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Scope of 'indigeneity': Contextualising Adivasi identities

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Abstract

This paper examines the contextual understandings of indigeneity among Adivasi communities in central India. I rethink the spaces of indigeneity by analysing the connections between collective identities, 'Adivasiness,' and indigeneities. I propose two analytical lenses. First, I explore indigeneity as a prism to interpret assertions of Adivasi identities, demonstrating how regional Adivasi socio-political movements reflect the constituents of local, contested indigeneities. Second, I consider the potential of indigeneity as a project with historical, political, and sociocultural dimensions. I discuss how Adivasis and non-Adivasis can approach indigeneity as a category of practice to understand the social transformations in Adivasi peoples' lives.

In the current climate of political polarisation, economic hardship, and a Hindutva upsurge in Indian polity, the concept of indigeneity acquires renewed significance. This work contributes to Indigenous and Adivasi Studies by advancing theoretical perspectives on Adivasi identities in relation to place, ethnicity, and socio-cultural institutions.

In October 2022, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in a semi-urban city in the Bastar region of the state of Chhattisgarh, central India, which lasted until September 2023. I will refer to this city as 'Baliyapal.' This fieldwork is part of my PhD program, where I am studying the impact of experiences at educational institutions on the lives of 14- to 19-year-old youths from an Adivasi community. Many of the youths I worked with are first-generation school-goers in their community, having moved from their home villages to pursue institutional education, and currently reside in state-run hostels for Adivasi students in Baliyapal. I am examining the processes through which their experiences influence how Adivasi youth self-identify. By understanding their lived experiences, aspirations, and desires, I am gaining insight into how youth identify and navigate belonging in their everyday lives within urban educational spaces, and how those identifications influence their understandings of social institutions such as government schools, hostels, community, and family.

Situated in the northern part of the Bastar division, Baliyapal has strong interlinkages with its surrounding rural areas. The local economy largely depends on the constant movement of people from nearby villages and the agricultural produce they bring. The Adivasi communities living in and around Baliyapal include the Gonds, Bhatras, Halbas, and Murias. Over the past two years, people in Bastar have educated me about certain ideas that have played a pivotal role in shaping my understanding of the larger

socio-cultural, political, and institutional contexts within which I have situated the particularities of my work with Adivasi youth. These ideas engage with how Adivasi perspectives have been – and are being – imagined and conceptualised by both Adivasis and various non-Adivasi actors, including the state, researchers, activists, and dominant-caste groups. I connect these ideas as threads that can be woven into the intricate patterns of positionings and belonging of Adivasi communities, encompassing the multiplicities of pasts, subjectivities, and politico-cultural experiences (Rycroft and Dasgupta 2011). In this paper, I discuss these ideas within the purview of the concept of indigeneity. The contexts for these ideas are rooted in the regions of central India. The frames of reference for other regions are relatively different; I shall not be able to do justice to these distinctions within the scope of this paper.

The paper is organised in three sections. In Section One, I introduce the foundational ideas that shape my exploration of indigeneity as a key concept. In Section Two, I demonstrate how indigeneity can be harnessed to analyse the assertion of Adivasi identities in social movements. As a category of analysis, indigeneity offers avenues to explore meanings from various contexts that encapsulate these movements, thereby highlighting the intricacies of asserting Adivasi identities. In Section Three, I approach indigeneity as a category of practice to examine how it can nurture the contours of an aspirational project. This project has the potential to enhance our understanding of the histories of Adivasi communities, their relationships with place, and the contemporary challenges they face due to marginalisation. It also foregrounds the complex realities of Adivasis' daily lives and the diverse factors that shape their lived experiences. I conclude the paper by outlining its core ideas and reinforcing the importance of expanding the conceptual horizons that engage with the notion of indigeneity.

I

Introduction: Approaching 'indigeneity'

According to the 2011 Census of India, about 105 million Indians are officially classified as *Scheduled Tribes*,[1] constituting 8.6% of India's population (Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India 2013).[2] Some other terms used in academic literature and public discourse for groups classified as Scheduled Tribes include *Adivasis*, *Tribals* or *Indigenous peoples* (for a history of these terms, see Damodaran 2006; Dasgupta 2022; Skaria 1999; Xaxa 2008). Throughout this paper, I prefer the term 'Adivasi' over alternatives like 'Tribals' and 'Indigenous peoples' because many activists and people from Adivasi communities in central India employ the term 'Adivasi' for self-identification. They utilise it to make political claims from the state, historicise, and address issues related to ethnic, social, and cultural identities

[1] The term *Scheduled Tribes* is a legal and constitutional term, and the peoples classified under this category vary from state to state, regionally. The process, like any other socio-political process, is ruptured with inclusion and exclusion errors. As of 2025, there are more than 700 groups that have been classified as *Scheduled Tribes* by the Indian state.

[2] Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India. 2013. *Primary Census Abstract for Scheduled Tribes: Census of India 2011*. New Delhi: Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India. https://censusindia.gov.in/nada/index.php/catalog/5049.

(Baviskar 2007; Das Gupta 2024, 2025; Prasad 2022; Sen 2018). The term 'Adivasi' thus holds political and symbolic capital, particularly in relation to issues of representation.

The term 'Adivasi' was coined in the 1930s as part of a political movement aimed at forging a sense of unity and identity among various tribal peoples during British colonialism in India (Hardiman 1987). It is derived from two Hindi words: *adi*, meaning 'of the earliest times or from the beginning,' and *vasi*, meaning 'inhabitants.' The term comes with its share of complexities and contestations. As David Mosse (2005: 55) writes, the term has:

> now been stripped of its literal meaning of 'original inhabitants,' which has become an adopted identity of people with a shared historical experience of the loss of forests and the alienation of land; an identity which both points to subalternity and refuses to accept that subalternity.

Consequently, the questions of 'Who is an Adivasi?' and 'What does Adivasiness mean?' have been topics of scholarly debate in recent decades (Banerjee 2016; Chandra 2016; Das Gupta 2024; Dasgupta 2022; Prasad 2022). I hope that some of the complexity and ambiguity of the category 'Adivasi' are reflected in the ideas presented in this paper.

The methodology employed in this paper is grounded in an interpretive, critical-constructivist approach to understanding knowledge (Kincheloe 2005; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012). This approach assumes that reality is not fixed but shaped by our perspective, combining interpretive methods with ideas from critical theory and constructivism. It suggests that individuals, as political agents, create multiple realities which, as Kincheloe (2005) describes, are shaped by their position within broader social, political, and historical contexts. In this view, what we know about the world involves a relationship between the knower and what is known, which is influenced by power structures and social contexts. The way the knower constructs the known determines what we consider 'reality.' Therefore, this approach emphasises the importance of meaning, the context in which knowledge is formed, and the standpoint of those producing it (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012: 32–33). It underscores that knowledge is not a passive reflection of an objective reality but a dynamic product of social interactions, interpretations, and power dynamics.

Informed by this methodology, I rethink the conceptual spaces of indigeneity by discerning how the category of Adivasi implies 'a range of historically defined, contested, and mediated indigeneities' (Rycroft and Dasgupta 2011: 1; see also De 2025). By analysing key discursive sites where these mediations unfold, I aim to underscore the potential significance of indigeneity in contemporary India for Adivasis and the activists and scholars working on issues related to Adivasis. Indigeneity merits rigorous attention because it is important to explore its distinct understandings specific to different Adivasi communities and regions. I also want to locate the significance of indigeneity beyond global discourses on indigeneity.[3] I do not focus on indigeneity through the prisms of territoriality or 'colonisation.' Furthermore, I do not engage with the idea of Adivasis as 'Indigenous Peoples' in terms of original settlement. These

[3] For an interesting account of why global discourses of indigeneity and indigenous movements began to develop during the 1990s in different parts of the world, see Steur (2017).

pertinent ideas have been critically examined over time (Gerharz, Uddin, and Chakkarath 2018; Ghosh 2006; Karlsson 2003; Shah 2010; Xaxa 2008). Taking inspiration from these ideas, I work with some framing ideas about indigeneity that articulate the interlinkages between collective identities, 'Adivasiness,' and 'indigenousness.'

Debates and contestations surround the ideas of indigeneity due to its numerous definitions, elucidations, and local articulations. In this paper, I conceptualise indigeneity through a combination of fieldwork with Adivasi communities in Jharkhand (such as the Mundas and Hos) and Maharashtra (the Warlis), recent ethnographic research with Adivasi youth in Bastar, and critical dialogue with relevant scholarly literature. My work with Adivasi communities is informed by my positionalities as a non-Adivasi, upper-middle-class Sikh man from New Delhi. I understand indigeneity as a relational concept that encompasses a diverse range of socio-political expressions. It emphasises the viewpoints, feelings, ways of being, and unique imaginations of Adivasi communities, all within the context of larger structural processes that influence their social positions and everyday lives.

In particular, I explore the concept of indigeneity through three modalities. First, exploring how Adivasi communities derive meanings from their relationship with a sense of place is significant. By 'place,' I want to emphasise how particular places shape their experiences. These places may be specific, concrete, and physical spaces, or more nuanced understandings of social and material relations with people, spaces, and objects that illustrate how 'home' is not merely an abstraction for the communities. Second, the social relations within Adivasi communities, among different Adivasi communities, and between Adivasis and non-Adivasis are important constituents of social and political organisation in local regions, and interactions of Adivasi communities with state institutions. These relations of power, elucidated by local historical, socio-economic, and political contexts, highlight the heterogeneities across the Adivasi communities and the situatedness of distinct communities within the Adivasis. Third, the social locations of people are shaped by unequal access of different Adivasi communities to a plethora of economic, social, educational, and political resources, as well as broader social networks and information. These inequalities are closely tied to Adivasi communities' relationships with the state and the construction of their identities – processes that are anchored in the communities' own subjective understandings as they strive to create, negotiate, and enact various forms of identification. I will elaborate on these modalities throughout the paper.

A contextual examination of these modalities in various forms can create opportunities to work with indigeneity as a broad lens from which we may view the nuances of Adivasi cultures, Adivasi mobilisation, and local socio-political movements that are central to the negotiations between Adivasi communities and the Indian state. Relatedly, through this formulation of indigeneity, I seek additional approaches that not only provide new critical perspectives to grapple with the meanings and politics of 'being Adivasi' and 'becoming Adivasi' (Dasgupta 2018: 7) but are also adept at locating harmonious and dialogic practices across groups with limited understandings of each other's historical and cultural contexts. The following two sections aim to outline possible ways of working towards these goals and to create spaces for more meaningful exchanges between communities shaped by different pasts and worldviews.

II

Indigeneity: Interpreting assertions of Adivasi identities

In this section, I examine how indigeneity can be used as an analytical lens to understand Adivasi identities and their political articulations. I explore indigeneity as a prism for interpreting assertions of Adivasi identities within regional and place-based Adivasi socio-political movements. I elucidate how the contexts of these movements can be read as the constituents of local and contested Adivasi indigeneities. These movements involve the following intertwined contexts:

a) political questions of claim-making from the state
b) collective belonging and engagement with the affective imaginaries of the nation-state
c) production of complex social dynamics between – and within – Adivasi communities

When I write about Adivasi identities, I refer to the workings of collective identities since I focus on the collective forms of life and politics that unfold in these movements. These collective identities are an amalgamation of various aspects, each occupying a central position at different times in specific spatiotemporal contexts. These aspects include self-identifications by groups, and particularistic understandings of their social location, both by the groups themselves and by external actors. Another key component is the relational ties among people within a group, which also give rise to a sense of belonging to a solidary and bounded group with shared social and cultural commonalities (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). Brubaker and Cooper (2000: 20) write: 'Neither commonality nor connectedness alone engenders ''groupness'' – the sense of belonging to a distinctive, bounded, solidary group. But commonality and togetherness together may indeed do so.' Adivasi communities often assert their groupness through a combination of cultural practices, territorial claims, shared experiences of marginalisation, and political mobilisation. These expressions include emphasising oral histories, Adivasi languages, ritual practices, or ecological ties to land. Moreover, collective struggles against dispossession and state-led development projects often increase the significance of a shared identity (Chandra 2024; Dasgupta 2022; Jairath 2020).

Claim-making from the state

During my fieldwork in Bastar, I gradually observed and learnt how the lack of employment opportunities for Adivasi youth and the diminishing options for livelihood in villages have become matters of utmost concern for the Adivasi *samaj* in the region. These issues have acted as catalysts for fostering social cohesion among different Adivasi communities in Baliyapal. As I spent more time with Adivasi activists and educators to comprehend the texts behind various social actors' invocation of the term 'Adivasi *samaj*,' I learnt about the multiple ways in which people understand and assign sociocultural meanings to this term. These ways suggest a form of group self-identification that can be construed as an assertion of Adivasi identities, which is vital in producing social relations among Adivasi communities, based on engagement with

state practices, discourses of development, and solidarity rooted in a shared ethnic identity and political mobilisation in negotiations with the state.

A socio-cultural and political organisation effectively leveraging the assertions of this group self-identification is the Sarva Adivasi Samaj (SAS). SAS is an umbrella organisation representing all 43 Adivasi communities in Chhattisgarh. SAS aims to raise awareness among Adivasis about issues related to land, water, and forests while fostering unifying politics among the Adivasis in Chhattisgarh, where, historically, any assertive Adivasi politics have been absent (Bhardwaj 2019; Mukherjee and Pattnaik, 2025; Sharma 2012). In the summer of 2023, I witnessed protests by the Adivasi *samaj* led by SAS, including road blockades, strikes, and mass meetings in public *maidans*, demanding collective rights from the state to social justice, access to resources through local recruitment in Bastar, and constitutional entitlements using a better reservation formula in Chhattisgarh.[4] The manner in which the Sarva Adivasi Samaj (SAS) channelled Adivasi identity-based articulations during these protests shows that Adivasis' everyday experiences – and the political identifications those experiences enable – are closely intertwined with the structural politico-economic conditions of Baliyapal specifically, and of Bastar more broadly.[5]

Through the citations of Adivasi *samaj* and Sarva Adivasi Samaj, I aim to highlight how the production of Adivasi identities can be situated within political discourses about indigeneity. Adivasi communities have to navigate many institutions of state and local power relations to claim their legal entitlements. Despite the legal basis, they must consistently articulate the basis of these claims within rights-based discourses. Thus, the self-assertion of collective identities holds an instrumental value in the broader political project of claim-making from the state (Jairath 2020; Singh 2022: 2024). As Jairath (2020: 63) writes in her study of Adivasi mobilisation against the Bokaro Power Supply Company in Jharkhand, such forms of identity assertion reflect *'*a culture of resistance that is simultaneously a sedimentation of historical processes and material conditions as well as a conscious discursive positioning*.'* Furthermore, this positioning

[4] In September 2019, the policy to recruit local residents for Classes C and D in government jobs (Class III and Class IV employees) was introduced across various departments in the districts of Bastar and Surguja, both of which are Scheduled Areas in Chhattisgarh. In 2021, this reservation was also extended to positions at the divisional level. This change meant that only local residents would be hired for divisional posts in Bastar, as well as Surguja, which is located in northern Chhattisgarh. In May 2022, the Chhattisgarh High Court declared these reservations unconstitutional. As a result, the emphasis on local recruitment in these divisions was abruptly ended, allowing individuals from outside Bastar to be employed for third- and fourth-category posts within Bastar.

The issue of reservations has been mired in numerous legal complications in Chhattisgarh over the years, and it continues to persist. As of 2025, the reservation quotas for government jobs and educational institutions in the state are 32% for Scheduled Tribes (STs), 12% for Scheduled Castes (SCs), and 14% for Other Backward Classes (OBCs). However, these figures have faced legal challenges, since the total percentage of reservations must be under 50% according to the reservation policy of the Central Government of India. Successive state governments have continued to play around with these figures as the politics surrounding reservations in the state remain volatile.

[5] Sarva Adivasi Samaj registered a political party as well, named *Hamar Raj* (Our Rule), in 2023 to advocate for political demands of the Adivasis. The party claims that successive governments in Chhattisgarh have failed to address the demands of the Adivasi *samaj*, and have not safeguarded the Adivasi interests and rights. As a result, it argues that the time has come for an Adivasi political party that addresses the issues confronting Adivasis by participating in the electoral process.

serves as a marker of the cultural politics of representation, which is an important constituent of Adivasi politics that comes to define what rights mean on the ground for the communities.

The various manifestations of these assertions offer insights into the discursive terrains where the shifting articulations of collective identities and indigeneity unfold. Many communities have ambivalent relationships with the term 'Adivasi.' They may self-identify as Adivasis in some circumstances or reject the term altogether. However, they seek recognition as 'Scheduled Tribes' from the state primarily to access the benefits of autonomy and the entitlements of affirmative action (see also Shah and Shneiderman 2013). As historically marginalised communities have learnt different ways to interpret the obscure meanings of the 'state' in India, they have started engaging with the politics of authenticity, claiming, and reclaiming through pragmatic approaches (Chandra 2024; Singh 2024). Many communities, such as the Gaddis in Kangra, Himachal Pradesh (Kapila 2008), and the Gurungs and Tamangs in Darjeeling (Middleton 2015), assert their right to negotiate with the state and to be recognised as Scheduled Tribes to have better access to resources and to express their enduring relationships with the places they inhabit.

Collective belonging and the nation-state

The issues of collective belonging also capture the minutiae of these expressions and the everyday experiences of Adivasi communities. These issues acquire varied meanings in relation to the assertion of the collective identities of Adivasi communities. I utilise the notion of belonging in a particularised way here. The objectives of asserting identities are not only to elaborate the historical, legal, and local constituents of belonging but also to explore the historical processes that illuminate Adivasi communities' struggles with the affective imagination embedded in the discourses through which dominant political and state institutions articulate the nation-state. I work at the interstices of ideas about 'nation' and 'state' to gesture towards the social and emotional imagination and commitment that make the nation such an affective and elusive category for many people. Concomitantly, these ideas create the possibility of writing about state practices that attempt to institutionalise social and territorial boundaries and utilise the extensive resources at their disposal to privilege certain narratives and representations over others. These practices are underpinned by the state's capacity to create, disseminate, and legitimise specific forms of knowledge that sustain the state's claims.

Adivasi communities are positioned in political spaces marked by unequal power relations, where their political capital often does not fully serve as a means of realising their collective aspirations (Chandra 2024; Chemmencheri 2015; De 2025; Shah 2018). To express their 'difference' and 'culture,' Adivasi communities often employ performance as a strategic tool. These performances take the form of ritualised actions, enacted within broader discursive contexts shaped by political, economic, and other agendas (Shneiderman 2015: 37), enabling communities to negotiate with the state and capitalise on emerging opportunities. Additionally, these performances can be understood in relation to 'indigenousness,' which is shaped by local concepts and movements, social relations, and activism (Schulte-Droesch 2014; Wolf and Heidemann 2014).

The performative expressions of indigeneity are particularly visible in urban areas across central India. The representation of 'Adivasiness' at state-aided (and often state-sponsored) Adivasi Fairs takes various forms, including folk dance competitions, tourist brochures that market the 'exoticism' of local regions, displays of 'Tribal' art, clothing, and food, and the narration of worship rituals. These performances and displays are not only aimed at tourists and local non-Adivasis but also serve as a means for Adivasis to assert their ethnic and cultural identities (Berger 2014; Prévôt 2014). For example, in Bastar, events such as *Dussehra*, *Adivasi Divas*, and local festivals like *Madai* function as vital sites where Adivasi identities are performed and reshaped, often incorporating traditional customs, ritual practices, and engagements with state power and narratives. These events demonstrate how the challenges posed by dominant framings of indigeneity emerge as practical outcomes of Adivasi communities' strategic engagements, particularly in navigating their collective belonging and relationship with the nation-state.

The reasons for the participation of people from different Adivasi communities in these Fairs are complex. Among other things, they reveal how Adivasis navigate the intricate web of interactions with state structures and non-Adivasi groups, which also makes it 'possible for us to appreciate the fraught terrain in which Adivasi aspirations take shape in contemporary India' (Chandra 2016: 303). Adivasi communities are no strangers to the idea of a 'nation,' which is generally based, socioculturally, on a monolithic conception of nationality or the collusion of a few powerful ethnic groups. Consequently, many communities and groups tend to be neglected in the 'cultural' processes of nation-building, as they are not perceived as significant in terms of their contribution to a 'national culture.' It is the cultural processes of nation-making that cultivate the conceptual space of 'mainstream.' The state and people within this so-called mainstream recognise only particular modes of difference in the 'imagined community' of the nation-state in India (Anderson 1983; Bhukya 2017). Under these circumstances, one can argue that the assertion of identities, through these articulations of belonging, aims to respond to a crucial dimension of the modern state apparatus: 'the sentiments that it mobilises and discards, emotions like fear, trust, loathing, speculation, uncertainty, longing, joy, hope, and despair' (Gupta 2015: 276). Therefore, the politics of collective belonging are embedded in the sociopolitical and historical power relations between local state structures, non-Adivasis, and Adivasis, within which Adivasi communities must navigate the political questions of attachment and belonging.

Social relations among Adivasi communities

One way Adivasi communities are navigating these intricate relationships is by actively asserting their place through social and political mobilisation grounded in rights-based movements. In several parts of India, community-based grassroots organisations are playing an influential role in organising locally driven movements related to Adivasi issues, including the assertion of citizenship rights, human rights, forest rights, and resisting different forms of state power (Chandra 2024; Kumar and Kerr 2012; Mahana 2019; Mukherjee and Pattnaik 2025; Oskarsson 2018; Singh 2022; Sundar 2016; Wadhwa 2021). This task is challenging because the lines of division within – and between – Adivasi communities today are increasingly being marked by social class differences, such as the rise of an Adivasi middle class with access to

education, state employment, and urban networks, as well as by generational shifts, where the lives of younger Adivasis are shaped by migration, formal schooling, and evolving aspirations.[6] As a result, the demands of Adivasis from these movements and the state are complex and diverse; the tasks of mobilisation and managing the expectations of different social actors are delicate. Informed by my ethnographic fieldwork, I briefly analyse the shifting class and generational relationships that are interacting creatively within the diverse social contexts of central India.

Drawing on my fieldwork with Adivasi communities in Bastar, including the Gonds, Murias, Halbas, and Bhatras, I have observed the emergence of an Adivasi middle class over the past two decades. This development is a key factor in understanding the diverse and tense intra-community relationships in central India (see Hota 2024; Shah 2018; Xaxa 2024). This class comprises Adivasis in Bastar who have developed significant educational capital by gaining credentials and skills recognised in mainstream educational and employment settings. They have been able to access opportunities provided through policies aimed at ensuring representation in education and state employment. They also have better access to various socioeconomic and political resources, which has translated into better jobs and opportunities for social mobility in Bastar. Besides wealth, the formation of the Adivasi middle class in Bastar is also influenced by their engagement with traditional knowledge and cultural practices of Adivasi communities, as well as increasing connections to urban areas, employment trends, and shifting social perspectives.

Over recent years, as the Adivasi middle class has evolved, new layers of division and allegiance have further complicated the already complex dynamics of social relations in Bastar. People from different Adivasi communities are now driven to find the constituents for cultivating their perspectives, engagements, and identifications in the web of knowing, which is dominated by the lifestyles, routines, values, and aspirations of this burgeoning middle class (see also Noy 2020 for a comparable study in Jharkhand). In Baliyapal, I observed how these layers are unfolding, particularly through the social boundaries that have emerged between Adivasis living in urban areas and those in rural areas. These relationships, characterised by a trust deficit in everyday interactions, highlight growing economic disparities across regions, the emergence of varied class structures among Adivasis, and, importantly, the power dynamics that influence perceptions of the middle class, as demonstrated by the differing experiences of being an Adivasi from rural and urban Baliyapal. These insights were developed from my own observations and conversations with Adivasi youth, activists, and educators, who reflected on the contrasting experiences of rural and urban life. In the future, I plan to study how these relationships alter the modalities of asserting collective Adivasi identities in place-based social movements in Bastar, through which Adivasi *samaj* seeks better access to economic resources and a just implementation of reservation policies.

[6] These divisions must also be analysed along gendered lines, which I did not do in this paper due to space constraints. For example, there has been an increase in alcoholism and violence among young Adivasi men from different communities. Young Adivasi women have begun questioning the dual threats to their own security from the outside as well as from the men in their own communities, where urbanisation influences, coupled with the absence of resource rights, make them more vulnerable to gender-based violence (Kalluri 2019: 334).

The changing contexts of everyday networks of association and obligation constructed in Adivasi villages through relations of power and social organisation are also reshaping intergenerational relationships within Adivasi communities. The educators in government schools, Adivasi youths, and older members of the Adivasi *samaj* in Bastar taught me how many Adivasi youths are shaping new identities rooted in education, urban lifestyles, and emerging aspirations for autonomy and mobility. While they continue to value their familial ties, cultural practices, and memories of village life, they are also critically engaging with the expectations of village life regarding work, gender roles, and tradition. They are reinterpreting what it means to belong, negotiating between inherited ways of life and new possibilities that unfold through their schooling and migration experiences.

These identities are also creating new lines of conflict with older generations of Adivasis, many of whom lacked access to institutional schooling. For many young Adivasi men, economic opportunity is the most decisive factor driving migration to cities in Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and Tamil Nadu, even when the work is precarious and exploitative. However, these decisions are not motivated solely by livelihood. Migration also offers young people opportunities to escape social constraints of village life, such as age-based hierarchies, expectations of agricultural work, and restrictions related to gender and behaviour. These opportunities open up space to explore desires for friendship, romance, and self-expression. The pursuit of economic survival is intertwined with the desire for autonomy and new forms of social belonging, all of which shape their motivations for leaving their villages.

The reshaping of intergenerational relationships within Adivasi communities today is driven not only by changes within villages but also by broader social transformations linked to education, rural-urban mobilities, and modes of socialisation. These transformations include social trends reinforced by peers in educational institutions, processes of socialisation in urban spaces, and the rapidly changing nature of present times under the influence of neoliberal rationalities in education, such as competitive individualism, progress, and legitimacy through outcomes in the form of jobs (Moitra 2024; Zacharias 2013). In several rural areas of Bastar, for example, adults from the Adivasi *samaj* are concerned that as Adivasi youth move away from home villages for urban education or to seek informal work to navigate economic uncertainties in their families' lives, it is becoming increasingly difficult to invest in the processes of youth mobilisation around issues pertinent to the long-term welfare, security, and development of Adivasis. The channels of reciprocal communication and knowledge sharing between generations have blurred, due to Adivasi youth's evolving priorities and aspirations. In this context, engaging with the constituents of local Adivasi indigeneities can help us understand how multiple social relations, fissures, and desires – both within and among Adivasi communities – influence the assertion of collective Adivasi identities.

III

Indigeneity: Exploring the possibilities

In this section, I explore the potential of indigeneity as a project with historical, sociocultural, and political dimensions. Grounded in the perspectives and knowledges of Adivasi communities, this aspirational project examines how Adivasi and non-Adivasi activists and scholars can approach indigeneity as a category of practice to better understand the dynamics of social transformations in the daily lives of Adivasi peoples. By 'category of practice,' I refer to the ways in which Adivasis inhabit and mobilise the idea of indigeneity in everyday life, governance, and activism, in terms of the three modalities outlined in this paper. The goal, then, is to engage with indigeneity as a lived political practice. The diverse manifestations of indigeneity can be employed to analyse multiple histories of peoples identifying as 'Adivasis,' trace their present-day relationships with land and place, and understand the distinctive ways in which Adivasis navigate marginalities through situated realities.

Engaging with the multiple histories of 'Adivasis'

To derive meanings from the knowledge that the Adivasi youth and I created in Baliyapal, I needed to situate the individual contexts of Adivasi youth within the broader sociocultural context of their community. As the analytical processes developed during fieldwork, I started deciphering the social, political, economic, and historical positions that various Adivasi communities occupy and shape their collective experiences. These positions are products of how the sociocultural, educational, and politico-economic histories of Baliyapal have evolved over the last two decades. These histories have been shaped by socio-spatial processes that reflect and reproduce power relations through political and educational institutions, economic development, and social dynamics permeated by class, gender, geography, language, and ethnicity. The kinds of communities that multiple Adivasi groups nurture, based on their shared cultural practices, forms of belonging, and politics, are intertwined with these histories. Therefore, engaging with these histories would open possibilities to explore the multiple invocations of 'Adivasiness' and the cultural politics of being an 'Adivasi' in the contemporary moment, particularly within sociopolitical movements led by Adivasi communities in central India.

These insights prompted me to reflect on the long-interwoven histories of peoples identified as Adivasis or Scheduled Tribes. These histories are layered with twists and turns that date back to a period long before the advent of British colonialism in India and the birth of terminologies like 'Adivasi,' 'Indigenous,' and 'Tribe' (Das Gupta and Basu 2012; Prasad 2003; Sen 2018; Skaria 1999). They encompass complex narratives of migration, livelihoods, conflicts, localities, and political configurations of peoples belonging to different social, religious, and ethnic groups (cf. Bhukya 2017). However, they seldom find a place in the historical narratives that form part of public discourses due to the rigidity of the nation-state in allowing for diverse identities, nationalisms, and histories. This narrowing is further reinforced by elite actors within academia, the media, and the development sector, whose influence often aligns with or amplifies state-centric and homogenising frameworks. I contend that historical analyses of multiple pasts, identities, and cultures through the lens of indigeneity can generate new understandings that disrupt dominant representations of nation-states. In this context,

indigeneity can gain more significance when used as a lens to offer fresh insights into existing discussions on Adivasi histories, identities, and belonging, and to introduce alternative ways of thinking about them within academic discourses.

Indigeneity can be utilised to articulate different questions drawn from these historical narratives, conveying the stories of arrivals and departures of communities from various localities, their collective memories, struggles for livelihoods, and experiences of social changes over time. Such introductory questions can help expand the archives, moving beyond formal, text-based sources to include oral histories and testimonies, ritual performances, everyday activities, and kinship memories. For instance, these questions will enable a broader range of historical reference points to emerge:

a) What creative tensions has an 'Adivasi' community undergone over the decades that have led to sociocultural transformations?

b) What did the efforts to reinvent themselves as a 'community' at different moments in history entail?

c) Based on these efforts, what can be inferred about their relationship with 'land' and 'place'?

The forms of historicisation these questions raise emphasise the memories, interpretations, and narrations of community members, while also recognising their partial and situated nature.[7] This exercise can be institutionalised by broadening the social and cultural ambitions of 'indigeneity' – particularly by drawing on the modalities of indigeneity discussed in this paper as modes of inquiry. The discourses of indigeneity, open to multiple interpretations, can play a key role in forging historical consciousness in specific locations, drawing on local knowledge systems, collective memories, embodied practices, and community-led forms of storytelling, expression, and representation. These discourses are also well-positioned to mobilise strategies from the toolkit of so-called modernity and its understandings of identity, culture, and difference (Parkin 2000).

Addressing a sense of place and relationship with land

From an anthropological perspective, the ideas of indigeneity can offer a valuable frame for examining the relationships of Adivasi communities with processes of identity construction and lived landscapes. As several scholars have argued, viewing indigeneity solely through the lens of territoriality or original settlement can be limiting in the Indian context, as it reduces the historical complexities of the social, cultural, political, and economic processes that have shaped how Adivasi identities are cultivated, experienced, and understood over time (Ghosh 2006; Shah 2010; Steur 2017). As a concept, indigeneity offers insights into how broader historical, political, and sociocultural forces shape Adivasi identities. This involves analysing the layered histories that Adivasi communities have experienced, and how they interpret and derive meanings from these experiences today. One significant way to approach this is by

[7] An excellent literary exemplification of this kind of broadening exercise in historicisation is Ranendra's (2017) novel, *The Lords of the Global Village*. See also John (2021).

engaging with the Adivasi communities' relationships with the land and their sense of place.

Any understanding of land needs to be informed by sensibilities of inclusion, belonging, and relatedness to the past, in order to situate land and a sense of place within the same conceptual realm as Adivasi identities. This perspective, where land is considered a cultural asset, has been clearly expressed by historian Prathama Banerjee (2016: 144):

> In fact, one could argue, drawing from Adivasi histories, that the very concept of land must be reimagined as ecology rather than land per se, that is, as inclusive of forest, field, minerals, water and animals on the one hand and of specific modes of habitation of and relation to such land on the other.

Discussing local indigeneities in relation to land and place involves examining how Adivasi communities mobilise material, symbolic, and affective resources to express their relational understandings of how places are imagined and produced.

Banerjee (2016: 144) also argues that 'thinking about land as simultaneously resource, ecology and territory brings in issues of state and state-making as an intrinsic part of the land question.' Her argument is significant because land not only reflects the lived experiences of particular locations, boundaries, and everyday practices of the Adivasi communities but also serves as a harbinger of the larger social relations embedded in national and transnational polities and economies. A relational understanding of indigeneity – attuned to issues of land and place – can help us grasp how the state materialises in the daily lives of Adivasis.

In many local, place-based movements across states such as Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha, and Maharashtra, Adivasi communities are resisting multiple violations and demanding stronger enforcement of the Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Act (PESA). This Act grants decision-making powers to *Gram Sabhas* (village councils) in Adivasi-majority areas within states where Adivasis are otherwise in the minority (designated as Scheduled Areas under the Fifth Schedule). The Adivasi communities are exploring the historical roots and the significance of their actions through discursive work within these movements. This discursive work entails the creation and circulation of narratives, symbols, and interpretations that assert their claims to land, governance, and identities, while also challenging the dominant state-centred views of land, development, and Adivasi autonomy. The affective orientations in these movements, which are the relational expressions of identities and belonging, serve as markers of Adivasi communities' self-expressions of their relationships with peoplehood and place. These orientations are shaped by the Adivasi communities' lived experiences of engaging in social relations with the state, as well as the pronounced role the state plays in their everyday lives (Choubey 2015; Dandekar 2015, 2018; Davidsdottir 2021; Veeresha 2021).

Studying the contexts of marginalisation

Finally, I want to highlight the value of indigeneity in understanding the contexts of marginalisation in the lives of Adivasi communities. This is a significant ambition in the pursuit of dignified living spaces, by and for the Adivasi communities. Due to the current political and socioeconomic conditions in India, which aspire towards statism,

centralism, and homogeneity, the spaces for Adivasis to express their identities, differences, and dissent are rapidly shrinking (Das Gupta and Basu 2012; Moodie 2015; Sundar 2012; Wadhwa and Dunne 2024).

I explore indigeneity in relation to these contexts in two interconnected ways. First, by delving into the multifaceted aspects of 'indigenousness,' I suggest that Adivasi groups can employ indigeneity to highlight their experiences of dislocation and displacement, social and cultural marginalisation, economic hardship, and the distinct ways in which these marginalities are articulated and negotiated in everyday life. To illustrate, understanding Adivasi indigeneities would help situate the lives and perspectives of Adivasi communities within the larger contexts of the complicated histories of relations between Adivasis and non-Adivasis in central India. These historically situated relations, marked by power asymmetries and long-standing distrust, have gradually led to a state where many Adivasi communities feel socially and culturally marginalised, materially disadvantaged, and politically excluded (Ghosh 2006; Mahana 2019; Sundar 2016; Xaxa 2016).

Second, engaging with indigeneity can deepen the pursuit of modes of self-expression that articulate the historical injustices endured by Adivasis, their effects in the present, and the political visions of alternative futures. These modes of self-expression are crucial for addressing the Adivasi communities' anxieties about downward social mobility and for responding to fragilities and uncertainties produced by their structural positions in marginalised social locations. Anti-minority prejudices, cuts to welfare funding, rising authoritarianism in governance, human rights violations, shrinking freedoms, privatisation of economic resources, and Hindutva have permeated the everyday lives of people in India, especially ethnic and religious minorities, with brutal intensity (Appadurai 2019; Hansen 2021; Jaffrelot, Hansen, and Chatterji 2019; Satia 2021). This intermingling is bound to influence the ways people relate to the practices and imaginaries that shape the social locations of Adivasi communities.

For Adivasis, activists, and scholars to meaningfully engage with these ramifications and political imaginaries, it is essential to approach marginalisation not only as a discursive phenomenon but also as a structural one. This involves recognising the multiple ways in which the politics of land and forests, livelihood insecurities, and migration are reshaping hierarchies and class dynamics within Adivasi communities, as discussed in the previous section. The entanglement of marginalisation and structural inequality is contributing to generational tensions between youth and older Adivasis, alongside material and symbolic shifts in local power structures. This is reflected in the prevailing sense of ambivalence that characterises many Adivasi communities' perceptions of their relationship with the Indian state – an ambivalence intensified by intergenerational conflicts and constantly shifting politico-economic conditions. As demonstrated by Uday Chandra in his analysis of the Koel-Karo and Naxalite movements in Jharkhand, 'community' and 'generation' have become contentious sites of struggle:

> The rural Adivasi 'community' we encounter today is far from a vestige of a pristine precolonial past, but an artifact of the constitution of modern state–society relations in India with its peculiar set of intergenerational conflicts that define the nature and limits of governmentality. Intergenerational conflicts within this 'community,' therefore, map onto competing statist visions of

> Adivasi communities as well as the ways by which Adivasi subjects negotiate the modern Indian state today. (Chandra 2018: 232)

Concluding thoughts

In this paper, I have examined how the contested, contextual, and relational meanings of indigeneity can take shape and be expressed through specific practices and lived experiences. Indigeneity serves as an enabler of possibilities for contextualising Adivasi identities, engaging with the processes employed by Adivasi communities for exploring and articulating their relationships with place, and addressing the social dynamics among different Adivasi communities as well as between Adivasis and non-Adivasis. As a category of analysis, the interconnected dimensions of claim-making from the state, collective belonging, and shifting intra-community relations demonstrate how dynamic social, political, and affective processes shape assertions of Adivasi identities. These dimensions offer a grounded understanding of indigeneity as an analytical lens for examining how collective identity, belonging, and relations of power are formed and contested in contemporary central India. As a category of practice, the exploration of history, place, and marginalisation reveals how indigeneity, as a lived and evolving project, can illuminate how Adivasi communities express their identities, negotiate power, and reimagine their futures from their own situated perspectives.

Through my ideation processes, I have also aimed to show how indigeneity, as a prism, opens up space for interpretive and affective explorations. These explorations highlight how structural compulsions and historical-sociopolitical contexts mediate meaning-making in the actions and decisions of Adivasi communities. As such, indigeneity also emerges as a critical concept for contributing to the development of the emerging interdisciplinary field of 'Adivasi Studies' in India (Banerjee 2016; Chandra 2015; Damodaran and Dasgupta 2022; Dasgupta 2018).

In contemporary India, competing interpretations of democracy, social change, and politics continue to reinforce stark inequalities. Therefore, it is significant to analyse the flows of practices, processes, and structures that shape 'Adivasi' as a category of understanding in light of the community-building efforts within Adivasi communities and by the Adivasi *samaj*. Indigeneity can play a vital role here, as local Adivasi indigeneities facilitate work with ethnographic materials that address the politics of place, people, and everyday events. Against this backdrop, I intend to continue this theoretical endeavour in my future work on indigeneity, as I strive towards building a long-term, grounded relationship with the Adivasi communities.

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