



SWEDISH
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REGULAR SESSION INFORMATION

Session: Beyond the 'Tribe' and 'Tribal Studies'

Session Convener(s): Sangeeta Dasgupta, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

Chair: Sangeeta Dasgupta, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

Comments: -

I) *Shifting Categories: Making Sense of the Andaman Islanders in Colonial and Post-colonial India*

Madhumita Mazumdar, Dhirubai Ambani Institute of Information and Communication Technology, Gandhinagar

Vishvajit Pandya, Dhirubai Ambani Institute of Information and Communication Technology, Gandhinagar

II) *Does the Tribal Dream Correctly?: Disciplinary Hesitations in the British Naga Hills*

Bodhisattva Kar, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Kolkata

III) *Sovereignty, Subjectivity and Sobriety: Notes and Queries on Adivasis and Alcohol in Jharkhand*

Roger Begrich, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore/Universität Zürich

IV) *Sharpening Adivasi Identity: Modes of Conflict, Appropriation of State's Rhetoric and Ritualised Space Making in Rural Maharashtra*

Pushpesh Kumar, SRTM University, Maharashtra

V) *Beyond the 'Tribe': Other Frames, Other Possibilities*

Sangeeta Dasgupta, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

ABSTRACTS

Session description

In India, the term 'tribe' is widely used in the academia and beyond even as critical anthropology has increasingly sensitized us to the problematic origins of the term. While the Indian state guarantees affirmative action on the basis of a tribal identity, the discipline of anthropology, continuing with its colonial antecedents, carves out a realm of tribal studies that historians then engage with. This panel will critically explore the hegemonic terms on which 'tribal studies' stands. It will also examine whether 'adivasi' and 'Indigenous Peoples' could be more effectively employed in articulating the self-identity of the people in terms of their empowerment. Further, it will reflect on the ambivalent lineages of the tribal/adivasi heritage discourse in postcolonial India, while recognizing that the idea of heritage itself has been understood differently in the official discourse of the Indian state, and in the language of adivasi communities themselves.

This panel then raises a variety of themes and concerns, some of which we hope to address in this session. Participants would reflect on the many different ways of imagining the 'tribe' in the colonial period, the shared and yet distinct worlds of colonial ethnographers and missionaries in the creation of categories, the discussion between protectionists and interventionists on the future of the 'aboriginal primitive tribe' and its reflection in the arguments put forward by the Indian intelligentsia and in the Constituent Assembly debates, the genesis of the modern disciplines of sociology and anthropology in the late colonial period, contending heritage claims that selectively appropriated colonial markers in post-colonial times, the impact of globalization on contemporary adivasi identity etc. These issues are woven around a central concern: can one move beyond the tribe and tribal studies if one recognizes the multiplicity of contexts and processes in which these concepts were produced, interpreted and reinterpreted?

Papers

I) *Shifting Categories: Making Sense of the Andaman Islanders in Colonial and Post-colonial India*

Madhumita Mazumdar, Dhirubai Ambani Institute of Information and Communication Technology, Gandhinagar
Vishvajit Pandya, Dhirubai Ambani Institute of Information and Communication Technology, Gandhinagar

With its focus on the ambivalent positioning of the indigenous communities of the Andaman Islands, viz, the Ongee and the Jarawa in mainstream "tribal studies", this paper will seek to address some of the critical questions raised in this panel. It will try to understand why the shifts in the categorization of these communities from "Andamanese Aborigines to Primitive Tribal Groups" has to be seen in the context of the larger political economic framing of the Andaman Islands in the discourse and practice of colonial and post-colonial state-making in India. The categorization of these communities in other words, has to be understood in the context of an expanding settler colonial agenda in the Islands, the coercive and ameliorative policies undertaken in relation to the Andamanese, the failure to attain complete territorial control of the forest and the incessant threats of tribal hostility and violence. The paper will try to show how the colonial control of the Andamans based upon the spatio-temporal zoning of the Islands was legitimized by post-colonial anthropology with its uncritical acceptance of the category of the PTGs. It will conclude by showing how the present administration is struggling to cope with the epistemological and political challenges of redefining the temporal as opposed to the sociological category of the "Primitive" and the structures of governance that sustains it.

II) *Does the Tribal Dream Correctly?: Disciplinary Hesitations in the British Naga Hills*

This paper tries to identify some of the forces that were discursively condensed into the figure of “the tribal” at the beginning of the twentieth century as conflicting approaches to primitiveness came to rustle the disciplines of anthropology and psychoanalysis. By tracing the complex traffic between the emergent academic cultures of recording and interpreting dreams in the early twentieth century, the political space of everyday conversations and the administrative concerns in a loosely governed frontier, this paper wishes to understand how the oneirological capacities of the tribal became a crucial site for debating the fundamentals of colonial rule. Instead of the formulaic invocation of orientalism and the commonsensical accusation of distortion in racial stereotypes, my paper will try to move beyond the conventional frame of secular critique by addressing the fantastic without the guarantee of exorcism. In simpler words, rather than merely pointing at the ‘errors’ in ‘colonial representations’ of the tribal, and thereby affirming a truer and fuller reality of their dream-discursive practices, the project wishes to explore the historical horizons where blunders mesh into truths, the fantastic into the everyday, the allegorical into the literal, and the indisciplinary into the disciplinary. The call here is to revisit the disciplinary history of anthropology in order to construct an alternative historiographical ethic of approaching the fantastic. My sources for this project consist mostly of private papers and publications of various administrators and anthropologists who worked in the area from the 1840s to the 1950s, the government documents (Foreign Department), the proceedings and publications of the evangelical missions, newspaper reports and autobiographies.

III) *Sovereignty, Subjectivity and Sobriety: Notes and Queries on Adivasis and Alcohol in Jharkhand*

Roger Begrich, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore/Universität Zürich

This paper will discuss how tribal drinking serves, since colonial times, to reify tribal difference in India, and how it is used to mark the tribal subject not just as inherently different, but also as problematic and worthy of reform. Based on ethnographic research in Jharkhand, I will investigate how the legislation and taxation of alcohol marks adivasis as a distinct category of legal subjects. I will thus discuss indigeneity as a particular relationship to sovereignty and the law, rather than as a descriptive or analytic concept. The aim of this paper will be to evaluate the applicability to the scenario of tribal India of two influential recent theoretical contributions: Elizabeth Povinelli has situated her theory of indigenous subjectivity - a tension between what she calls the *autological subject* and *genealogical society* – in settler colonies. My work on adivasi and alcohol will experiment with her ideas to see whether and how they can contribute to the theorization of indigeneity in the postcolonial (and non-settler colonial) Indian context. Partha Chatterjee's work on what he calls *political societies* alludes to tribal communities as an example for constituencies to which power relates as *populations* – rather than as individual citizens. I will test his ideas by discussing the legal and political subjectivities of adivasis that can be traced ethnographically in tribal alcohol economies in Jharkhand.

IV) *Sharpening Adivasi Identity: Modes of Conflict, Appropriation of State's Rhetoric and Ritualised Space Making in Rural Maharashtra*

Pushpesh Kumar, SRTM University, Maharashtra

The present paper dwells upon the sharpening of tribal identity in contemporary times in rural Southeastern Maharashtra. Drawing upon the ethnographic data from a few villages it demonstrates the intensification of tribal identities through tribe-caste conflict and through inter-tribal covert and overt conflicts. The most ‘primitive’ tribe

called the Kolams seems to be appropriating the states's rhetoric of 'primitive tribe' in contesting forest officials and in expectation of greater attention from the state. They also legitimize their adivasi identity through ritualized space-making processes.

V) *Beyond the 'Tribe': Other Frames, Other Possibilities*

Sangeeta Dasgupta, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

This paper will seek to historicize the concept of 'tribe', a colonial category that finds its resonance even today in dialogues centering on tribal communities. While the category of the tribe had traversed in the course of the nineteenth century a long path before it moved from an open 'descriptive' entity to one of 'definition', and even as the 'tribe' became seemingly concrete, identifiable and officially recognizable by the end of the nineteenth century, the parameters for identification continued to shift. And this was reflected in the Census reports, in the debates between the protectionists and the interventionists, in discussions carried out in the Constituent Assembly, and in arguments put forward by academics even today. At a broader level, this paper argues for the need to move away from the category of 'tribe' and from a 'tribal studies' paradigm in order to question the hegemonic terms on which tribal studies rests. It advocates the importance of a new Adivasi studies approach that can engage with contesting terms such as 'scheduled tribe' and 'Indigenous Peoples'.