# Tribe, Egalitarian Values, Autonomy and the State

**Alpa Shah**

One of the most significant human costs of the development trajectory of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2004) that India is currently pursuing for economic growth is that of the destruction of the livelihoods and lives of its forest-dwelling communities in central and eastern India. The proposed corporate national and multinational mining projects to harvest the mineral reserves that lie under lands historically protected for Adivasis will not only alienate and pauperise them but also lead to the destruction of rich societies that have had relatively egalitarian values, in a country often seen as the society of quintessential hierarchy. In this essay, I analyse Adivasi egalitarian values, arguing that crucial to their persistence is Adivasi autonomy to access livelihoods (land and forests) for their social reproduction and for an Adivasi counter-politics. Also outlined are some of the processes that have been undermining Adivasi autonomy, in which the Indian state is shown to have played an increasingly destructive role.

Anyone who has spent any significant time living with Adivasi or tribal communities in the forests and hills across central and eastern India would have noted certain remarkable shared features of these communities.[1] Whether it is the Mundas of Jharkhand, the Konds of

[1] I focus here on the hills and forests of central and eastern India and not the northeastern states which have a substantial tribal population but with very different social histories and composition.

Odisha or the Koyas of Telangana, when one compares these forest-dwelling Adivasis to the caste-dominated communities of the agricultural plains, their relatively egalitarian values, and the dignity and pride with which they have held these values, stand out.

The difference between Adivasi society and much of the rest of Indian society has historically troubled many a scholar and administrator. A range of colonial administrators and anthropologists were keen to mark out the difference between tribes and castes (Hutton 1931; Risley 1891; Russell and Lal 1916; Thurston 1909) and went some way to ensuring special status for tribes in the making of the Indian nation state (Elwin 1943; Furer-Haimendorf 1994). In post-independence India, however, criticism arose that those who had highlighted the uniqueness of tribes were motivated by dubious theories of racial difference (Bates 1995) or romanticism (the accusations so often made of Elwin and Furer-Haimendorf—see, for instance, Prasad 2003). The overwhelming analytical push was to see the category of tribe in India as a colonial construction (Guha 1999),[2] to argue that tribes were simply 'backward Hindus' (Ghurye 1963 [1943]) to be absorbed into Hindu society (Bose 1941) to become peasants (Beteille 1974), or at best to see tribes in transition along a tribe-caste continuum in a process of absorption into the latter (Bailey 1960, 1961; Bose 1941; Kosambi 1965; Sinha 1965). The emphasis was to show tribes as some way along what we may call an 'assimilation model', the assumption being that loss of isolation and closer integration with wider society would make a tribe a caste, the impetus for this continuity undoubtedly underwritten by a desire that 'India is One' (indeed these were the concerns of the editors of *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Dumont and Pocock, in 1961).

Yet, as Xaxa (1999) has pointed out, while tribes have continued to undergo changes of many kinds including Hinduisation, earning their livelihoods from a variety of occupations and often becoming peasants, these factors have not necessarily transformed them into castes nor taken away their distinctive identities. It is a shame that with the critique of the colonial production of knowledge and accusations of romanticism, and with the turn away from in-depth village studies, ethnographies of Adivasi society based on deep participant observation went out of fashion as did the ambition for a broad comparative anthropology which contrasted the similarities and differences between these communities across India. Moreover, Parry's (1974) complaint about the neglect of egalitarian values in the Indian sociological literature still

[2] A. Beteille, 'Construction of Tribe', *The Times of India*, 19 June 1995.

stands. Yet, as this essay will argue, though they are being increasingly undermined, contemporary India has seen the persistence of certain shared features of the forest-dwelling societies, the distinctive identities Xaxa (1999) alludes to.

## Egalitarian values and social organisation

To different degrees in different groups, across the forest-dwelling communities of India, there are a number of shared features of social organisation and values which mark out their relatively egalitarian character when compared with the caste-divided societies of the agricultural plains. It must be clarified at the outset, however, that to emphasise the egalitarian values of Adivasi society does not mean to argue that there is no hierarchy among Adivasis, or that Adivasi societies do not fluctuate seasonally between egalitarian and hierarchical structures (Wengrow and Graeber 2015), or that some Adivasi groups are not more like interdependent castes than tribes, or to suggest that all Adivasis groups are equally egalitarian and that processes such as Christianisation and affirmative action have not caused internal stratification. It is to argue that 'in relation to' the stark social hierarchies that mark caste society in the agricultural plains, Adivasi communities in the forests and hills have been notable for their 'relatively' egalitarian values which leave them 'comparably' free from unequal social divisions. Adivasi egalitarian characteristics have ranged across at least three different domains of life: kinship and political organisation, production and consumption ethic, and gender relations.

### *Kinship and Political Organisation*

To take the first—kinship and political organisation—one of the crucial markers of tribal society all over the world (Sahlins 1968), which has been shared by many of the forest dwellers of India, is their 'segmental organization … composed of a number of equivalent, unspecialized multi-family groups, each the structural duplicate of the other: a tribe is a congeries of equal kin blocs' (Sahlins 1968: 325). Indeed, this was Bailey's (1960) 'prima facie' distinction in separating the tribal Konds and their segmentary political system based on agnatic kinship, from the caste-divided Oriyas whose political system was marked by ordination and dependent relations with other hierarchically ordered groups. In the Indian case, Adivasi groups have lived in relative geographical isolation (notwithstanding trade links with other groups), allowing them to remain relatively self-contained and maintain a great deal

of autonomy from the state. They have been fundamentally ordered by kinship principles implying an important degree of equality and have been essentially homogenous, undifferentiated and unstratified. Although tribal groups sometimes have untouchable communities attached to them, and with who they will have unequal relations marked by tribal superiority (Bailey 1961, for instance, noted that Konds have Pans who are landless low-caste people), these groups have not been essential to their social order and the kinship structure of tribal society has been conceptually self-sufficient. In contrast, caste society has been defined by a series of interdependent groups of people who cannot be kin, who are people of different kinds and who are needed to serve those above them in the hierarchy.

Endogenous forms of authority among Adivasi society have typically not encouraged internal stratification through attaining personal wealth and status. Although there were some Adivasi kingdoms in which the land of chiefs was turned into private property—like the Chero or the Nagabanshi Raj—they rarely had standing armies. Among many other Adivasi groups—for instance, the various Mundari tribes (Santhal, Ho, Munda)—land was collectively owned by the clan and though there were some dominant lineages, there was no kingdom. This is not to say that Adivasi societies had no authorities or leaders. But that their own systems represented a form of democracy that subverted the notion of leaders and authorities who were permanently invested with status and power, discouraging processes of stratification. Brian Morriss (2013) went as far as to suggest that India's forest-dwelling communities were marked by social systems of anarchy, that is, ordered societies without forms of rule which represent enduring structures of domination and exploitation.

Indeed, in the villages where I have lived in the Chotanagpur plateau, Mundas and Oraons have selected their own leaders (the *pahan* and the *paenbharra*) every three years by randomised selection through spiritual sortition (Shah 2010). These practices were so democratic that it was a lottery as to who will be chosen. Not everyone felt that they could hold such responsibility and some passed on the role to others they considered more appropriate. The authorities were to lead the resolution of disputes by being mere facilitators of discussion as decisions were ultimately to be made by consensus which could often take days to reach. These notions of democracy marked a sacral polity (Shah 2010) in which there was no division between the sacred and the secular. Spiritually endowed leaders got their powers by appeasing the spirits in the correct manner, allowing for an ideal of leadership that was not based on wealth, status, rank or charisma but on the values of

society as a whole marked by egalitarianism. Even with the insertion of the electoral processes of the Indian state, these practices were still widespread across the Chotanagpur plateau. While the former were regarded as corrupt and associated with a negative concept of politics, the latter were a ritual reminder of the egalitarian values of Adivasi society.

### *Production and Consumption Ethic*

A second feature of the relatively egalitarian values of forest-dwelling communities in comparison with the societies of the caste-divided plains was their production and consumption ethic. Adivasi societies have generally foraged and produced to meet not much more than their own subsistence needs, showing a greater propensity to live for the moment. The accumulation of wealth over time and the intergenerational transmission of property have not determined status and power within Adivasi society. Economic differences between households have been minimal and temporary (due to sickness or a life cycle ritual, for example) rather than permanent.

Eating, drinking and making merry were a central part of daily Adivasi sociality, but this consumption was first and foremost about sharing with others and not about showing your superiority, marking yourself apart from others. What Alfred Gell (1986) pointed out for the Muria Gonds of Bastar was widespread across Adivasi communities in the forests and hills—day-to-day expenditure was largely devoted to acquiring means, mainly in the form of liquor, to extend casual hospitality as freely as possible. Indeed, showing off one's wealth through conspicuous consumption was not something generally aspired to and risked social ostracisation. By the same token, if a wealthy person lost their wealth, they did not necessarily lose their status.

Production and reproduction within Adivasi societies have in general been non-commoditised. Mutual aid through systems of non-monetised labour exchange between households has been central to reproduction of households. The principle was that if you help me build my house, I will help you build yours. Or, if you help me sow my fields today, I will help you sow yours tomorrow. Emphasis was placed on valuing people as masters of their own production and consumption, producing without being forced to sell themselves or their products as a commodity.

Although direct access to sufficient resources for subsistence living is no longer possible for most Adivasi communities who have to engage in wage labour, as Bird-David (1983) has pointed out of the Naikens

of Kerala, even with the entry of these hunter-gatherers into the wage economy, there was much greater continuity within Naiken society than change. This was because in the rubber plantations that developed at their doorstep, the Naikens found another source of gathering: 'wage gathering'. Seeing wages as just another form of gathering for subsistence enabled the Naiken to remain Woodburn's (1982) 'immediate return society' (Bird-David 1983: 60) and persist on Sahlin's (1972) 'zen route to affluence' (Bird-David 1983: 60). I would argue that much of the participation of Adivasis in the seasonal casual wage economy of contemporary India can be viewed in similar terms. Although they are undoubtedly super-exploited in the brick kilns or construction sector (see Shah et al. 2017), Adivasi ability to engage with this economy alongside their forest dwelling and land cultivation-based livelihoods enables their social reproduction in their own terms. Adivasi entry as labour into the markets of capital can also be seen as a form of wage gathering to meet immediate needs and rarely for accumulation or investing in personal wealth and status that would encourage internal differentiation of the community.

### *Gender Relations*

Lastly, and perhaps most strikingly, across the forests of central and eastern India, what is remarkable is the relative gender equality and freedom that women have held in particular in comparison to the societies of the plains. Despite patrilineality, patriarchy was muted in the Adivasi hills and forests. It was not only the respect and autonomy in relation to decision-making power over their own lives and activities that women in Adivasi areas had that were telling but also what men did. In the hilly forests, it was common to find men cooking and doing other domestic work such as washing their own clothes, collecting water, sweeping and looking after children. The gender divide between production and reproduction was not as stark as it was in the plains.

Both sexes worked inside and outside the household and though there was often a sexual division of labour, it was neither very stark nor was it one of dominance and exploitation, asymmetry and hierarchy. Abuj Muria Gond women were noted to plough the land and the Bison Horned Maria women went on hunts. Among the Oraon, a mainly settled agricultural community, where the seasonal ritual hunting practised in the hot season has become the domain of men, every 12 years, the divisions are subverted and men give up hunting and women dress up as men and embark on a ritual hunt known as the *jani sirkar* (literally meaning women's hunt).

Tribal women work outside the household, a situation common among Dalit communities and among the elite in India, but much less so among other non-tribal counterparts (Singh 1994). Moreover, among the Oraon and Munda with whom I have lived, when Adivasi women participated in wage labour or sold things they produced, they controlled the money they brought in. Indeed, Singh noted that Ho and Kadar women, Tanakar Pardhi, Rajuar, Pallityan and Bondo women contributed to family income and controlled their family's expenditure. This intra-household autonomy between men and women gave power to women and helped limit their sexual exploitation.

Women have also had much greater sexual autonomy in Adivasi societies. Premarital sexual relations were not uncommon (see also Shah 2006). In some Oraon- and Munda-dominated villages, we still find the presence of the *dhumkuria*, and in Muria areas, the *ghotul*, a house or dormitory where youth—girls and boys—dance, drink, eat and sleep together in what may appear as hedonistic merriment and where, as Elwin (1947: 132) remarked, it was not uncommon to find women as the initiators of sex and courtship. In places where, there were no physical dormitories, the institution of the ghotul or the dhumkuria carries on through Adivasi dancing at festivals. It is rare in other parts of India to find men and women holding each other, openly dancing closely and for sexual crossing on ritual occasions. Marriages by elopement were common (Singh 1994). It was not unusual for girls and boys to choose their co-habitation partners and for marriage rituals to take place (if they did at all) once the couple set up house and often after they had children. Joint-family households, often leading to the subordination of women, were rare. Divorce and remarriage were common—initiated by both women and men (see Shah 2006).

Drinking of alcohol, generally only the domain of men in the rest of India, was central to Adivasi sociality and religious life and openly shared between men and women (Shah 2011a). To drink in private circles, as in the rest of India, would be taken as an act of selfishness. The ancestors must regularly be given drink. Guests must be given alcohol as a sign of hospitality. And men and women must drink together in each other's company as much as possible and not just on ritual occasions.

To point out this relative gender equality does not mean to say that domestic violence against Adivasi women was absent, or that sexual exploitation of Adivasi women was non-existent, or that Adivasi women and men had the same role in societies. But it is to say that, historically, women were not the Second Sex in Adivasi society as much as they were in the rest of India.

## Autonomy in Social Reproduction and Counter-politics

What, then, explains why, and the extent to which, Adivasi societies maintained their relatively egalitarian values in contrast to their neighbouring caste-divided communities? Autonomy in controlling direct access to their means of livelihood—especially land and forest resources—is clearly important as it limits the ability of structures of domination, stratification and exploitation in penetrating their societies, and allows for the social reproduction of Adivasi communities on their own terms. Bailey (1961: 14) marked the significance of this material independence through access to land,

> The larger the proportion of a given society which has direct access to the land, the closer is that society to the tribal end of the continuum. Conversely, the larger is the proportion of people whose right to land is achieved through a dependent relationship, the nearer does that society come to the caste pole.

Historically, a low population density was combined with an abundance of forests in which most Adivasis foraged and some cultivated using slash and burn techniques. With colonial rule came the deforestation and then reservation of the forests and the introduction of Hindu caste outsiders to extract revenue from the land and 'settle the population'. Many tribes moved further away into the hills and forests with the introduction of outsiders and a destruction of their livelihood base. Today, most Adivasi communities have to supplement their ability to live off the land and forests with wage labour through seasonal casual migrant work joining the mass of the Indian labour force working in the informal economy. However, unlike the Dalit lower-caste communities of the agricultural plains who are landless and do not have access to land and forest resources, Adivasis are not usually dependent on wage labour alone, and this is important for their ability to maintain their autonomy of social reproduction and their related egalitarian values.

Indeed, a comparison with Dalit communities is apt. At an all-India level, Dalits are usually thought to be better off than Adivasis and are, for instance, shown in the poverty statistics to be less poor. But income levels are not everything, and, in comparison with the forest-dwelling communities, Dalits suffer from greater domination, oppression and internal stratification. The crucial difference between Adivasis and Dalits, I suggest, is that the latter have no direct control over any part of the material basis of their social reproduction which is always mediated by other groups. This dependency means that there is a greater

propensity to reproduce the hierarchical structures of caste against Dalits and within Dalit communities.

In contrast, for most Adivasis in the hills and forests of central and eastern India, wage gathering (locally or through seasonal migration) was just one of the ways in which they socially reproduce their households. The reliance on multiple sources of livelihoods, and in particular the direct control of some of the means of social reproduction, enabled Adivasis the autonomy to participate in the underbelly of capitalism in their own terms—for instance, as wage gatherers reproducing their own relatively egalitarian societies rather than as 'free' labour whose values fundamentally transform with capitalism.

The political implications are vast. Those who are waiting in the margins for societies like the Adivasis to enter full-scale proleterianisation for a working-class struggle have based their models on a particular European history of proletarianisation which does not exist in the rest of the world and is swiftly unfolding where it may have (Bernstein 2007; Breman and van der Linden 2014; Therborn 2012). In the Adivasi case, the fight for the protection of land rights and forest resources for Adivasis is more important than ever not just for the basic security of the protection of their livelihoods, as is commonly argued, but also because their control over some of the means of their social reproduction enables the persistence of the social values of egalitarianism in a society otherwise marked by hierarchy and inequality. Indeed, as argued by the recent High Level Committee, Government of India, report, 'beyond their marginality, the many positive features of tribal society must be appreciated and it must be recognized that non-tribal people have much to learn from the richness of tribal cultures and their systems of knowledge' (Government of India 2014: 25).

If autonomy to directly access some of the means of their social reproduction is one axis of the extent to which Adivasi communities are egalitarian, another is their counter-politics to the wider political–economic processes that they have been subjected to, drawing on and reinserting values that they have long held. Adivasis reacted against the colonial penetration of their areas and the erosion of their access to land and forests through a series of violent rebellions across the breadth of central and eastern India; the Kol insurrection, the Santhal Hul, the Sardar movement and the Birsa rebellion are just a few examples. While Kumar Suresh Singh (1982) and Ranajit Guha (1999 [1983]) have done much to draw our attention to these insurgencies, Adivasis have also responded to their oppressors by reinserting their own values, their own ideals, which, although are formed out of their contact with society

around them, do not conform to those hierarchical societies. Adivasi egalitarian values and their ritual forms—the selection of leaders, the hunt led by women, for instance—were thus the idiom of their resistance. Indeed, one could argue that one of the results of the Adivasi rebellions of the past is that they were granted certain protections to access their land and forests (for instance, through the Chotanagpur Tenancy Acts, which were the result of the Birsa Munda Rebellion in the early 1900s) which have enabled them the autonomy for their counter-politics.

This counter-politics of Adivasi egalitarianism can be seen as a reaction to their class-based exploitation, a form of class struggle in E.P. Thompson's sense as 'class struggle without class' (Thompson 1978). This is a conception of class struggle that pays attention to the values of the working class as they actually exist in their day-to-day struggle against capitalism, and which moves beyond the 19th-century valourisation of the proletarian ideal of a class attack against capitalism. Whereas Thompson focused on ideals of fairness as central to this class struggle, in the Adivasi case it is the values of egalitarianism that are the idiom of class struggle against the exploitation of their own society expressed in their own terms.

Adivasi class struggle does not make them societies against the state, as Pierre Clastres (1987 [1974]) has argued of Amazonian Indians. Nor does it make them societies that are just running away from the state, as framed by James Scott (2009). They are societies that have developed right under the very systems of oppression that have been grinding against their doorstep—they have lived in its shadows (Shah 2010)—and developed a counter-politics in response to and negotiation with the state. Thus, to think of a counter-politics of Adivasi values and autonomy from their hierarchical neighbours as class struggle does not mean to say that Adivasis are in any way separated or isolated from the rest of India. For it is in negotiation with the processes of their integration into the state and the processes of capitalism that they have produced their own values. Moreover, to argue that Adivasis have developed a counter-politics is not to valourise them as museums from our past. They are our contemporaries. They are a constantly changing response to the circumstances they are in. They are what Levi-Strauss (1966) would call *bricoleurs*—constantly borrowing in order to create something different. It is the oppression of the politico-economic systems they have been subject to which has nurtured their counter-politics of autonomy.

## Adivasis and the State

To conclude, I propose some brief reflections on the processes undermining Adivasi autonomy and related values. Fought for by the Adivasi insurgencies of the past, ironically, it is the Indian state that enabled Adivasis to maintain their counter-politics of egalitarianism, but it is also the Indian state that undermines these values. Although it is continuously shrinking, the reason why tribal communities in India still have access to some land and forests is because the state, in response to various Adivasi rebellions, was forced to introduce a series of land and forest right Acts—most notably in the Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Indian Constitution—ensuring the protection of these spaces for Adivasis. Adivasi direct access to their livelihoods were thus, to a certain extent, protected, ensuring that they had continued material autonomy to reproduce their societies on their own terms, even if, as I will argue, that autonomy has continually been taken away from them.

However, while on the one hand the Indian state preserved the autonomy of Adivasis, on the other hand it also encouraged the greater integration of Adivasis through other processes. The first is the increasing infiltration of the state into Adivasi societies through developmental measures which cannot take due account of Adivasi cultural values. This includes forms of mainstream education as well as processes of affirmative action through reservations of seats in government for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. These, I would argue, though instituted in the name of equality (equality before the law), were to be implemented by a state constituted of homo hierarchicus, of high-caste men who generally treated the Adivasis as *jungli*, as wild, savage and barbaric (Shah 2010). Although there are cases of tribal groups asserting their tribal identity, increasingly concerned to distinguish themselves from mainstream society to gain access to these seats, the overwhelming effect of reservations among the forest-dwelling Adivasis is that in the name of equality (as embodied in the Indian state), egalitarian societies are brought into the prevailing forces of hierarchy so that reservations become the force of internal stratification within those societies (Higham and Shah 2013).

Together these processes encourage Adivasis to develop ideals of individual accumulation of wealth, status, rank and commodification. They pull Adivasis more firmly into the forces of capitalism, and the processes of inequality within their own societies are brought therein. This increasing infiltration of the state and its related economic processes produces class stratification *within* Adivasi society and is likely

to lead to the rise of patriarchy. It encourages some Adivasis to co-opt the values and aspirations for upward mobility held by the upper and middle classes, undermining their counter-politics of autonomy.

Moreover, while offering limited protection of Adivasi lands and forests, the Indian state has overwhelmingly promoted the interests of capital, eroding the autonomy that Adivasis have enjoyed in relation to their access to livelihoods in reproducing their societies. Mass dispossession due to mining, land grabbing for corporate interests, reform of the Land Acquisitions Act, all make it easier for capital to access land. These forms of primitive accumulation have a longer history—mining and industrialisation of these areas go back to the late 1800s—but the new waves of accumulation by dispossession in neoliberal India come with a brutal military face. Indeed, today the counter-insurgency forces of the Indian state in the forests and hills of India mark a social death of the Adivasis (Shah 2011b; Sundar 2016).

Resistance against this trajectory of development in the forests of central and eastern India has in recent years been headed by Maoist-inspired Naxalites who have been mobilising Adivasis. Despite their attention to 'from the masses to the masses', the Naxalite revolutionary class struggle, in its stagiest teleology of revolution strategy, has largely missed recognising Adivasi egalitarianism as a form of class struggle (Shah 2013), and has also brought the state and the values of capitalism closer to Adivasi lives (Shah 2014).

The overall effect of this development trajectory may be to turn Adivasis into pauperised tribal castes with nothing but their labour power to sell, stripped of their counter-politics of egalitarianism, and whose only capacity to aspire will be in the terms set by their oppressors. In India, in response to Adivasi resistance, the state has protected a degree of Adivasi autonomy by enabling Adivasis direct access to their livelihoods and to control the means of their social reproduction, but it is also the state which is eroding the possibility for this autonomy and thus Adivasi egalitarian values, and which is doing so through brutal repression.

What is perhaps most needed are in-depth studies which try to understand Adivasi social values in different parts of the country and a comparative theoretical framework which explains processes of change and continuity across the country. I have argued here that the degree of autonomy Adivasis have to directly access their livelihoods, that is, to socially reproduce, as well as their counter-politics of egalitarian values are key to both.

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