The Primacy of Politics:
Interrogating Indigeneity and Ecology in India

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Reviewed works

Dasgupta, Sangeeta. 2023. *Reordering Adivasi worlds: Representation, resistance, memory.* Delhi: Oxford University Press, 368 pp., ISBN: 978-0190127916 (hardcover), $78.

Roshkow, Ezra. 2022. *The nature of endangerment in India: Tigers, 'tribes', extermination and conservation, 1818-2020.* New York: Oxford University Press, 378 pp., ISBN: 978-0192868527 (hardcover), $36.

Kohli, Kanchi & Manju Menon. 2021. *Development of environment laws in India.* Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 388 pp., ISBN: 978-1108490498 (hardcover), $90.25.

Pingali, Gautam. 2023. *Indigenous question, land appropriation, and development: Understanding the conflict in Jharkhand, India.* London: Routledge, 162 pp., ISBN: 978-1032326412 (hardcover), $147.

Introduction

A powerful central forest conservation law in India, the Forest (Conservation) Act 1980, has been amended in August 2023 (Pardikar 2023). The new Act claims to aid afforestation efforts 'to enable achievement of national targets of "Net Zero Emission by 2070" and maintain or enhance the forest carbon stocks through ecologically balanced sustainable development.'[1]

Deceptively innocuous in its vocabulary of an internationalised climate-crisis response through state-driven greening efforts, it carries many a serious changes that will have long-term consequences for both India's vulnerable indigenous communities and its forests. The suggestions and criticisms received by the joint parliamentary committee that deliberated upon a draft of the Bill[2] pointed out that it would pave the way for untrammeled commercial exploitation in fragile and already stressed forests and biotic zones.

Most importantly, however, the new Act will weaken the already frail mechanisms in place for local self-government institutions to have a say in the process of forestland diversion (Deepika 2023; Nandi 2023; The Wire Staff 2023). The claims and political voice of millions of India's most vulnerable Adivasi, Scheduled Tribe (ST)[3] and other forest dwelling communities (OTFDs) are detracted by the greater and often arbitrary powers awarded to the central state via the amendments to this Act.

It does so by narrowing down the administrative need for empowered decision-making by local self-government institutions, i.e., the *gram sabha*, or village-level local councils, mandated to have regulatory powers by legislations such as the Panchayat Raj (Extension to Scheduled Areas) (PESA) Act 1996 and the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006.[4]

In fact, in the last decade these laws have regularly been ignored, weakened, and challenged (Chandra 2019; Sethi 2019). The Hindu nationalist regime in place since 2014 has pushed for greater centralisation, and sustained attacks on public deliberation and criticism of its policies (Mukherji & Zarhani 2023). In this light, rights-based legislations, such as the two aforementioned laws, acquire further salience as statutory protection against excesses of the state that may adversely affect India's most vulnerable communities.

Moreover, it has been firmly established that rights-based legislations have a critical role to play in the process of democratic deepening (Jenkins & Manor 2017).[5] The Forest Rights Act 2006, for example, has enabled political mobilisation of indigenous communities staking claims upon the state (Forestcampaign 2023; Tripathi 2019). In contemporary India, the politics of indigeneity is indeed at the heart of its tryst with development with democratic means. Institutions that further a democratic tenure transition in India's forests need to be further strengthened, and a key challenge facing India's indigenous communities, who struggle for their cultural and material rights within the democratic framework, is to move towards political positions that make this possible.[6]

Adivasi communities inhabiting India's resource-rich regions (in terms of forests, minerals, water and land) find their lives inextricably embroiled with contestations over natural resource use.[7] The Adivasi "way of life" is celebrated for its redemptive potential for sustainable natural resource use and conservation; or as a solution to the challenges of climate crisis gets attention (AdvasiLivesMatter 2021; Lopes 2022; Panda 2019). However, this discourse, without the bedrock of autonomy, local self-governance, and a deliberative institutional culture in forest governance apparatus, would be ineffective, even detrimental.

India's forest governance is still dominated by a "fortress" model of conservation, that prioritises pristine, human-free zones as the predominant need for ecological and wildlife conservation. Paradoxically, this model yields ample space for forestland diversion for "developmental" and extractive needs pushed by powerful interests (Kashwan 2017). The principles of "eminent domain" that have guided the forest administration since colonial times remain unchanged even in Independent India in being singularly biased against India's Adivasi and their customary rights in the forests (Vasan 2016).

What does this scenario mean for indigeneity and politics in India? There is no single or easy answer to this and numerous related questions. However, the four books reviewed in this essay offer deep insights into the struggle for a democratic and equitable society for India's indigenous communities. Through the four volumes we delve into: (a) the question of "being and becoming Adivasi" and the centrality of power and politics in this history (Dasgupta); (b) the layered and deeply contested genealogy of terminologies, policy concepts and practices directed at indigenous communities (Roshkow); (c) the complex political histories and legacies of the legal regime governing natural resources in India (Kohli & Menon); and (d) the nature of resource politics in a mineral rich sub-national state of India, Jharkhand (Pingali).

The essay is divided into three parts. The next two sections present a brief overview of the four volumes and the last section aims to bring together the discussion around the question of forest rights and Adivasi politics. Centered on the fight for forest rights, we attempt to identify some of the directions the politics of indigeneity in India might take, and how it might shape natural resource use patterns in contemporary India.

I use the term "indigenous communities" in a broad sense to indicate groups who see themselves as older or prior inhabitants of a region, dominated by the so-called "mainstream" in terms of economic, political and cultural lives. The discourse around nomenclature is quite revealing of the politics, history, and contestations inherent in the process of self-determination of indigenous communities the world over (Sundar 2016, 1-46; Radhakrishna 2016, 1-30).

Adivasi selves and the discourses of "endangerment"

Professor Sangeeta Dasgupta's volume *Reordering Adivasi worlds* and Ezra Roshkow's *The nature of endangerment in India* compel us to read oft-forgotten or neglected histories into the present, warning us about the pitfalls of reading the present into history.

The former volume is a culmination of over a decade-long historical-anthropological research into the Tana Bhagat movement/sect among the Oraon community of east and central India, from early days of colonial encounters to the present times. This invaluable contribution helps us unpack the arduous and multi-layered histories and processes of Adivasi self-determination and self-representation.

Roshkow's wide-ranging work on the historical moorings of the idea or notion of "endangerment", deals with a cornerstone concept in wide-spread discourses on "nature conservation" and welfare of so-called "tribal" communities across the globe, with special reference to the Indian subcontinent. Taken together, these two volumes address key questions around the historical messiness and violence engendered by ideas and concepts prevalent in administrative, popular, and academic discourses that impinge upon indigeneity and natural resource politics.

Being Adivasi

What does it mean to "be" an Adivasi? Who "decides"? in the rarefied echelons of scholarship, the muddy waters of everyday politics, or popular imagination. Dasgupta's volume presents some answers to these questions. It is a finely researched, richly detailed and exciting history of an Adivasi community through the colonial era to the present times—counterpoising archival sources with documents recording communities' memories, as well as oral traditions.

To undertake this task, the author takes the case of the Oraon[8], and the Tana Bhagat movement[9], which arose around 1914. The Tana Bhagat movement has often been considered a "mainstreaming" move-ment, one that brought sections of the Oraon into Gandhian politics and the Congress party in the Indian national independence struggle. Their closeness to the Congress party and dissensions away from it continue to be an important part of political representation of a sizeable segment of the Oraons.

The author maintains that the debates around indigeneity and deve-lopment have a deep ecological register—as the Adivasi (and their advocates) define themselves/are defined as "original inhabitants", and assert their identity as the original guardians of ecology, against the dominant paradigms of developmentalism and extractivism (on extractivism, see, Martinez-Alier 2022).

In this contestation, more often than not, the Adivasi are the vulnerable and marginalised but, as this book brings out, there is a powerful story of Adivasi agency and self-assertion that needs to be told: 'the voices of Adivasi, although multiple and fractured, can be heard as they assert their identity, express their politics, and creatively negotiate with the state and its institutions' (Dasgupta 2023, 3).

The book is divided into two parts, comprising of three and four chapters respectively. The first part delves into the making of different labels applied to identify or "define" the Oraon as a people or community at different points in time in the writings of Christian missionaries, administrators, state and other anthropologists, and writings of a prominent, and first ever, nationalist voice in Indian anthropology, S.C. Roy (1871-1942).

Taking the Oraons as a case, she shows how the markers that we use to identify and define a tribe today, with all its attendant essentialisms, were 'generated and acknowledged in colonial and postcolonial times' (ibid., 7). Colonial interventions in the Chhotanagpur region were deeply intertwined with the imaginaries of a "tribe". Shaping of customary rights in agrarian as well as forest regions, perceptions about Adivasi society and customs in general, and the way the legal discourses around their protests evolved, were all embroiled with these imaginaries. As the author states,

> These shifts within the understanding of the term tribe … were related to, among other things, the working of official minds, changing assumptions, and differing terminologies; the tensions within the discipline of anthropology and its application in the colony; varying ideologies of governance and the imperatives of rule; and interactions with the "native" populace. (ibid., 12)

The missionaries working in the area since early 1830s deployed several categories such as heathen, pagan, savage, race, aboriginal, in their attempt to capture the Oraons' "endangered" or rapidly changing way of life. Their contributions to the identity formation of the tribe became part of the "bureaucratic memory" with the coming of official ethnographies and the rise of the monochromatic categories of "tribe" following "animistic" religions.

In Sarat Chandra Roy's work, in the Bengali and English languages between 1915 and 1937, one can see an attempt to create a distinct Indian approach to anthropology. He engaged with the evolution of British social anthropology,

caught within the traditions of British social anthropology and its links with the colonial state on the one hand, and seeking, on the other, to establish a unique "Indian" approach to anthropology, veered between shifting notions of denigration and appreciation of tribes and tribal culture as he wrote about the Oraons of Chhotanagpur. (ibid., 14)

The second part of the book deals with multiple narratives of "Tana pasts"—textual and oral. These include not only historiographical traditions in the academe but also self-narratives of the Oraon community, Tana leaders, and their followers. The author questions the assumptions prevalent among contemporary stances that suggest that Oraons stayed away from the state—in the "shadows of the state", as it were—in an egalitarian social structure, leading a monocultural economic, social, and religious life.

The author delineates the reordering of the Oraon world as the Tana Bhagats negotiated with the *sarkar*, *sahukar*, and *zamindar* (state, moneylender, and landlord), questioned the hierarchies within the Oraon world, and engaged with Gandhi and the Congress. She highlights how

> the Tana Bhagats continued in postcolonial times with their poignant dreams and negotiate with government officials in Jharkhand and the Congress high-command in Delhi—at different levels, drawing upon diverse experiences and distinctive memories. (ibid., 7)

Deconstructing the linearity of the story of Tana movement, the author presents an alternative reading of Tana protests. Mapping social and cultural lives on to the historical evolution of the region's geographical, agrarian, and forest landscape, she discusses "patterns of migration of Adivasi communities", that determined land and ritual privileges, shaped protests and generated the cleavages within Adivasi communities, in time reordered by colonial intervention.

Instead of clear-cut cleavage of Adivasi-non-Adivasi, or "settled agriculturists" and forest dwelling Adivasi, she favours historical approaches that foreground either agrarian or environmental histories respectively, presenting the Tana movement itself as a struggle located on marginal cleavages within the Oraon society. Complicating the picture of "mainstreaming", she demonstrates that the Tana and the Congress local leaders both co-constituted their discourses according to their own ends, audiences, and vocabularies.

> As one looks at the two kinds of histories of the Tana movement: the official historical archives and that rendered by their leaders—speeches, pamphlets, and petitions—it is clear that the Tana draw

upon and rework "the memories of events passed down generations" in conjunction with the present events, … [t]heir representations of the past, though not always mutually exclusive, are at times historically framed; at times decidedly evocative; at times consciously crafted; at times intuitively structured. (ibid., 24)

The author's interrogation of the Tana pasts works at several levels. The book finds its location into the struggle of the archive-dependent historian trying to write histories of people who did not have any presence or agency in the making of the very sources the history relies upon. Textual sources remain part of colonial or postcolonial state's imperative to rule, control, or improve the aboriginal or primitive, and lend themselves to persistent essentialisation of Adivasi identities, lives, society, and protests. Early nationalist histories drew linear connections between "tribal" rebellions against the British as early forms of anti-colonial nationalist movement. "Tribe-caste continuum" models overdetermined "tribal" development studies through most of India's post-Independence period. Even with the project to resurrect the invisible "subaltern", the binaries and essentialism of "primitiveness" have continued to plague our histories. This not only makes it imperative to find alternative sources to conventional approaches, but also ways to interrogate and try to strike a balance between rigors of historiographical method, and the need for revision.

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Its most important contribution, however, lies in buttressing the academic and political salience of Adivasi self-determination. The assertion of Adivasi self-hood that privileges oral narratives and memories of their own "habitus", as it were, seeks to break this pattern, by recognising that written histories are another form of epistemological suppression.

"Endangered" identities

In this line of argument, it becomes critical that the emancipatory projects of Adivasi assertion are rid of the vocabulary and markers inherited via the colonial discourses of "protection" and "improvement" (Chandra 2013). *The Nature of Endangerment* deals with the notion or trope of being "endangered"—a speciously vague and overarching threat perception, often backed by a body of bespoke knowledge—as it moves from a global colonial legacy to become one of the markers of India's discourse on nature and conservation.

In common assumption, the concept of endangered, or on the verge of extinction, is attributed to the rise of conservationist consciousness in the 1960s and early 70s (such as saving the tigers), in relation to non-

human species or natural environments. However, as this book demonstrates, the idea of endangerment existed much earlier, applied to the vanishing lives and cultures of indigenous communities that met the European peoples throughout the colonial world. The author unravels how this racist, imperialist analogy explains the postcolonial legacies of conservation terminologies and approaches.

Since early colonial encounters in the 1500s, Europeans caused, but also documented and lamented the loss of communities termed indigenous. Only in the middle of the nineteenth century did the 'concept of extinction, long understood as impacting human "races" and "tribes", also came to be applied to what we now call wildlife.' The early colonial practices of dehumanising comparisons between so-called wild tribes and wild animals was now given a regular "pseudoscientific basis". It is not altogether unsurprising that the received conservation discourse is often indistinguishable from earlier forms of human endangerment and extinction discourse.

In fact, the idea of protecting "tribal wildness" predated the idea of protecting wildlife by many decades, reaching its peak around the 1930s, when there was very little consciousness of large mammal protection. In fact, peoples "in" and "of" the wild co-existed with the wildlife. As the author's research around the Kanha National Park presented in this book suggests, since the nineteenth centuries, parks and sanctuaries have been planned not only to conserve wildlife but also peoples believed to be in danger of extinction. Animal and dehumanising analogies were used for long in history, and in the planning of parks, this analogy continues to exist.

The "endangerment" discourse is also visible in policy approaches related to categorisation of people as forest dwelling or agrarian. Is forest dwelling an inseparable idea with Adivasi hood? Taking India's Bhil and Gond communities of central India, Roshkow explains how in common and policy perceptions both have persistently been seen as wild tribes, inhabiting, loving, and even nurturing the wilderness, at least as equally endangered in their cultural and social moorings as the wildlife and forests they live in. So, if the forests go, so will their animals, and the "wild tribes" with them: hence the need for exclusivist conservation.

Just as it is absurd to treat the Bhil and Gond peoples, totaling nearly 30 million, as homogenous forest-dwelling people, it is equally absurd that any one-size-fits-all approach to resolve the so-called "tribal problem" will make any sense. Assimilating a large body of extant literature on the subject, the author demonstrates how the three approaches, namely "integration", "isolation", and "assimilation", have cast a long shadow on the way India has engaged with its Adivasi and "tribal" citizens.

The protectionism and endangerment discourse is not confined to policy and state. Even civil society/activist dialogues may look at Adivasi as endangered subjects, as the self-perception of recipients of Narmada Bachao Andolan[10] resettlement/relocation offers might differ from their homogenous image as "endangered" citizens. The author argues that they may look upon themselves as victorious against the state.

As the history of the Bhil tribals in the region would indicate, a community may be looked at in diametrically opposite ways by the state as its gaze changes from confrontationist to paternalist through history. Just like the idea of "primitiveness" (Chandra 2013), which provides a fulcrum trope for analysis of colonial legacies in postcolonial settings, the idea of "endangerment" needs to be unpacked and used as a fruitful lens into Adivasi identity formation, politics of development, and the discourse around environmental conservation.

Laws and politics of natural resource use

Deeply connected with the question of Adivasi assertion for a fair and just natural resource use is the mode of environmental governance in India. In *Development of Environment Laws in India,* Kanchi Kohli and Manju Menon have presented by far the most readable and exhaustive account of the evolution and multiple dimensions of environmental law in India. It is understood that environmental legislation is a deeply contested terrain in India, and implementation of these laws is often fraught with controversies. This volume provides a richly researched account of these laws in their socio-political contexts and debates around them from a legal-juridical point of perspective.

It covers a stupendous canvas of environmental fields, law making bodies, regulatory agencies, statutes, peoples and controversies, locating them 'within broader local, national, and international socio-political and economic influences' (Kohli & Menon 2021, 1). The authors demonstrate how institutional ideologies of developmentalism have undergirded and in turn constituted by the evolution of environmental laws in India in the last five decades. Understood as an aggregate body of laws, statutes, case law, legal code, regulations and principles, the environmental legal framework mediates peoples' connection with nature—a fact that is often overlooked in the obsession with matters of cost-benefit assessment and technical details.

It is critical, as the authors underline, that environmental governance be understood as a domain of power politics. Looking at environmental laws and their implementation as a "field of power", of tussle between often conflicting demands, and competing actors following ends 'contingent, multiple, and fluid' (ibid., 2), opens up an analytical

framework that allows a far richer and deeper understanding of why environmental governance in India finds itself falling short in every direction possible.

The authors identify four major players in the "field of power": governments, courts, international environmental institutions, and expert-based regulatory institutions. Other forces, economic and political, regularly influence these entities. Powerful economic interests, corporations impinge and shape policy action as well as judicial interventions; social movements create pressures and demands that get built-in in lawmaking and political action of governments.

This mix of actors and influences make it difficult to gain any "systematic outcomes" in environmental governance and, in turn, makes any analysis of environmental law difficult. Kohli and Menon rightly advise us to treat environmental law as "political tools". They deftly weave this perspective throughout the volume, giving numerous cases, debates, and very illuminating narratives of how things progressed through the decades. As they state:

> The roles and functions of environmental law are better understood when they are seen as political tools and not only as legal and regulatory instruments. The end game in Indian environmental law is political resource distribution, and as powerful stakeholders or interest groups stretch environmental laws and principles in many directions, this puts environmental laws in the realm of resource politics…. Environmental laws can be useful to protect community rights over the environment, but all too often they have legalized resource grab from the poor whose access to law is very poor. (ibid.)

This framework is borne out in laws dealing with forests, their conservation/reservation, and diversion (Chapter 3 and 6). Forest laws remain some of the most controversial and contested matters with direct implycations for life chances of India's indigenous communities. India's central forest law, the Indian Forest Act 1927, the process involved in reservation of forestlands, role of the judiciary in creating the institutionalised mechanism of compensatory afforestation, and the significance of the famous Godavarman case of 1995 and its aftermath and implications are discussed.

The coming of the Forest Rights Act in 2006, especially in connection with the Forests (Conservation) Act 1980, is critical here. The contestations over the implementation of the law and even its constitutional validity since early days of its enactment is of much importance in understanding the nature of politics around forest rights (ibid., 116-17). A rather brief but helpful comparison between the Forest Policies of 1952,

1988, and the Draft Policy of 2018, aids the understanding of the context to the FRA 2006 and its importance for indigenous peoples' struggle.

The book will naturally serve as an excellent and comprehensive text for any student, researcher, teacher, or activist interested in India's environmental law. But, in a sense, one of the book's strengths is also its only weakness. It covers too large a ground, and the need to be exhaustive on such a large canvas often appears to interfere with the possibility of tying up the conceptual threads, so succinctly presented in the Introduction. As a reader, it is easy to get lost in the detail, and one sorely misses an overall summing statement at the end of chapters, or even at the end of the book which could have presented a take on the overall picture as it stands now.

For instance, issues and processes connected with India's domestic politics and its competitive authoritarian turn[11], rise of Hindu nationalism (Sharma 2023), crony capitalistic developments, the rapidly changing international power balance and climate change politics, are factors embroiled with the way India's environmental legal framework will continue to mediate the struggle for survival for India's vulnerable communities in the coming times.

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The material presented in the book is superbly researched and exhaustive, and a thematic afterword would have enhanced its value of the volume manifold. That, however, does not detract anything from the importance of this volume, and perhaps the next edition will address this issue—especially in the post-pandemic world.

Jharkhand: A test case for indigenous politics?

The monograph by Gautam Pingali in many ways highlights the afore-mentioned themes empirically. It brings ground level research from Jharkhand, one of the most resource-rich states of India, marred by centuries of conflict between indigenous communities and so-called "outsiders". Bringing a political-economic lens to Jharkhand's conflicts over land, forests, and water, and the stakes of multiple players—the subnational and national state, corporations, and Adivasi publics and leaders—this study draws our attention to a crucial point: ideas and interests co-constitute and structure political institutions.[12] This has tra-ditionally been given comparatively lesser attention in political science scholarship in the Indian subcontinent. The ideological and normative moorings of political and policy action have a lot to do with how well-meaning state legislations turn out in practice on the ground, or what determines state capacity.[13] I dwell upon this issue in the concluding section of the essay.

The state of Jharkhand in Eastern India presents a powerful case for the questions at hand, wherein India's Adivasis or indigenous communities have been locked in a tussle with the state and "outsiders" for their rights over land, water, forests, and culture for two centuries. The contours of this contestation have acquired national and international dimensions today.

Who owns natural resources in a nation? How does the developmentalist ideology and agenda of the Indian state articulate itself in a mineral-rich region and how do indigenous communities engage with this agenda? Especially so when the neo-liberal developmentalist agenda is extraction driven, and the state machinery is geared to treating natural resources as mere material commodities, rather than a basis of social and cultural life of people who live in the region.

The indigenous people, their societies often predating the modern extractive state, become a negative or legal compliance burden on successful businesses; and successful business becomes the panacea of the "common good". Ironically, even the agendas of conservation and environmental protection, when exclusivist, more often than not have an equally marginalising impact on the indigenous communities.

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Pingali locates his analyses of conflict in Jharkhand on three key factors that impact holistic development—"land", "law", and "progress". He highlights the varying approaches the Adivasis, the state and corporates have towards these three aspects of development.

The Adivasi have a special connect with their land and forests, and believe themselves to be the caretakers of their land, refusing to treat it as a commodity. This sits in contrast with the approach the state and corporations have towards land—the former treats all land as its sovereign property or national asset that should be utilised for national development while the latter treat it as a source of profit, and peoples' rights as a burden.

Law making, its application, implementation, and its fallouts for the three different parties is another dimension of his analysis. Meeting the agendas of these three kinds, often contradictory in their inherent aims, is what makes developmental legislation such a contested topic in Jharkhand, he argues. How is this seemingly balancing act playing out, who is benefiting, and how are the other parties responding are all studied through the lens of law-making by understanding the rationale behind the laws and the orthodoxies they support.

The third theme assessed is that of "progress". How does the state look at progress—and the means and hurdles in accomplishing the same? In the state's eyes, the author argues, progress is about

economic growth, and the mineral wealth in the Scheduled Areas are assets waiting to become the means of rapid industrialisation and growth—which will bring jobs, prosperity. The corporates always think the state is not doing enough to make it easy for them to do business and legal, customary and other rights of the Adivasi are but an avoidable technicality facing business propositions.

The Adivasi, however, consider subsistence, maintenance of their cultural identity, their value systems and happiness and well-being as central to their attachment with land, mineral wealth, and steps towards progress necessarily do not converge with industrialisation, stark consumerism, and unregulated urban expansion. Depending on who governs or controls the debate—the state, corporations, or Adivasi community organisations—the ideological lines are drawn and the re-sults reflect support for or opposition to state-led modernisation, neo-liberal extractive expansion, or an alternative view of development.

Reviewed works and the existing literature

The volumes reviewed here add substantively to the evolving body of literature on Adivasi and indigenous communities in India. There now exists an extensive body of historical and anthropological writings that make deft use of oral histories, ground-up accounts, and sources that indicate a dynamic, self-defining, autonomous voice among indigenous communities (see for example, Rao 2023; Damodaran & Dasgupta 2022; Oza 2022; Pati 2018; Bharat 2019; Nilsen 2018; Bhukya 2017; Sundar 2007; Froerer 2007; Skaria 1999; Karlsson 2011). Contestations over forests, mines, land, and water feature prominently in many of these works, and Dasgupta's volume lends itself to Adivasi struggles on social, political, and environmental fronts.

Roshkow's volume fills an important need for a wide-ranging conceptual treatment connecting the global with the local, and teasing out layers of racist and colonial legacies in "tribal" governance. Most importantly, the book speaks to literature on terms of discourses around indigenous communities, their development and welfare, and nature conservation "governmentality" (see, for example, Nathan et al. 2004; Chandra 2013; Shahabuddin 2010; Nathan & Xaxa 2012; Guha 1999; Baviskar 1995).

Menon and Kohli's volume provide a theoretically grounded-view on evolution of environmental laws in India, and as it covers a very large ground, fills a deep need for ready compendia, especially for students. Pingali's volume is a valuable addition to empirical explorations in India's scheduled areas and so-called "tribal" states, one which will go a long way in bringing to light the complexities of politics of indigeneity and

natural resource use in the region (see, Tillin 2013; Kikon 2019; Kikon & McDuie-Ra, 2020; Shah 2010; Rao 2023; Ranjan 2023; Corbridge et al. 2004; Sundar 2009; Prakash 2001; Devalle 1992)

The politics of indigeneity and democratic natural resource use

How does indigenous identity assertion play out in the context of the agendas of an extractive state and its functioning within the compulsions of democratic politics?

What does "indigeneity" stand for in India? For long, scholars have maintained that the concept "indigenous" is misleading in the Indian context (Roy Burman & Verghese 1998; Rycroft & Dasgupta 2011). The categories and labels tribe/tribal, scheduled tribes, indigenous communities or "first nations", or Adivasi, are often used interchangeably in India, but the usage is far from being unproblematic. The term "tribe", a legacy of colonial anthropology, is falling out of favor due to the attendant notions of imperialistic and hegemonic knowledge, as well as the arduous task of defining it in epistemologically meaningful ways. The term "indigenous" communities are taking a prominent place in academic and popular discourses globally, and yet in India, the administrative term "scheduled tribe" continues to hold value, as the state-citizen relation continues to play a definitive role in identity formation (Radhakrishna 2016, 1-32). In fact, the Indian government has regularly contravened the attempt by India's tribal leaders to portray its tribal communities as "indigenous" peoples, and any attempts at provisioning of international legal regimes in these matters has been looked at as international interference and overreach.

It is, however, now widely accepted that the idea of "indigeneity" is a normative expression of collective experiences of marginality rather than an "academic" concept suited to capture so-called "objective" reality. It has three crucial aspects to it: first, having "prior" claim over natural resources in a region they inhibit on account of their existence before the predominant economic systems evolved in the particular region; second, being in a "dominated" position vis-a-vis the larger, dominant section of the society in which the indigenous population live; and finally, "self-determination/identification" as a distinct community, culturally, socially, and politically vis-a-vis the dominant population and the community (Karlsson & Subba 2006, 3-9).

This overarching conceptualisation provides us a possible way out of the multi-pronged debate around the controversies inherent in the usage of the labels. What is important is that all these labels at some level articulate shared histories of marginality and conflict, agency and

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adaptation for survival and dignity. Here the primacy of politics, especially indigenous politics, cannot be overemphasised.

Forest rights of the Adivasi: The role institutions play

Contestation over natural resources and rights of indigenous citizens to have a say in how India's natural resources are governed and for whom, are at the center of India's democratic experiment. Politics is structured by institutions (Steinmo et al. 1992), and the institutions that determine power differentials in favour of the indigenous communities, or create mechanisms that enable a politics of deliberation would further democratic governance of resources (Kashwan 2017).

In this context, a conceptual and empirical investigation of the way public institutions—especially those directed at vulnerable communities—emerge, persist, and change, acquires salience. The Forest Rights Act 2006 and its implementation are a case in point.

The salient transformative aspects of this legislation are: statutory "recognition" of (a) historical disinheritance of forest dwellers by forestry laws of colonial and independent India and the urgent need for restitution; (b) "role and right" of forest dwelling communities and their conventional wisdom, habitational needs, and "autonomous agency in forest conservation" and sustainable development; and (c) individual and community rights to forest produce, management, and diversion of forest land to other developmental or commercial uses (for a detailed exposition on this, Lele & Menon 2014, 1-24). Despite the shortcomings of the Act, it has been recognised as a landmark legislation, especially if the community forestry rights are implemented to their true potential. It is also argued, however, that despite its potential, the Act has many shortcomings that prevent it from truly redefining the terms of discourse on forests rights in India (see Vasan 2016).

What leads to better implementation of the Forest Rights Act? The role played by social movements[14], party ideology and/or leadership[15], or national and international civil society "networks" as advocates of rights (see Kumar & Kerr 2012, for a detailed discussion on the crucial role played by civil society networks) of the indigenous communities, cannot be overemphasised.

However, it is important to note that whether the subnational or national state evolves capacity for implementing this legislation would depend upon a politics that "powers" the bureaucratic "puzzling" (Heclo 2010; Mukherji et al. 2019; Mukherji & Zarhani 2020). As the question of "tribal" self-rule or autonomy over natural resources becomes politically salient, the problems and dead-locks around the implementation

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of the forest rights act will be resolved through this process of bureaucratic puzzling and political powering. This process occurs as a part of the process of "social learning", within a normative worldview, or "policy paradigm" (Hall 1993). Policy paradigms can be strengthened or weakened by social contestations over policy failures.

Not only the role of social movements is important in generating ideas of change, international technocratic and civil society networks are equally critical in strengthening ideas that define a policy paradigm. The UN Declaration on the Rights of the Indigenous Peoples 2007 preceded/coincided with the Indian legislation on forest-dwellers' rights, but the ideas of tribal "self-rule" or autonomy over land and natural resources were also at the root of tribal movements in central and eastern India that later got submerged in the demand for new states (Tillin 2013).

It may be argued that as long as the policy paradigm within which India's forest bureaucracy functions is characterised by the idea of exclusivity or state-centricity, implementation of the forest rights legislation will not reach the potential it entails. Much depends upon how the norm of people-centricity in governance within the Indian state "thickens". Interaction between, and trust among, civil society, political actors, and the bureaucracy plays a crucial role in this process.

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Nearly 17 years after the coming of the Forest Rights Act 2006, the experience of its implementation shows huge variance in subnational state capacity.[16] A look at the nation-wide implementation data[17] would make it clear that while individual habitational rights are among the most discussed and recognised, the more crucial community or community forestry rights have only started getting recognised. In a recent study by ATREE (Ashoka Trust for Research on the Ecology and Environment) (Lele & Mokashi 2023), it was revealed that in four central Indian states of India, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Maharashtra, livelihoods of over 62.6 million people (nearly 23.6 million belonging to the Scheduled Tribes) can be immensely improved if the potential for Community Forest Resource Rights in these states are awarded.

Indigenous identity, rights, and politics: Some concluding observations

The indigenous communities' role in conservation of forests, biodiversity, and wild-life is often under-recognised, and community efforts to preserve India's forests need to be brought at the forefront of any analysis of forest governance policy (see Gadgil et al. 1993; 2003). Yet, it is important to watch against new essentialisms of eco-nationalism or ecological righteousness. Unless a politics of deliberation that enables a mix of local and regional approaches—modern scientific knowledge that

is inclusive of local and indigenous pragmatic approaches to mixed use of forests—it will be impossible to go beyond rhetoric in realising the true role of indigenous knowledge and communities in climate change mitigation and sustainable development (Saberwal & Rangarajan 2009, 9-18).

Often enough, political leaders of tribal dominated regions can be seen caught between tough choices of politically polarising (and often electorally rewarding) issues of religious and ethnic identity assertion over more complex issues of tackling vested interests in forest, water, and land usage. Majoritarian and populist leaders have often vilified local efforts at self-governance as anti-national and anti-development. In today's Jharkhand, for example, the recognition of tribal "sarna" religion[18], important in its own right, seems to be overshadowing popular debate over many other pressing developmental issues, or matters that would pave the way for greater security for indigenous communities, such as regulation of illegal mining or withdrawal of draconian legal action taken against the *pathalgadi* activists by the previous government (Angad 2020; Mukesh 2022; Pal 2021).

It remains to be seen how the politics of indigeneity evolves in India; and whether identity assertion translates into real change. In building and strengthening forest governance institutions that will enable a democratic tenure transition, the role of indigenous politics is primary.[19]

Endnotes

[1] See the proposed Bill (No. 80, 2023) text, available here: https://prsindia.org/billtrack/the-forest-conservation-amendment-bill-2023.

[2] The Bill, referred to a Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) in March 2023, received nearly 1039 memoranda of criticism and suggestions for consideration from various quarters of the civil society, government ministries and political parties through the months of April-July 2023, but ended up clearing almost all the proposed amendments in the Act. The JPC has ignored concerns about the Bill effecting a veritable reclassification of forestlands hitherto protected from diversion to non-forestry activities by the FCA 1980 (and attendant Supreme Court judgement of 1996).

[3] The Indian state categorises about 104 million people (8.6 per cent of India's population per the Census in 2011) as Scheduled Tribes. Tribal communities however are a much larger group and the administrative label and social realities of these communities are not interchangeable. Overall, nearly, 100 million tribal communities directly or indirectly depend upon forests in India.

[4] The rights institutionalised in the FRA 2006 encompass several aspects of people-forest relations, including individual and collective access to forests for a wide variety of material and cultural needs; collective practices of forest produce extraction, and conservation or regeneration of forests, and community veto or rights in cases of forest-land diversion. The PESA 1996 extends the powers of local self-governance to village councils in constitutionally defined tribal majority areas across the nation.

[5] The impact of rights-based legislations on the patterns of political action among the weakest sections of rural India, comprising largely of the OBC, Scheduled Castes, or Scheduled Tribes have

had both intended and unintended consequences. Rob Jenkins and James Manor (2017) in their study of the large-scale rural right to work programme MGNREGA explain that implementation of this programme produced, besides visible impact on poverty levels, an increased "political capacity"–further broken down as "political awareness", "voice", and "assertiveness", besides "mobilisation beyond ethnic boundaries" among the poor by building in operational measures within the legislation that act upon these factors.

[6] Till August 2021, over 4.2 million claims had been filed under the FRA 2006, and over 2 million titles were awarded, transferring tenurial rights over nearly 60,702 sq. km of forest land to India's forest dwellers (*FRA Monthly Progress Report*, Sept. 2021) Available at: https://tribal.nic.in/FRA.aspx.

[7] Nearly 38 per cent of India's forest cover, 38 per cent of dams, and nearly 70 per cent of reported mines extracting major minerals are located in administrative units where indigenous communities are in a majority. See, Wahi & Bhatia (2018: 30-40).

[8] The Oraons live in central and Eastern India mainly, and are one of the major "tribes" of Jharkhand state in Eastern India.

[9] In 1914, a leader called Jatra Oraon led a self-purification movement among the segments of the Oraon community who had been marginalised by the forest and agricultural policies of the colonial government. Another leader, Sibu Oraon emerged in 1919, who called for greater purificatory reforms, rent strikes, and mobilisation against Hindu moneylenders and traders, Muslims, and upper caste Hindu landlords. By 1920, Sibu Oraon had joined his forces with the emergent Gandhian politics in the region—adopting the symbols and strategies of the Gandhian non-cooperation movement.

[10] The *Narmada Bachao Andolan* (Save the Narmada Movement) started in 1985 as a mass protest against the Narmada Valley project (in operation since the late 1970s) that included plans to build 30 large, 135 medium, and 3000 small dams over a nearly 1300 km stretch of a central Indian Narmada river. The Narmada, one of the major rivers of central India, flows through the states of Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Gujarat. Till date, the project has displaced over 250,000 people, a majority of them rural Adivasi and other backward classes. The movement gained momentum through the 1980s and 1990s under the leadership of Medha Patkar, and a large body of civil society organisations, national and international. The movement won many victories along the way, including the 1993 withdrawal of the World Bank's support for the project. However, in 2014, the Hindu nationalist BJP government approved the highest dam of the project, the Sardar Sarovar in Gujarat, submerging nearly 38,000 hectares of land and over 200 villages. Till date, thousands of internally displaced citizens await adequate rehabilitation and relief from the state governments involved with the project. For a ground-up perspective on the movement, see Nandini Oza (2022). Also see, Baviskar (1995) for a classic anthropological account of the movement at its peak.

[11] A "competitive authoritarian" regime is a mid-way house between an autocracy and democracy, wherein the ruling political regime renders it difficult for its political competition to regain power using electoral or other legitimate means. See, Manor (2021) for the emergence of this type of politics in contemporary India.

[12] One of the pioneering works that take ideas as a crucial variable in long-term political change is that of Blyth (2002).

[13] For detailed discussion of this research gap, see Mukherji (2013); for the importance of norms and ideological underpinnings of elite strategies in determining state capacity, see Mangla (2015; 2018).

[14] See, Gadgil and Guha (1993; 2013) and Guha (1989). The authors pioneered an interdisciplinary framework that contrasted the historical struggle over natural resources between the dominant urban classes or the "omnivores" and their international alliances and a wide spectrum of "ecosystem" people—rural and forest dwelling communities—claiming their conventional local rights over forests. Here the state emerges as an agency protecting and promoting primarily the interests of the former and social movements as the prime driver of change through the pressures

they build upon the state.

[15] See, Chiriyankandath et al. (2020); the authors attribute a very important role to the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) leader and Indian National Congress President Ms Sonia Gandhi in bringing about the FRA 2006, with the Left parties that were part of the UPA ruling alliance during their first term (2004-9).

[16] Similarly, the performance on "Other" forest-dwelling communities have been dismal too. It is hardly surprising that Jharkhand state, with its forest bureaucracy dominated by north Bihari settlers, performs dismally in comparison with neighboring Odisha, both fairly comparable on socio-economic criteria. Since 2014, with the rise of a centralising and autocratic regime that stands for Hindu nationalism, attacks on weakening rights-based legislation like the FRA have increased in multiple ways.

[17] Ministry of Tribal Affairs, FRA Status Reports. Available at: https://tribal.nic.in/FRA.aspx.

[18] On the religious angle, see Jha (2022); On the popular debate, see Kukreti (2020).

[19] In relation to the expansion of Hindutva among indigenous communities and varied responses of different groups from among supposedly homogenous communities, see Baviskar (2006), Froerer (2007).

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