Countering and Contesting Hegemonies: Identity-Politics and Adivasi Social Movements in Jharkhand, India

Abstract:

Since the colonial period, the Indigenous communities in India, currently referred to as the *Adivasis*, have been subject to social and political marginalisation, and their land and labour exploited for State and business interests. This research deals with how Adivasis have mobilised to claim their rights over their land and resources in Jharkhand, which was created as the 28th State in Eastern India in November 2000 as a result of their struggles. It concentrates on a particular geographical space in Jharkhand, the Chechari valley (and its adjoining areas), where Adivasi communities were threatened with displacement, as well as loss of their traditional-cultural context and livelihoods, all of which have been central to their identity and way of life. This research focuses on how Adivasis in the region collectively challenged these policies and examines the different methods they used, including interacting with sympathetic individuals and groups. Moreover, it elaborates on the processes of mobilisation and negotiation as well as highlights the development of their social and political identity in the region. The main research question of this thesis is 'Why and how have Adivasis in the Chechari region and its adjoining areas in Jharkhand mobilised to challenge the multiple forms of violence and exclusions exerted on them by the State and dominant communities and how have these processes influenced their social identity and political empowerment?'

This research analyses three cases in Chechari (and its adjoining areas) where Adivasis have countered, contested and negotiated with the State and dominant communities in the region to retain their traditional land and resources. The first case examines how Adivasis came together as a social movement to protest against the regional and central government's decision to displace people from 245 villages, majority of who were Adivasis, in order to establish an Army firing practice range. The second case considers how Adivasis, using legal strategies, challenged the central and regional government's decision to displace/relocate eight villages from the core area of Palamu Tiger Reserve in the adjoining areas of Chechari. The third case is one where Adivasi youth collectively mobilised and took an active role in the election process to ensure that large numbers of their community members effectively participated in the 2019 regional and national elections. Importantly, while these cases are presented sequentially, these processes co-existed and remain so even in the contemporary context. All these cases demonstrate the growing awareness,

collective strength and agency, and the multiple strategies developed by the Adivasis in the region to claim their social, economic and political rights.

This study uses an ethnographic approach and methodology and is guided by, what is argued to be, an indigenous standpoint perspective. It also allowed an insider's understanding on the workings of social and identity-based mobilization, as the author is an Adivasi from Jharkhand, familiar with the local dialects, customs and practices, and has been actively engaged in the social and political mobilisation processes for over a decade. A combination of theoretical approaches informs the analysis of this study. Attention is given to the role of the State in post-colonial context, including how its institutions engage with the local population to promote its interests and those of the ruling governments. In this regard, some important authors include Hamza Alavi, Ralph Miliband, Pranab Bardhan, and Partha Chatterjee. Johan Galtung's notions of structural, cultural and direct violence is also used to understand how the State and dominant communities have marginalised the Adivasis socially, culturally and economically. It also uses Foucauldian frames of power and discourses to understand the (re)producing of Adivasi subjects, aspects essential to understanding their mobilizing drives. The frames of 'Civic Driven Change' and 'Insurgent Citizenship' also help to further analyse the agency and strategies of Adivasis in countering and contesting dominant hegemonies in the region.

Four important conclusions can be drawn from this study which contribute also to the wider research on the rights of indigenous communities. First, while there is considerable literature on the oppression of indigenous communities under the colonial and post-colonial State, it generally compartmentalises the groups into 'oppressors' and the 'oppressed'. This study shows that Adivasis engage in more fluid ways and spaces to effectively negotiate and claim their demands and rights. Second, the use of multiple strategies is often necessary to respond to the varying forms of violence experienced at different levels in claiming their demands and rights. This includes, as demonstrated in the study, engaging with or building alliances with supportive entities, such as political parties, members of the government and administration, and armed insurgents, and working with, through and against the State. Third, identity assertion and identity politics are powerful forces and outcomes of the social mobilisation and agency of indigenous communities. While they might belong to diverse economic and social backgrounds, nevertheless the collective organisation and struggles for their land and resources gives rise to a new political identity with greater negotiation possibilities and potential for change in their favour. Fourth, the author's

'insider' role as part of my 'engaged observation', while tense and even seemingly contradictory at times, allowed for greater understanding and insights on how community identity was internalised, practised, reproduced and strengthened through collective mobilisation. Overall, the thesis demonstrates the importance of viewing identity formation and mobilisation of indigenous communities as organic processes that adapt and strategize at different levels in response to changing power relations. These processes are, in turn, shaped by specific discourses, which need to be acknowledged and strengthened, to further support such collective struggles by marginalised communities to claim and access their entitlements and rights.