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 focusing 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 IAAS Newsletter includes six essays that analyse manifestations of contemporary Indian indigeneity as cultural practices.

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 assertions by political movements in India. Organisations representing ‘tribal’ communities unite as ‘tribe’ (‘first people’) and claim that they are ‘indigenous’ to India (Xaxa 1999). The presumption is that present day ‘tribe’ or ‘tribal’ are distinct cultural communities that have long histories of self-determination. 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 forefathers of an anthropology on ‘Indian tribes’ continue to inspire both popular opinion and academic debate. G.S. Chury (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 arguments was the self-taught anthropologist Verrier Elwin (1964). Contrary to Elwin, Chury argued that ‘tribal’ were the custodians of unique cultural traditions that were just distinct but also prior 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; Pril 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; Pfeffer and Bohra 2005).

Most of the essays included in this collection are based on new field research. The authors go beyond discarding ‘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 discussions and as such common Indian people and government bureaucrats themselves are critical of notions such as ‘ancient tribes’. The question then is whether or not Indian ‘tribes’ are authentic, but rather why and how members of ‘tribes’, political leaders as well as government officials construct ‘tribal’ authenticity in a politicised arena, and how this relates to the social and cultural realities on the ground.

Virginia Xaxa analyses the relationship between ‘tribal’ communities and the state. He argues that although it had been shown that ‘tribal’ communities, were in precocious collisions, 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.

Indigeneity as a cultural practice: ‘tribe’ and the state in India

Above inset: Lopez Marmo of the Birhor ‘tribe’ and Markus Schleiter enjoying a drink in the vicinity of the weekly market in Dorudara, Mayurbhanj, Orissa (photograph by Shmyranjan Hembram).

Above: Display of ‘tribal’ dance at the Advent Exhibition 2009, Bhubaneshwar (photograph by Markus Schleiter).
community within Bangladesh. and indigeneity’ in order to claim a place as a minority within the Bangladeshi state. The Garos of Bangladesh spokespersons for a Garo ‘nation’ are now referring to politically excluded from a national Bengali identity, neighbouring countries as well. Historically, Bangladesh Bert Suykens focuses on encounters between government negotiate a relationship with the state are definitely worse if not obliged – to comply with this state interpretation of 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 Onge who are supposed to follow it, and are stimulated – if not obliged – to comply with this state interpretation of their Onge 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 Gottikeya who have fled the Mro insurgency in Chittagong 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 Gottikeya 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 Bengal (primarily Muslim) nation. Garo speaking people are located on both sides of the international border dividing India and Bangladesh. Whereas Garo 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 adavasi 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 adavasies’. Contrary to this, ‘strategic essentialists’ consider adopting an ‘adavasi identity’ as a strategic move, given the legitimacy that is attributed in popular discourse to ‘indigeneous’ 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 imaginarion, in line with modern claims to hybrid identity (Gupta & Ferguson 2001). However, we rather argue for a shift from deconstructionist towards a deeper understanding of processes of building, maintaining, connecting and upholding cultural imaginations. Research in relation to ‘tribes’, ‘indigeneity’ 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 conducted, shape and make others shape and make others perceive themselves. This perspective, attention should also be given to how ‘tribal’ identities connect to people’s lifeworlds, since such ‘identities’ will normally not only be legitimated 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 insights into the politics of positive discrimination in other parts of the world, while creating awareness of the dark shadows that identity politics can cast.

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