Indigeneity as a cultural practice 'tribe' and the state in India

In recent decades, India has seen a re-emergence of 'tribal' movements. To be 'tribal' plays an important part in identity claims advanced by many of the 84 million people who the Indian state has categorised as such. These claims are encouraged by that same state, which allocates substantial resources for the welfare and development of 'tribal' communities. Academic debates on the dynamics of social categorisation acknowledge these cultural, political and economic dimensions, but nevertheless continue to centre on the extent to which Indian 'tribes' can and should be seen as an essentialist (colonial) invention. New research is focussing on a deeper understanding of the present-day processes by which 'tribes', and 'tribal identities' are being sustained, redefined, created and denied. This section of the IIAS Newsletter includes six essays that analyse manifestations of contemporary Indian indigeneity as cultural practices.

Markus Schleiter and Erik de Maaker

THE WORLD'S LARGEST DEMOCRACY, as India is often referred to, is renowned for its extreme social inequality, as well as its great cultural diversity. Both characteristics are manifest in relation to the 'tribes' as a culturally distinct but – by and large – socio-economically deprived segment of the Indian people. India at large has some of the world's most wealthy people. As a result of the country's economic liberalisation, from the 1990s onwards, it also boasts a middle class of about 200 million people. Unfortunately, in addition to the rich and the middle classes, India continues to have as many people below the poverty line as all of Africa taken together.

India's fast economic development promotes a more or less homogenised urban culture, but nevertheless it remains a country of extreme cultural diversity. Its more than a billion citizens are divided along religious, linguistic, regional and ethnic lines, resulting in a large number of distinct groups, the membership of which is said to be decided by birth. Such birth-groups (of which caste is but one manifestation), are sustained by the rather persistent practice to marry within the group. There are new and old tendencies to cross social boundaries on economic grounds, and the idea of the 'love' marriage is gaining ground against that of a marriage 'arranged' by one's relatives. Nevertheless, even the young and highly educated elite, who benefit the most from India's high economic growth and cultural liberalisation, by and large continue to marry within the birth-group. Religion, caste and ethnicity do not become irrelevant when people engage with global modernity, but are redefined – which includes drawing new boundaries – and continue to act as assets that allow people to hierarchically distinguish themselves from others.

The fact that social categories are acknowledged and emphasised by the state plays a major role in India. This draws on a long history of assertive policies, which are invigorated by the proactive nature of the Indian constitution. The leadership of the pre-independence Indian National Congress, and notably the constitution's main architect Bhimrao R. Ambedkar, were acutely aware of the deprivation of India's poor. The constitution, and its later amendments, provide a framework for radical politics of compensatory discrimination. Apart from the reduction of caste based inequality, these provisions also aim to have a positive effect on what are known in India as the 'tribal' communities (however, significantly, these provisions have so far left the Muslim population out). Although far less numerous than the *dalits* (a term used to refer to erstwhile 'untouchables'), the 'tribal' communities are in many respects considered as even more vulnerable and thus in need of state protection.

'Tribe', as a social category, has not just emerged as an assertive category of an independent postcolonial state, but was introduced prior to that by the colonial state to describe communities that were not believed to be part of 'mainstream society'. Here, the colonial administration has supposedly drawn on terms such as *atavika* (forest dwellers) or *girijan* (hill people), groups who were at the margins of the postcolonial states. Over the last century, many 'tribals' have settled in urban environments, where they either became deprived

day labourers, or more recently, became economically highly successful professionals. The majority of the 'tribal' population is located in rural areas, few of them living in (remote) forests, or in hills and on mountains. Rather than identifying 'tribals' with one of the major religious traditions, they are said to have their own, unique sets of beliefs and rituals. 'Tribal' groups are believed to be outside the caste hierarchy, and attributed an acephalous social organisation. The colonial administration, in its efforts to categorise the South Asian population, created extensive listings and descriptions of the various 'tribes', their traits and habitats.

These colonial descriptions have provided the basis for the creation of 'schedules' (listings) of 'tribal' groups for each federal state in present day India. The category 'Scheduled Tribe' refers today to a 'tribe' being administratively registered by the government, qualifying members of this group for preferential treatment such as access to reserved seats in schools and in electoral bodies, as well as the provision of specific numbers of government jobs. Crucial for the recognition of people as members of a 'tribe' are administrative practices. An extensive administrative machinery exists of government run 'tribal' development initiatives, which plays a major role especially for the development of rural areas with a high percentage of 'tribal' population. Not only have benefits that are associated with being 'tribal' invigorated the boundaries of 'tribal' groups, they have also provided an incentive to people to try and have their group registered as such, in order to gain access to these benefits.

'Tribe' plays an increasingly important role among political movements in India. Organisations representing 'tribal' communities unite as *adivasis* ('first people') and claim that they are 'indigenous' to India (Xaxa 1999). The presumption is then that present day *adivasis* or 'tribes' are distinct cultural communities which are historically marginalised and/ or are descendants of the 'original' inhabitants of a given territory. The latter positions other residents of the same territory as the descendants of later migrants, who are subsequently denied 'first' rights towards that land and its resources (Baviskar 2006, Karlsson and Subba 2006). Political movements that build on 'tribal' or *adivasi* claims tend to further reify the cultural characteristics of these communities: ancestral rituals become staged performances, and photographs of 'tribal' dress and material culture are pictured as hallmarks of 'tribality' on calendars and so on. However far such cultural vignettes are removed from their earlier setting, they allow many of the people concerned to link the present to the past. Contemporary public displays of 'tribality' tend to be romanticised imaginations that have gained prominence due to specific historical and political circumstances, but that does not mean that the people who belong to the communities concerned do not share certain pasts, habits and cultural practices that set them apart from others. Notably, the latter sort of claims are not only advanced by democratic means, but are also more or less explicitly associated with various insurgency movements in central and north east India. Some of these movements have been at war with the Indian state for more than half a century, and are considered by the state as a very serious threat to its integrity.

Above inset:
Lugu Murmu of the Birhor 'tribe' and Markus Schleiter enjoying a drink in the vicinity of the weekly market of Durdura, Mayurbhanj, Orissa (photograph by Shyamranjen Hembram).

Above:
Display of 'tribal' dance at the Adivasi Exhibition 2009, Bhubaneswar (photograph by Markus Schleiter).

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Contemporary academic debates on the applicability of categories such as 'tribe' and (more recently) 'indigeneity' in India have a long history. The category 'tribe' has been criticised from the mid-20th century onwards and the fore-fathers of an anthropology on Indian 'tribes' continue to inspire both popular opinion in India as well as academic debates. G.S. Ghurye (1963[1943]) argued that there were no sociological grounds on which a fundamental distinction could be made between caste and 'tribe'. One of his main opponents was the self-taught anthropologist Verrier Elwin (1964). Contrary to Ghurye, Elwin argued that 'tribals' were the custodians of unique cultural traditions that were not just distinct but superior to both the Indian and European mainstream. Elwin feared that a denial of the distinctiveness of the 'tribes' would result in their being categorised as low caste Hindus, despised and rejected for habits that went in many ways against the grain of the mainstream population. Thus perceived, the debate on 'tribe' cannot be disconnected from the efforts made to define mainstream Indian society as centred on a kind of high culture, far removed from what then becomes the folk culture at its margins. In many ways, these juxtaposed positions continue to be of importance in the debate on 'tribe' in India today. On the one hand, there has been a steady stream of contributions of those who consider 'tribe' as a colonial construct (such as: Bates 1995; Unnithan-Kumar 1997; Pels 2000; Shah 2007). On the other hand, there are sustained efforts to reinforce the case for 'tribe,' stressing the uniqueness and distinctiveness of 'tribal' customs (such as: Singh 2002; Peffer and Behera 2005).

Most of the essays included in this collection are based on new field research. The authors go beyond discrediting 'tribal' essentialism, to enquire into present day cultural practices of building and upholding indigeneity in India. Proceeding from contemporary academic perspectives on culture as something that is continuously reconstituted, essentialising imaginations of Indian 'tribes' cannot hold ground (such as: Bourdieu 1992; Das and Poole 2004). More specifically, essentialising ideas on Indian 'tribes' are – similar to hybrid claims of identity – contested in political discourses and as such common Indian people and government bureaucrats themselves are critical of notions such as 'ancient tribes'. The question then is not whether or not Indian 'tribes' are authentic, but rather why and how members of 'tribes', political leaders as well as government officers construct 'tribal' authenticity in a politicised arena, and how this relates to the social and cultural realities 'on the ground'.

Virginius Xaxa analyses the relationship between 'tribal' communities and the state. He argues that although it had been shown that 'tribal' communities were, even in precolonial times, integrated at the margins of states, the general assumption is that 'tribal' communities were and are outside the state. Xaxa shows that the measures taken by the Indian state derive from 'tribes' being perceived outside the state as well. The state intends to protect 'tribals' against mainstream society, strengthening 'tribal' cultural institutions, while at the same time furthering their integration with mainstream society. However well intended these measures are, their goals are contradictory, resulting in policies that in one way or another fail to deliver.

Above:
An occasion for
rice-beer in a
Santal-farmstead,
Durdura, Mayurbhanj,
Orissa (photograph
by Markus Schleiter).

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Markus Schleiter is affiliated research scholar of the International Institute for Asian Studies. He worked as a part-time lecturer at South Asia Insitute, Heidelberg and at the Institute of Ethnology, Goethe University, Frankfurt. He recently completed postdoctoral research on *'Localized Statehood: Social and cultural practices of tribal development'* by means of anthropological field studies in a settlement of Birhor 'Tribe' in Orissa, India. He is currently designing a future research project on indigeneity in India and Bangladesh entitled *'The making of indigeneity: Santali romantic video films and the mediation of culture beyond a region'*.

Note

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Prasanna Nayak provides a historical perspective on efforts made by the Indian state towards the development of 'tribal' communities in Orissa, reflecting on changes that have taken place over the last 40 years. He argues that the officers in charge were initially showing great commitment, however, in later decades their involvement became more habitual, which had great consequences for the quality of the pro-grammes conducted. Nayak argues that a lack of curiosity results in officers maintaining naïve imaginations of 'tribal communism'. Consequently, they succumb to the well-to-do villagers, instead of ensuring that the deprived ones are taken care of. Programmes would not only benefit from a greater commitment, but also from a greater usage of social scientific insights that bypass such romantic notions.

Contrary to the emphasis of the Indian state on economic and societal integration of 'tribal' groups in Orissa, it has been very hesitant to do so on the Andaman Islands. There, most of the efforts are focussed on sustaining 'tribal' culture, as Vishvajit Pandya shows in relation to the Ongee. Pandya suggests that this policy is subverted by large scale migration from mainland India to the islands. The extensive contacts that exist between these migrants and the Ongee cannot be acknowledged, but force the government to take measures that counteract their effects. The result is that 'tribal' culture becomes reified by state agencies, swapped back onto the Ongee who are supposed to follow it, and are stimulated – if not obliged –to comply with this state interpretation of their Ongee customs.

However complex the relationship of the Indian state to 'tribal' communities can be, groups that are unable to negotiate a relationship with the state are definitely worse off. Bert Suykens focuses on encounters between government officers and Gottekoya who have fled the Maoist insurgency in Chhattisgarh to the neighbouring state of Andra Pradesh. There, they have taken refuge in a forest area. Forest guards try to evict them, burning down their makeshift houses, while Andra Pradesh state refuses to provide relief since it suspects them of having Maoist sympathies. Having fled the Maoists, but not being acknowledged as refugees by the state, the Gottekoya suffer double marginalisation.

Ellen Bal analyses another instance of people who seek recognition by the state. Moreover, her essay takes us to Bangladesh, and shows that the involvement of the Indian state with 'tribal' communities has a bearing on neighbouring countries as well. Historically, Bangladesh evolved as a Bengali (primarily Muslim) nation. Garo speaking people are located on both sides of the international border dividing India and Bangladesh. Whereas Garos used to be politically excluded from a national Bengali identity, spokespersons for a Garo 'nation' are now referring to a transnational Garo identity in order to claim a position within the Bangladeshi state. The Garos of Bangladesh have 'embraced the discourse of indigenous people and indigeneity' in order to claim a place as a minority community within Bangladesh.

Finally, Luisa Steur shows that for a movement to position as *adivasi* can be very effective, even if such claims are historically and sociologically not at all viable. She discusses different approaches by which such a movement can be analysed. 'Deconstructivists' warn against the adverse effects of an indigeneity discourse, stressing its communal components, as well as the pressure that it can exert onto members of the communities involved who fail to fit the 'romantic images of *adivasi*ness'. Contrary to this, 'strategic essentialists' consider adopting an '*adivasi* identity' as a strategic move, given the legitimacy that is attributed in popular discourse to 'indig-enous' claims to land. Steur shows how academics can move beyond these rather limited approaches, which is required if the complexity of the ways in which subaltern communities relate to the state is to be understood.

Recent debates on global indigeneity approach it primarily as a cultural imagination, in line with modern claims to hybrid identity (Gupta & Ferguson 2001). However, we rather argue for a shift from deconstructonism towards a deeper understanding of processes of building, maintaining, connecting and upholding cultural imaginations. Research in relation to 'tribes', 'indigneity' and cultural diversity in India provides paradigmatic examples of essentialist indigeneity politics, involving many differing actors who maintain a complex relationship to their purported identity. Research approaching the topic from this angle, is likely to yield new insights. For instance, the cultural and social arenas in which the leaders of 'tribal' movements operate, can be revealed by research along the lines of that of Luisa Steur. And, for instance, the administrative impact on the categorisation of 'tribes' cannot be explained based on an analysis limited to the constitution of development plans. Rather, everyday bureaucratic practices in government offices, and the viewpoints of the officers who conduct these, shape substantially imaginations of 'tribality', as is evident in the contributions by Prasanna Nayak and Vishvajit Pandya. Approaching the theme from yet another angle, it is also worth researching how 'tribal' movements are constituted, and how much support their spokespersons man-age to gather among the people they claim to represent. From this perspective, attention should also be given to how 'tribal identities' connect to people's lifeworlds, since such 'identities' will normally not only be legitimised with reference to a past, but also be rooted in various ways in present day cultural practices. India has a long history of on the one hand acknowledging, fostering and celebrating diversity, coupled to bitter social conflicts at the expense of its minorities. Analysing the dynamics at play can provide us with new perspectives on the politics of positive discrimination in other parts of the world, while creating awareness of the dark shadows that identity politics can cast.

Bureaucratic practices in government offices, and the viewpoints of the officers who conduct these, shape substantially imaginations of 'tribality'.

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