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(Un)Doing rights: Adivasi participation in governance discourses in an area of civil unrest in India

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(Un)Doing rights: Adivasi participation in governance discourses in an area of civil unrest in India

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ABSTRACT
This paper draws on recent empirical research into indigenous Adivasi identities in India to explore Adivasi participation and demands for community rights within local structures of governance in a village context. I examine the multiple articulations of rights by the Adivasis that they consider crucial for community development in the backdrop of protracted violence and conflict. This paper engages with the local context of civil unrest by drawing attention to the Maoist movement, its assumed opposition to rights in official policy discourses and its relevance to the Adivasi lives. In particular, I analyse the ways in which the Adivasis engage with the local power relations with respect to the state, the Maoists and other community groups to make demands for everyday survival and gain access to resources. Linked to this, I attend to the modes of collective (dis)engagement, social and political participation of the Adivasis in governance forums to (re)claim the rights to land, forest, safety and overall community development that were denied to them as a group historically. These rights, I argue, are deemed necessary by the community in ensuring equal citizenship, social inclusion and in realising their specific struggles for human rights within the local context of violence.

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Introduction

The nation-state of India has been produced through and structured by the ideas of democracy and decentralisation. The Indian Constitution was guaranteed a federal character by the drafting committee of the Constituent Assembly, chaired by B.R. Ambedkar, who was a firm believer of public reasoning and equal participation. This federal character meant distribution of powers to legislate and execute laws between the Centre and the states. It translated into decentralisation of powers by the central government to the state and local administration to improve public engagement and participation in decision-making. The architects of post-colonial independent India viewed participation of citizens as fundamental to the governance of the country. To this end, decentralisation of governance has been key to ensure citizen participation.
However, within the category of citizen in India, hierarchisation has existed. For instance, with the passing of the recent discriminatory citizenship law, the Citizenship Amendment Act 2020, religion has become a basis for the grant of Indian citizenship. For minority groups like the Indian Adivasis, this legislative enactment calls into question their national and ethnic identities. Living in close proximity to land and forests, the indigenous Adivasi identity has been discursively tied to forestry work and agricultural labour in official policy and community discourses. This association with land and forests depicts the Adivasi communities as animists, nature-worshippers, with a distinctive culture, and without a ‘proper’ religion, thereby endangering their citizenship rights under the new citizenship law.

Such a framing of citizenship provides a glimpse of the internal others in the country whose participation in the functioning of the Indian state continues to be disregarded, despite their historical categorisation as citizens. The conceptualisation of citizenship in the Indian context raises questions about the deficit positioning of minority groups like the indigenous Adivasis who are included within the boundaries of the Indian state, yet their social, economic and political inclusion remain unfulfilled.

Given this backdrop of historical exclusion, my interest in this paper is to explore the demands and participation of the Adivasi Gond community in local structures of governance to claim their rights to development including, but not limited to, land, work, livelihood, safety, law and order. These claims I argue are inextricably linked to the struggles for citizenship of the Adivasi community as well as their human rights.

In the context of this paper, I examine the selective and strategic engagement of the Gond community with local governance to navigate the power relations in their local village context of violence and conflict. I provide an understanding of the Maoist movement in areas of the Adivasis and the significance of the Maoists as a power group to ally or negotiate with, in addition to the Indian state. In doing so, I highlight the Adivasi struggles for rights that they regard indispensable for survival and dignity within their precarious context, thereby offering new linkages with human rights discussions.

Drawing on the above understandings, the discussion in this paper is divided into four sections. In the first section, I provide a historical context of the production of Adivasi identity in India by the colonial regime and its re-articulations by the post-independence Indian state to highlight the historical exclusion of the Adivasis from governance. In the second section, I provide an overview of the research study, outlining its research context, methods and theoretical underpinnings. I then engage with the local context of civil unrest and protracted violence and its normalisation in state and community discourses in the third section. Here, I draw on empirical data to focus on the multiple understandings and articulations of rights and development of the Adivasis within their precarious local community context. Extending this discussion on rights in the fourth section, I demonstrate the strategic use of governance structures, participatory forums and power groups by the Adivasis to claim their forest rights and negotiate with the Indian state.

**Land, law and social relations in India: a historical context**

Historically, strong linkages have been made between the Adivasi identity and social and legal categorisation of ‘tribe’ in India since the colonial rule. The social categorisation of
‘tribe’ was separated from caste and religion through its discursive and material links with land, forests, environment and remote geographical location. It was produced as synonymous with backwardness, tradition, absence of ‘proper’ religion and lack of modernity.\(^5\)

Drawing on the African context, Mamdani (2001, 2012) illustrates the race/tribe distinction as an instrument of governmentality and strategy for indirect rule by the colonial regime.\(^6\) He suggests that the distinction of race/tribe moved beyond the coloniser/colonised separation and authorised the internal division of colonised populations between native (tribe) and non-native or settler (race).

In the Indian context, a caste/tribe dichotomy, like the Hindu/Muslim binary, has been designed by law to strategically divide the country internally and create multiple internal others like the Adivasis, Dalits and Other Backward Classes (OBC). These hierarchical distinctions consolidated the powers of the colonial regime and have continued to provide the key axes for naming, identification and differentiation for the post-independence Indian state.

Like the colonial enactments, the legal and policy criteria of the independent Indian state entwined the identity of the land with the people in the context of the Adivasis. The category of ‘Backward Tribe’ was a colonial device first used to identify people living in certain demarcated or ‘Scheduled’ and ‘Backward’, areas.\(^7\) As in the African context, the category of ‘tribe’ used geography, rather than history, to define people while ignoring their fluid histories of migrations.\(^8\)

The Indian state retained and reinstated the category of ‘Backward Tribe’, deployed by the colonial regime, as Scheduled Tribe (ST). In doing so, it nodded to the boundaries and markings of the colonial regime, thereby linking Tribe with Scheduled and Backward reciprocally. Tribe in independent India continued to signify backwardness and weakness, as constituted against the modernising nation-state of India.\(^9\) The Scheduled Tribes were positioned as geographically remote and distant, educationally and economically weak, and in need of advancement and protection. In the absence of a specific criterion during the drafting of the Constitution, geographical location, proximity to land and forests, continued to remain the sole identifier of the Scheduled Tribes.

As such, alongside religious distinctions, the caste/tribe, Tribal/Non-Tribal or native/settler separation has been significant in the production of legal categories of Scheduled Castes (SC), Other Backward Classes (OBC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) in post-independence India. This separation provides an important link to the research context of this paper, as the local village community where the research took place had members of both ST and OBC communities. They embodied and performed the legally inscribed identities, while questioning and problematising the caste/tribe distinction.\(^10\) I will elaborate this in the next section on Research Overview.

**Law and its contestations**

In emergent post-colonial contexts like India, the language of differentiation has been embedded in and through law and policy to make special provisions ‘for the advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes of citizens’, and safeguard their fundamental rights.\(^11\) This includes the Adivasi communities that are legally recognised and included in the list of Scheduled Tribes. However, the laws and policies
designed in the name of protection provide dangerous grounds for discursive confinement and social exclusion of groups, often rendering them without rights due to absence of sustained engagement with them, as in the case of the Indian Adivasis.

The Indian Constitution makes provisions for guaranteeing rights, social inclusion and securing political participation of the Adivasis in governance. Building on these provisions, various decentralisation initiatives and rights-based legislation such as Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA) and the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006 have been enacted. These Acts call for the extension of the elected village bodies or Panchayats to the areas of the Adivasis as well as the strengthening of the local village councils or Gram Sabhas.

The above Acts, however, prescribe participation through processes of electoral politics and elected bodies like Panchayats which often risk appropriation by the dominant local groups. The prescription of democratic and electoral politics at the local levels assumes universal access to rights and resources and equal potential of all concerned groups to participate. It overlooks the particular challenges faced by historically marginalised, subordinated and excluded groups that live and function in precarity, without connection, inclusion and trust. It explains in part the continued non-participation and disengagement of the Adivasis with governance structures of the state in the context of this study. I will exemplify this in the fourth section on forest rights discussion.

Additionally, several bureaucratic bottlenecks in the implementation of rights-based laws have left out crucial decision-making powers to disable local groups to exercise autonomy. Simultaneously, these laws have concentrated power in the hands of the state officials and bureaucrats which defeats decentralised decision-making. In the case of the Adivasis, such exclusion both emerges from and results in the failure of representation of the community within local and political administration, thereby impeding their access to resources and exercise of rights as citizens.

The restricted access and rights of the Adivasis contradict the state’s claims and provisioning for under-represented communities in the Constitution. It repeats the pattern followed by the colonial regime in India which strategically excluded Indians from decision-making and positions of powers yet took decisions under the pretext of their protection and welfare. In this way, as Chatterjee (2004) contends, the legitimacy of the state is secured ‘not by the participation of citizens in matters of state but by claiming to provide for the well-being of the population’.

It is here that an understanding of the Maoist movement becomes significant. The Maoist movement, popularly known as the Naxalite movement, is a post-independence struggle that started in the late 1960s in India. The leaders of the movement propagated a Maoist line of armed struggle, i.e. carrying out a protracted people’s war along military lines to capture state power, and came to be known as Naxals. The struggle mobilised the rural, agrarian, peasant and Adivasi communities ‘on issues of occupation of land that belonged legally to them’. It reflected the inefficacy of the state’s land reforms in rural and remote areas of the Adivasis.

The Communist Party of India (Maoist/M) was formed in 2004 through the merger of the People’s War Group in Andhra Pradesh and Maoist Communist Centre in Bihar. It dissolved the ideology of ‘protracted people’s war’ and endorsed immediate armed struggle as the only way forward in the Indian context. At present, the CPI (M) is active and operates through its armed wing, People’s Liberation Guerrilla Army...
(PLGA) in regions such as Bastar in Chhattisgarh and Vidarbha in Maharashtra which are mostly areas where the Adivasis live. The fieldwork for this study took place in a village in Vidarbha which was declared a ‘liberated zone’ by the Maoists when the movement shifted its geographical location.

The shifting of the movement from Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal to forested areas such as Bastar and Vidarbha signified the conducive geographical location to sustain anti-state action and survive the ongoing state repression elsewhere. However, mostly, it indicated a deficit state. The declaration of certain areas as ‘liberated zones’ implied state absence from basic service provisioning such as health and education. For instance, in the village where I stayed, the local health centre and government school did not function. This neglect produced discontentment among the Adivasis and further mistreatment by the local landlords and authorities.

The resource and mineral-rich dimension of the Adivasi areas invited ‘developmental’ projects of mining and deforestation with state collusion, leading to displacement of the Adivasis and their shrinking access to forests and livelihood opportunities. It is here that the Maoists’ pronouncements on the exploitative nature of the state and right to jal, jungle, jameen (water, forests, land) rang true. In the fieldwork village, the Village Council meetings focused on the implementation of the Forest Rights Act and the Adivasis’ right to collect and sell the forest produce without involving any intermediaries, government contractors and the Forest Department.

The state response to the Maoist movement has been deployment of violence, classification of Maoists as terrorists and anti-national/India, and legitimisation of state violence as counterinsurgency and anti-terrorism. The movement has been framed as a law and order problem with terms such as insurgency, civil unrest and Left-Wing Extremism (LWE) in state policy. The historical linkages of the movement with areas of the Adivasis has further risked depicting the Adivasi groups as insurgents and rebels.

For this reason, the enactment of the rights-based legislation by the Indian state should be viewed in context of the unrelenting demands and struggles of the Adivasi community for their rights and citizenship and the presence of the Maoists. The multiple relations of power, within and among communities and their negotiations with the state and Maoists play a critical role in the (non-)participation of groups and realisation of their citizenship rights. This link between governance, participation and citizenship offers a new conceptualisation of relationships between the Adivasis, the Maoists, the state and legal institutions, as I will examine in this paper.

**Research overview: context and methods**

This paper is based on empirical research on the discursive production of Adivasi identities by the colonial and post-independence Indian state, performance and navigation of these identities through religion, education and gender. The research was informed by an ethnographic case-study design and took place through 25 semi-structured in-depth interviews and eight focus groups discussions (FGDs) with Adivasi and non-Adivasi adults, six FGDs with young people aged 13–18 years, along with observations, researcher diary and policy review. The fieldwork and empirical data collection took place for an extended period of seven months in a village with around 50 households in Vidarbha,
Maharashtra, bordering the Bastar region of Chhattisgarh, also considered the centre of the Maoist movement.

This research was part of the author’s doctoral study at University of Sussex. Its ethical review was approved by the University of Sussex Cluster based Research Ethics Committee (C-REC). Information sheets, including nature and purpose of research, were shared with a local NGO’s staff who contacted the local gatekeepers, senior and elder members of the village community, to inform them of the proposed research. Time was then taken with the community members to explain the principle of informed consent, with an assurance of confidentiality and anonymisation of participant details. ²⁹ Informed verbal consent was sought and obtained from the research participants in accordance with the context of this research and as approved by the C-REC.

Most of the village inhabitants were from the Adivasi Gond community, recognised as a Scheduled Tribe (ST) and a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PTG) by the Indian government. ³⁰ The main occupation of the Adivasi community was collection of forest produce for sale and subsistence, working as seasonal and daily wage labour in agriculture, in local shops and in irregular employment opportunities created through government welfare schemes such as construction of roads. Land and labour provided significant exploration points to understand the local village community interactions.

Others in the village included communities whose family occupations historically had been of lohar (ironsmith), kumhar (potter), and vyapar (trader). In legal terms, they were classified as Other Backward Classes (OBC) by the Indian government on the basis of their historical ‘main’ family occupations which denoted social and educational backwardness. ³¹ The OBCs self-identified as non-Adivasi or Non-Tribal (NT) and Hindu, belonging to the lower castes in the caste system. Religious, caste and ethnic distinctions among the local community members offered important axes of consideration, other than land, to understand village interactions.

As such, there were multiple and competing regulatory discourses, with the official state narrative of security and the Maoist narrative of an anti-state movement focusing on Adivasi rights being the dominant ones. The narrative of the local NGO, another key stakeholder of this study, emphasised educational access by viewing lack of formal school education as a deficit in the local community. Foregrounding these dominant discourses systematically and decentring these by opening up the spaces in-between became the research focus of this study, thereby providing significant linkages between its theoretical framing and methodological approach.

My choice of methods comprised reviews of various official literature, legal and policy documents, observations from living in the village, focus group discussions, semi-structured one-to-one in-depth interviews, and researcher diary. A combination of these methods enabled a better understanding of experiences and perspectives of the research participants. Most of the methods adopted helped foreground the ‘voices’ of the research participants and their understandings of events happening around them, more specifically their relationships with the state, the Maoists and with others in the village community.

The methodological choices were reciprocally linked to the empirical focus on community interactions and everyday navigations of identity. As central to the argument of this paper, there were multiple and often contradictory ways in which the Adivasi community allied with different power groups and participated in everyday life to negotiate their context of protracted violence and uncertainty. This view of identity navigation...
and participation as dynamic provides significant linkages to the theoretical framing of this paper which is guided by an assumption of multiple and contingent social realities and a poststructuralist theoretical positioning.

The analysis of this study is framed by poststructural theorisation of concepts used in data analysis, enriched by postcolonial and feminist literature. Poststructuralism advocates the significance of context in the formation of identities that are multiple and relational.32 Similar to this, the feminist theoretical framework emphasises the centrality of context in understanding the meaning of the social world,33 along with the importance of language and discourse, as carrying implicit theories and assumptions.34

Such a view challenges the fixity and pre-given nature of the social world and instead focuses on the plural and discursively constituted nature of identity, entangled with power relations, and in opposition to an Other.35 The understanding of the constitutive outside or the Other is crucial to the postcolonial framework.36 It links with the feminist and poststructural emphasis on equality and context and cautions against reading historically marginalised groups through exclusionary knowledge frameworks that can reproduce existing power relations.37

Drawing on the above framings, my theoretical and methodological stance allowed me to understand the entwinement of the researcher with the researched and the research context. Identifying as an Indian national, I was researching in an insider setting and was familiar with the research context due to prior practitioner work experiences. However, during my previous visits and stays in the area, I was a consultant to the Indian government researching on educational access, whereas the current research positioned me as a doctoral candidate exploring education among other research concerns. So, I was an ‘outsider’, living in New Delhi, studying in the UK, a Punjabi Hindu, and a non-Adivasi and non-OBC.

To add to this, my gender, age and education significantly influenced the ‘selection’ of research participants, their approach to me, and my interactions with them. My shifting belongings, as NGO volunteer, ex-government employee, and education researcher depended on and in turn, were shaped by my interactions and relations with the research participants. It influenced the inclusion of research participants who were mostly youth, female, and associated with formal and higher education in one way or another. This linked back to the empirical focus of this study on production and navigation of multiple identities and gives a glimpse into the emphasis of this paper on different ways and modes of Adivasi participation for everyday survival. It is these multiplicities that I explore in the next sections.

Rights in contexts of violence

There was no law and order enforcement in this area. It was the Naxals’ (Maoists’) rule of law that prevailed here. Everything from development to sticks and guns was theirs. Indian state and its law and order could not reach where they would. (Smita, 28, Female, Adivasi, Teacher, Interview)

They (Maoists) are our people, aren’t they? They live inside (the forests). They have stopped alcohol consumption in the areas where they operate. The villages are now alcohol-free. It is a good development, something that the government took years to do. (Sanam, 30, Female, Adivasi, Interview)
The above excerpts signal the precarious context in which the Adivasi community lived and functioned. By pointing to their neglect and degradation at the hands of the Indian state, Smita and Sanam emphasised the Maoist presence in the area in opposition to the state and its governance machinery. There was an extended history of state absence that had to be attended to by the Adivasis in their everyday navigations of violence and conflict in the area.

More particularly, the absence of the Indian state and its lack of governance were strongly asserted by Smita and Sanam in making articulate demands for ‘law and order enforcement’ and ‘development’. Their comments provided an indication of state inaction alongside its demarcation, social isolation and exclusion of the people. While the state had hierarchically categorised the Adivasis as Scheduled and Tribal, it was absent in the areas of the Adivasis, until the Maoist intervention that is. It was in this context that the Maoists and their ‘rule of law’ found a mention in Smita’s comments. In the official policy discourse, the Indian state classified LWE as a law and order problem, whereas Smita argued that there had never been law and order enforcement by the state. In this context of insecurity, there was an increased emphasis on demanding rule of law and safety as collective rights for the community.

The Maoists’ influence in areas where the state and its machinery could not reach exposed a deficit relationship between the state and the Gond community, who viewed the Maoists as more present and proximate. However, even with regard to the Maoists, Smita associated them with both ‘development’ as well as ‘sticks and guns’. It linked to the developmental activities carried out by the Maoists in the areas of the Adivasis, along with their use of violence to ensure compliance with the movement. As such, there were shifting antagonisms and alliances in the Adivasi relationships with the state and the Maoists.

The involvement of the Maoists in everyday life of the Adivasis, as opposed to state inactivity, made Sanam view them as ‘our people’. In the local community context, alcohol consumption by the Adivasis was looked down on by the other members of the village community, even though this practice was commonplace in the village. It was used to construct them as ‘backward’ and re-inscribe their deficit positioning. Re-iterating the negative association of alcohol with the Adivasi community, Sanam referred to its prohibition by the Maoists as a ‘good development’.

Given this context, a ban on alcohol was a significant regulation, an enforcement of law and order, which exemplified development for Sanam. However, for her, it was the Maoists who were able to enforce this regulation way before the government. They were present as inside-people, or ‘our people’, in response to the specific demands and struggles for community rights and development. In this sense, the Maoists were viewed to be operating within and as a force internal to the demands of the Adivasis, instead of an external influence as constructed by the state:

… the Maoists do not want root causes like underdevelopment to be addressed in a meaningful manner since they resort to targeting school buildings, roads, railways … They wish to keep the population … marginalised to perpetuate their outdated ideology. Consequently, the process of development has been set back by decades in many parts of the country under LWE influence. (MHA, 2013)
Illustrative of the Indian state’s rhetoric of rights and development, the above extract provided another link to the state’s construction of the Maoist conflict primarily as a law and order problem.\textsuperscript{40} Such a narrative obscured the concerns of structural inequalities and historical exclusions in the areas of the Adivasis. It viewed the Maoists as obstructing development in a modernising nation-state, while depicting the state as the guarantor of rights and modernity and provider of the goods and services of development.

However, it is significant to note that the state intervention was a response to the Maoist activity and not merely a response to the marginalisation of the people.\textsuperscript{41} The apparent emphasis on modernity, development and governance was a strategy to shape people’s subjectivities, infiltrate and securitise their local context to combat the Maoists, instead of addressing the histories of mis-governance.\textsuperscript{42} Nevertheless, it offered an acknowledgement of the historical absence of the Indian state.

The above extract suggested a restricted and functionalist understanding of development, as linked to the notion of progress and implying a forward movement by the people.\textsuperscript{43} This view instrumentalised the Adivasis to meet the development goals of the country, while overlooking their particular demands for development.\textsuperscript{44} For both Smita and Sanam, the knowledge of their specific context was key to understand their fight for community rights. The Maoists demonstrated this understanding for them. The Indian state, however, associated the Maoists and the Adivasis with underdevelopment and backwardness in policy discourses. These dominant associations effected Adivasi youths’ claims for their rights, as reverberated in the below excerpts:

They (Maoists) used to fight for our (Adivasi) rights with the Police and military, took action, put up big banners, took out rallies and marches … They gave voice to our demands and brought attention to our area … But no one wants to come to the village now due to the burning of roads and killing of contractors … No factories or industries are coming to our area. What good are the Naxals (Maoists) doing for development? (Sag, 16, Adivasi, Focus Group with male participants in 15–18 age-groups)

The state of development of the area is dismal. There are no roads or vehicular access to the village, no drainage system, children fall sick often and no medical aid or health centres. Community, especially young people make eloquent demands for their rights, but say that both state and Maoists maintain their power by keeping the area underdeveloped. (Researcher Diary, November 2015)

The dominant and official policy narrative which associated the Maoists with the destruction of infrastructure, killing of contractors and impeding of development was conveyed through the above extracts. The relevance of the Maoists among young people like Sag could not be sustained for the purposes of development, as the policy discourse constructed them in opposition to the state and its idea of progress and rights.\textsuperscript{45}

As an Adivasi youth, Sag articulated his view of development with the example of factories and industries. It connected to the probing of the modernisation discourse that worked by privileging industrialisation, marketisation and monetisation of economies.\textsuperscript{46} It further linked to the rhetoric of youth as global citizens who supported and participated in the discourses of globalisation, modernity and development.\textsuperscript{47} To attain social inclusion and equal citizenship, it was imperative for Adivasi youth like Sag to identify with the modernising idea of the Indian nation-state.
Similarly, my initial observations of living in the area reiterated the dominant view of
development and a deficit view of the area. I expressed this through the consideration of
facilities that I regarded crucial, having lived in the capital city of Delhi and with relatively
better networks which ensured social inclusion. Moreover, the above excerpt indicated my initial understanding of power relations as given, static, fixed and unchanging.

However, Sag’s depiction of the Maoists as fighting for the rights of the Adivasis, against the injustices of the Indian state, and giving voice to the Adivasi demands signified their paradoxical positioning among the Adivasi community. For Sag, the Maoists found acceptance among the community for giving voice to their demands and bringing ‘attention to our area’. It was reflective of the Adivasi Gond community as carefully navigating and ‘appearing’ to be on side with the group offering the most benefits and securing their access to resources. This involved fighting for their rights, bringing attention to their area, and ensuring community development. Alongside, it signalled a more complex assertion of power by the Adivasis to safeguard their collective survival together with their citizenship rights.

For the local community then, both the state and the Maoists represented two power
groups in the area which had to be both strategically aligned with to fulﬁl demands for
development and community rights as well as navigated to prevent violence and confron-
tation. I will elaborate this discussion further in the next section with speciﬁc reference to
the Adivasis’ claims for forest rights.

Claiming rights: governance, participation and forests

The utilisation of the rights-based narratives through a strategic use of governance bodies
and participatory forums by the Adivasi Gond community was illustrated in their claims
for forest rights:

I attended the gram sabha (village council) meeting today. It was a meeting of the village
council where all eligible voters/adult members of the village participated. Usually, these
meetings are attended only by members of the council and no outsiders participate. I was
invited by the senior and elder members to only attend.

The discussion was on the implementation of the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006. There was
careful planning by the council members – 11 samitis (committees) for felling of bamboo,
guarding of forests, collection of produce, selling, disbursal of funds and so on. Most of the
committee members were women, who were present in the meeting, but most of the talking
was done by men. The meeting went on for two hours. The consensus of the meeting was
not to approach any government contractor, middleman or the Forest Department through
which to sell the bamboo. It was to be done independently through the council to procure a
good market price. (Researcher Diary, December 2015)

The above incident narrated the democratic participation of the Adivasi community and
their use of decentralised structures of governance to claim their collective rights to the
forests, central to which was the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006. The implementation of
the FRA by the Indian government and its assumed expansion of the rights-based dis-
course in the country has been contested by some of the Adivasi and civil society
groups. Chemmencheri (2015) argues that the FRA makes the Adivasis into subjects
of the Indian state through the act of granting them land titles, or ‘a status of full
social citizenship’. In order to become ‘complete citizens’, the Adivasis have to
participate in processes of interpellation by making claims for land and forest rights through local village councils. This links back to the hierarchisation which exists within the category of citizen in emergent post-colonial nation-states like India. The processes installed by the state to recognise the social, economic and political citizenship of people favours the rights of certain groups over the others, while securing the power and authority of the state to name, regulate and control.

In the Indian context of the Adivasis, implicit in this selective recognition of rights has been an emphasis on individual ownership of land, as opposed to viewing land as common or communal property and jointly owned. Historically, the increased emphasis on individualisation and private ownership of land enabled the colonial regime to hold individuals responsible for revenue collection. The independent Indian state repeated and followed the processes instated by the colonial regime to delegitimise collective and community ownership of land, individualise this ownership and thereby bring more territory under its control.

Nonetheless, the above excerpt from the researcher diary strongly suggested the discursive agency of the local village community. The Adivasis were tied to land and forests in official state discourses, with their forestry work and agricultural labour categorised as ‘backward’. However, the Gond community utilised those very discourses to participate, exercise agency, secure their rights and eliminate state interference. While discursively regulated in policy and community discussions, the Adivasis acted in ways contradictory to their dominant construction as silent, shy and non-participatory. Much like their navigations of the power groups in the village, they participated in governance forums like the village council that they considered safe and productive to emphasise their demands for rights.

It is significant to note here that while the Adivasis were discursively confined and assumed to be living harmoniously with nature, the relationship of the community with the land, forests and its produce was way too complex and contingent on the forum they were participating in. In her study in Jharkhand, Shah (2010) suggests that the forests and fields are seen as part of a continuous landscape [for the Mundas in Jharkhand], both cut and protected over time … so their relationship with the environment is too sophisticated or adversarial for a simplistic reading of them as worshipping nature or living in harmony with it.

Similarly, for the Gond community, it was about everyday survival and negotiations which were inextricably linked with forests and its produce in their local context. The above instance exemplified defending of land by the Adivasis against the state’s extractive and exploitative agenda of development which had caused Adivasi displacement and deprivation from a good market price for their produce.

The above extract illustrated what has been termed as the Adivasi model of democracy and conflict resolution, as it involved participation of all adult members of the community and privileged gradual consensus over quick decision-making. This contrasts with the village Panchayats where the appointed or elected few participate and make decisions on behalf of the entire village. The above incident was indicative of the decentralisation of governance structures that ensured community participation through the local village councils, an aspect adopted in and crucial to the rights-based enactment of the Forest Rights Act, 2006.
However, implied in the above extract was the relatively dominant positioning of the Adivasi men who did most of the public speaking in the meeting. In their utilisation of the rights-based legislation, the engagement of the Adivasis within the local village councils remained gendered. Their struggle for the realisation of forest rights did not particularly address or take on the hierarchical positioning of women in the village. It linked to the argument that the impetus to introduce rights-based agenda carries gendered implications and can ignore the everyday lived realities of women, leaving them without voice and rights. For this reason, an understanding of the multiple and complex gendered dimensions of the diverse local contexts is key to address these in the governance and participation initiatives of the state.

The gendered participation of the Adivasi Gond community also connected to Cross-ouard’s and Dunne’s (2015) argument that the privileging of consensus produces possibilities for reproduction of relations of domination. Similarly, Pherali (2013) contends that decentralisation can ‘perpetuate existing power relations’ than transform them. Nevertheless, the above extract indicated the meticulous planning of the Gond community for the felling and sale of bamboo through formation of committees. Most of these committees were planned and helmed by the Gond women who took on supervisory and leadership positions and allocated duties to other members. As such, the engagement and participation of the Adivasi community also signalled their continuing struggle for gender justice.

Bamboo, classified as a ‘forest produce’ until recently, was placed under the control of the Indian government’s Forest Department through the colonial-era legislation of the Indian Forest Act, 1927. Viewed as timber, it was mostly auctioned in markets through the Forest Department. However, the Forest Rights Act, 2006 classified bamboo as ‘non-timber forest produce’, granting Adivasi communities the right to fell, collect and sell it through the village councils. In this backdrop, the above extract reiterated the contestation of land, forests and power relations between the Adivasis and the Indian state. It further denoted tensions with the Forest Department, which was created by the colonial regime but had been sustained by the Indian state:

At the start of the gram sabha meeting one of the village council youth helpers announced that the Forest Officer (from the Block administration) had called on the village council office landline, ‘summoning’ one of the council members to Block headquarters for some paperwork. The youth was asked by the member to call the Officer back and tell him about the village council meeting which could not be missed. As there were no elected representatives, the Officer was advised to come to the council meeting instead. The Forest Officer later came to the meeting to get the papers signed and reprimanded the members for not coming to his office. He was told by two (male) council members to give proper and adequate notice on a letterhead for calling them for any urgent work. (Researcher Diary, December 2015)

The above excerpt, depicting the same village council meeting analysed earlier in this section, symbolised the tense and erratic relations between the Gond community and the Forest Department. It exemplified the re-claiming of their rights, along with the ownership over land and resources, and a re-configuration of the dominant power relations in the area by the Adivasis. Here again, the extract demonstrated the participation of the Gond community in the spaces they considered safe and beneficial to claim their rights. These rights were entwined with their everyday lived realities and struggles for survival as well as the existence of the larger community.

Simultaneously, the above excerpt symbolised the resignification of the historical marginalisation, social exclusion and discursive othering into agency. The Adivasi Gond community,
through their appropriation of the rights-based discourse, acted in ways which were most suitable to them. They participated in the governance structures and participatory forums set up by the state, while re-negotiating and re-configuring power relations through keeping the ‘agents’ of the state away. The Adivasis drew on the same law and policy which summoned them into being by demanding extensive paperwork and interpellated them into a deficit social positioning to assert power and claim their collective rights for the community.

**Conclusion**

This paper examined the demands and struggles of the Adivasi Gond community for their rights in a local village context of violence and conflict. It pointed to the significance of the Maoist movement in activating and enlivening the state in the areas of the Adivasis and the presence of the Maoists as a response to state neglect and community demands. More specifically, I explored the participation of the Adivasis for claiming their rights to law enforcement, safety, roads and industries, and forests, the demands for which were firmly articulated for the purposes of community development. Through this exploration of community participation and struggles for rights, I foregrounded the strategic use of different power groups in the area by the Adivasis that in turn reflected histories of state absence, inactivity and silence on Adivasi demands.

While discursively regulated and hierarchically positioned, the Adivasis performed and navigated their everyday lives in ways contradictory to their dominant construction by participating in forums they considered safe and productive. Given their history of misgovernance, they strategically sided with groups to effectively claim their rights and community development. In so doing, they made claims to power and made efforts to re-configure dominant power relations, demanded rights for land and forest ownership, law enforcement, roads and factories. Implicit within these strong and pointed demands were also claims for equal citizenship to ensure equity and social inclusion of the Adivasi community.

This paper exposes new discursive formations which emerge in context of the Adivasis’ (dis)engagement with the Indian state and the Maoists and emphasises its linkages with the rights-based discourse in India. It highlights the resignification of the dominant discursive norms and categories and shifting of regulatory frameworks by the Adivasis. In illustrating the strategic use of groups and service-providers by the Gond community, whether the Maoists or the village-level decentralised governance structures of the state, the paper signals the Adivasi community as agentive and in opposition to their dominant construction. I emphasise the community efforts for achieving land and forest rights by pointing to the participation initiatives undertaken by the Gond community. Such participation, as the paper argues, symbolises the resignification of the discursive othering of the Adivasis into agency, through the appropriation of the dominant rights-based and governance discourses in India.

**Notes**

2. Drèze and Sen, *An Uncertain Glory*. 


8. Sundar, Subalterns and Sovereigns; Mamdani, Define and Rule.
10. Wadhwa, They are Like that Only.


30. Ministry of Tribal Affairs (MoTA), Standing Committee on Social Justice and Empowerment, ‘33rd Report on “The Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order (Second Amendment) Bill, 2012.”’ (New Delhi: Lok Sabha Secretariat, 2013). 75 groups in 17 states and one union territory (UT) in the country have so far been identified and categorised in policy as PTGs. However, not all these groups have been accorded the legal status of Scheduled Tribe.


47. Dunne et al., *Troubling Muslim Youth Identities*, ‘Pluralising Islam’.
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