployed Afghani tribal mercenaries (Rohillas), known to the British as 'Pindaris', and they also had to deal with widespread insurrections amongst the Gonds, Bhils and Bundela communities.

In recent research I have found large numbers of 'adivasis' to have been involved in fighting during the great uprising of 1857, known as the 'Indian Mutiny', although they feature little in conventional accounts.[29] Some areas and some tribal communities, in fact, were never effectively pacified, from which one might conclude that the *pax britannica* in India was something of a myth. There were, for example, a total of more than twenty uprisings in Assam between 1826 and 1932 (when the last revolt of the Nagas was put down). There were also a succession of uprisings by the Mal Paharias of Bihar, and by the Lushais and Daflas of Assam, as well as spectacular insurrections by the Hos of Singhbum, and the Khonds of Orissa and Andhra Pradesh.

Those who retained some land and some independence usually put up the stiffest resistance, and thus during the Santhal *hool* or insurrection in Bihar in central India in 1855, fighting continued for many months and some 10,000 adivasis were killed in British

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[28] C.A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: the British empire and the world, 1780-1830*, (London: Longman, 1989); M. Alam, *The Crisis of Empire in Mughal North India: Awadh and the Punjab, 1707-1748*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986).

[29] See also D. Baker, 'Colonial beginnings and the Indian response: the revolts of 1857-58 in Madhya Pradesh', *Modern Asian Studies*, 25, 3: 511-543, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). It is my belief that unemployed mercenaries and nomadic and newly landless tribesmen were also an important part of the bandit problem in central India, which became known from the 1830's onwards as the criminal and religious conspiracy of *Thuggee*.

reprisals before the movement was effectively suppressed: a fateful struggle which turned the Santhal districts into one of the biggest sources of migrant labour in the second half of the nineteenth century.[30] Other areas such as the Gudem-Rampa region of Andhra Pradesh were a constant source of unrest throughout the nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries, the most important and recent of these uprisings being in the Telengana region: a communist-led struggle which lasted from 1946 to 1951, covering an area of 16,000 square miles, and which eventually had to be put down by the army of independent India.[31]

It was in these struggles against the colonial government and against the Hindu settlers and money-lenders that came in their wake, that many of the tribal communities for the first time began to forge a common identity, an identity which often conflicted with the ideals of Indian Nationalism being developed by Mahatma Gandhi and the Congress party in the 1920's and '30's.[32]

During the independence movement itself, the Congress seriously attempted to co-opt many adivasi movements, but failing to understand what they were about they were usually unsuccessful, and adivasi agitations against the colonial authorities remained largely beyond their control.[33] Sometimes indeed they were as much opposed to Congressmen as they were to the British: examples include the Devi movement in Gujarat in the 1920's, which involved the boycott of Parsi liquor-dealers and moneylenders who were supporters of the Congress, and an agitation that took place in the central Indian zamindari of Dondi-Lohara over the loss of forest rights, which began in 1927 and continued until the early 1950's and which was actively opposed by the Congress government when it was in power in the province between 1937 and 1939.[34]

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[30] An account of this insurrection is given in Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983).

[31] D. Arnold, 'Rebellious Hill-men: the Gudem-Rampa risings, 1839-1924', in R. Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies 1*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982); M. Atlury, 'Alluri Sitarama Raju and the Manyam rebellion of 1922-24', *Social Scientist*, 131: 1-33, (Delhi, 1984); P. Sundarayya, *Telengana People's Armed Struggle, 1946-1951*, (Delhi: National Book Centre, 1985).

[32] An example of the invention of a form of an 'adivasi identity' in the Chittagong Hill tracts, that began long before the advent of the anti-colonial movement in India and was largely unaffected by it, is given in W. Van Schendel, 'The invention of the "Jummas": state formation and ethnicity in Southeastern Bangladesh', *Modern Asian Studies*, 26, 1: 95-128, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). See also Bain Attwood, *The Making of the Aborigines*, (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989), an account of the invention of an 'aboriginal' identity amongst the indigenous peoples of southern Australia.

[33] For a summary of the issues involved here see S. Sarkar, '*Popular' Movements and 'Middle Class' Leadership in Late Colonial India: perspectives & problems of a 'history from below'*, (Calcutta: Centre for Social Studies, 1983).

[34] D. Hardiman, *The Devi Movement: adivasi assertion in western India*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press,1987). My own research into Dondi Lohara will be published in the near future.

The 'adivasis' today

From the above it should be apparent that relations between the Congress party, which brought India to independence, and the 'adivasis', have always been somewhat fraught. Since independence, the policy of the Indian government has been a curious mixture of inversions and reproductions of the earlier policies of the British. Initially, although maybe agreeing with the British that the 'adivasis' were still too 'backward' to be allowed responsible government, they rejected altogether the idea that they ought be protected in special reservations. Sardar Patel, the nationalist leader and first home minister of the government of Independent India, whilst answering a question in Parliament by Jaipal Singh, the President of the Adivasi Mahasabha (an important political voice for the adivasis by the 1950's), thus described the government's policy as one of '...endeavouring to bring the tribal people up to the level of Mr. Jaipal Singh and not keep them as tribes, so that 10 years hence...the word "tribes" may be removed altogether when they should have come up to our level.'[35] As a consequence, although benefiting from the measures of positive discrimination introduced to promote the employment of harijans and other 'backward communities' in the government service, the adivasis lost much of the protection, such as it was, that had been given to what remained of their land in the later years of colonial rule. Inevitably, a wholesale destruction of forests in the adivasi areas ensued, with a million Biharis migrating into and settling in the adivasi areas of Chotanagpur in central India, for example, between 1951 and 1971. This deprived thousands of 'adivasis' of their land: landlessness amongst the adivasis as a whole increasing from 20% to 33% in the ten years between 1961 and 1971 alone.[36]

Belatedly recognising the inadequacies of its policy the Government of India has established tribal development blocks, 'social forestry programmes', and special funds to assist these areas, and has re-introduced certain restrictions on the sale of tribal lands. This reversal has been ineffective however, and in both Chotanagpur and Bastar in the 1970's adivasi agitators have blocked government forestry programmes in protest at the lack of attention that has been paid to their needs and the sacrifice of 'adivasi' lands to commercial interests.[37]

Resentment amongst adivasi communities has also encouraged a succession of protest movements, including the Jharkhand agitation - calling for a separate 'adivasi' state in

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[35] G.S. Ghurye, *The Scheduled Tribes of India*, p. 349.

[36] S.N. Dubey & R. Murdia, *Land Alienation and Restoration in Tribal Communities in India*, (Bombay: Himalaya, 1977); K.S. Singh, *Economies of the Tribes and Their Transformation*, (Delhi: Concept, 1982), p. xii.

[37] R.S. Anderson & Walter Huber, *The Hour of the Fox: tropical forests, the World Bank, and indigenous people in central India*, (Delhi: Vistar, 1988).

central India, the Chipko movement - a movement of peasants and tribals in the Himalayas who have been campaigning for many years against the degradation of the forests on which they depend for a livelihood, and the revolutionary Naxalite movement - which began as student-led communist insurrection in Bengal in the late 1960's and early '70's, and which, following its suppression by the government of India, has subsequently become established in several of the more backward areas in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh.[38]

Most recently furious controversy has blown up over the issue of reservations, which have encouraged a backlash amongst high caste Hindus resulting in widespread rioting (a virtual caste war) throughout the north of India, and the self-immolation of some fifty high school and university students. This problem had been escalating since 1981, but was brought to a head in 1990 by the proposal of the government of Mr. V.P. Singh to extend the quotas of government posts and university places allowed to members of the 'backward communities'.[39] Together with the scheduled castes, the adivasis are the main victims of the violence which has erupted. Like the discrimination that reservation is supposed to deal with, one therefore cannot help but think that the 'adivasis' are as much victims of the solution as of the problem to begin with.

For politicians a way out of this impasse will probably lie in new policies which end the attempt to use counter-caste prejudice to deal with caste prejudice, and which see the adoption of primarily economic criterian to assist the advancement of underprivileged communities. For historians and anthropologists the dilemmas are, in intellectual terms, perhaps more acute. In recent times it is arguable that the adivasis have taken on many of the characteristics of a super-exploited economic class - their marginalisation in the nineteenth century having turned them into a reserve of cheap labour and one of India's most important migratory groups - a phenomenon well illustrated by the annual migration of some 250,000 Biharis from the east of India to the Punjab in the west, where they are employed as low-paid agricultural labourers at harvest time.[40] But this is clearly a feature of 'adivasi' culture in decline and is not a fundamental characteristic of these societies.

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[38] N. Sengupta (ed.), *Fourth World Dynamics: Jharkhand*, (Delhi: Authors Guild, 1982); S. Corbridge, 'The ideology of tribal economy and society: politics in the Jharkhand, 1950-1980', *Modern Asian Studies*, 22, 1: 1-42, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Thomas Weber, *Hugging the Trees: the story of the Chipko Movement*, (Delhi: Viking, 1985); Rabindra Ray, *The Naxalites and their Ideology*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988); Ramachandra Guha, *The Unquiet Woods: ecological change and peasant resistance in the Himalaya*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989).

[39] Asghar Ali Engineer, *The Mandal Commission Controversy,* (Delhi: Ajanta, 1991).

[40].A.S. Oberai and H.K. Manmohan Singh, *Causes and Consequences of Internal Migration: a study in the Indian Punjab*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 229. For a case study of adivasi migrant labour in western India see Jan Breman, *Of Peasants, Migrants and Paupers: rural labour circulation and capitalist production in West India*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985).

From a broader perspective one might argue that the search for an 'essential' adivasi culture and society is itself an illusion, and that both the concept and its object have always been a political construct. Rather than ask 'who were the adivasis' therefore, it might be better to ask 'who wants to define them', since the definition of original or anterior inhabitants is usually a preliminary to the establishment of claims to political or economic power or (alternatively) reflects the power of an existing elite, exerting its cultural hegemony.

Claims of this sort perhaps reveal more about the structure of Indian politics and society than anything else. Whilst governments have viewed them as economic 'outlaws' and have treated them as such, most of our definitions of the 'tribal' in India (as elsewhere) are derived from the view-point of non-tribals, and they describe the 'adivasis' of India in largely negative terms as what is different or 'other than' the mainstream of Indian society. Unlike in African anthropology where the concept has been given real meaning (if only through it's persistent use in practice), in India the concept of 'the tribal' has been largely a dustbin category into which is thrown all that is unorthodox and non-Hindu. Many anthropologists have also regarded the history of 'adivasi' societies as a unilineal process, depicting the adivasis as merely an early stage in the process of 'modernisation', as spin-offs from the formation of great states and empires, or as the inevitable victims of Hinduisation (as argued by Srinivas and N.K. Bose)[41] - a view partly conditioned by modern anthropology's experience of adivasis, who are normally encountered at the stage when their political authority has vanished and their economies are all but extinct.

These definitions have found their apotheosis in the writings, for example, of Morton Fried, who argued that tribals may only be defined as peoples on the margin of settled kingdoms and empires, and in the earlier writings of Marshall Sahlins, who described 'tribal societies' as merely an initial phase in the onward march of the conquest of nature by humankind.[42] Generally it may be said that the history of 'adivasi' peoples has been neglected and at best has been treated only partially by competing academic disciplines. On the one hand, the existence of ancient 'adivasi' kingdoms is acknowledged and described by many Indologists, but this knowledge is seen as having no connection with the existence of modern nation states. On the other hand anthropologists have developed the concept of 'the tribe' as an analytical category used to describe kinship patterns in pre-

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[41] M.N. Srinivas, *The Dominant Caste and other essays*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987); N.K. Bose, 'The Hindu mode of tribal absorbtion' in *Cultural Anthropology and Other Essays*, (Calcutta: Indian associated publishers, 1953), and *The Structure of Hindu Society*, (Delhi: Orient Longman, 1975).

[42] Morton H. Fried, 'On the Concepts of "Tribe" and "Tribal Society" ', *Transactions of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 28, 4: 527-540, (New York: 1966); M.D. Sahlins, *Tribesmen*, (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1968).

modern societies. Rarely however are these societies seen to have evolved or survived in any substantive form into the present, let alone to have any political or cultural significance. Usually they are judged to have been largely supplanted by more modern social and economic structures: whatever politics and society that remains is appropriated by much wider 'human rights' or eco-political concerns.

In this context it is worth mentioning that in central India there are a great variety of 'adivasi' groups, but that a large proportion of them have been subsumed by scholars under the generic title of 'Gond', a name that is completely alien to the adivasis. In Bastar the tribals of the lowlands most often refer to themselves as simply 'Koitur' or 'the people'. Further south and east, in Orissa, the generic name given to a variety of adivasi communities is simply 'Kond', which means 'low hills' in the language of the Telugu speaking peasants of the plains. It requires little imagination to conceive how this appellation was invented by early colonial explorers, an appellation that nonetheless became widely used by the adivasis, for reasons that are simple enough: problems of communication work both ways at once.

Similar problems of translation and communication lie behind the modern epithets of 'adivasi' and 'indigenous peoples'. Both are terms adopted by tribal peoples in order to make themselves understood to the powers that be: the hegemonic classes of the towns, cities and states. These identities are adopted more by necessity than by choice, and they tell us little about the history of those identified as such. They are an adaptation to colonial ideas about castes and tribes, based on an epistemology that resolutely refused any understanding of claims to legitimacy and power phrased in terms other than those of property and contract. Rather like the often highly inventive *vamshavalis* (or genealogies) used by Hindu kings to establish their claims to a throne, the claims by adivasis to be 'the original inhabitants' are used simply as a means of legitimising demands for the redress of present-day economic and political inequalities. Such movements of 'indigenous peoples' express a desire by subordinate groups to lay claim to their own understanding of the past, but the form of this understanding is rooted in the present. The result is fatally flawed. Whilst adivasi claims often refer to a past golden age of tribal kingdoms and territories, in practice their identity has been forged in a commonality of experience that is very recent in origin. It is arguable therefore that the 'adivasis' are not at all the 'original inhabitants' but merely the recently dispossessed, and that not only the signifier but what is signified by the concept of the 'adivasi' is an invention of colonialism, an essential 'other' in the conspectus of modernity. The Independent Commission on International Humanitarian Issues (ICIHI) has tried to alleviate doubts by arguing that the Indian adivasis are an exceptional case, but by conceiving of 'indigenous peoples' in less romantic and more practical terms, it may be possible to avoid the notional dichotomy between 'preservation'

and 'assimilation', and to move toward policy options that in the long term are more likely to serve the interests of subordinate and marginalsied groups. The first step in this direction may be to admit that all Indians are, in one sense, 'adivasis'.