***Adivasis*and the State in Modern India: A Critical Appraisal**

**Uday Chandra**

**Introduction**

The term *Adivasi* was coined by activists in Jharkhand roughly a century ago.[[1]](#footnote-1) It is a Sanskritic neologism, akin to *swaraj* (self-rule) or *loktantra* (democracy), that characterizes at least 100 million Indians today as “aboriginal.” The relative newness of the term, a translation of a Latinate word used in British colonial territories since the mid-eighteenth century, has not prevented historians and social scientists from deploying it as a catch-all term for social groups inhabiting geographical areas demarcated by Schedule V of the current Indian constitution. The groups themselves continue to refer to themselves as Santals, Soras, Gujjars or Gonds, ethnonyms that distinguish a group from another. By contrast, similar groups residing in the Schedule VI areas in Northeast India prefer the older colonial term, “tribes.” The postcolonial Indian constitution itself created a new legal category, Scheduled Tribes (ST), to encompass areas under both Schedule V and VI. According to Articles 342 and 366 (25) of the current constitution, an ST is any group defined by the state in those terms. In practice, to become ST in postcolonial India, a group must satisfy state anthropologists that it is “backward,” “primitive,” “remote,” averse to contact with other groups, and in possession of distinctive customs.[[2]](#footnote-2) In other words, such groups are, in governmental terms, outside social hierarchies of caste that define personhood in postcolonial India. Assimilationists, critical of the official languages and logics of the state, have, nonetheless, preferred to describe the same groups as simply *vanvasi* (forest-dwellers) or, as per the sociology of Hindu nationalism, “backward Hindus”.[[3]](#footnote-3) By contrast, these groups are now increasingly labeled by global activist networks as “indigenous,” an updated vocabulary for “aboriginal” groups in British settler colonies.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Whatever theambiguities in terms, it is only over the past decade or so that calls for an Adivasi Studies or Adivasi History have coalesced in the academy.[[5]](#footnote-5) Any attempt to write Adivasi histories, along the lines of women’s histories or Dalit histories, must reckon with peculiar problems: the term Adivasi restricts history-writing to a presentist mode of inquiry and to colonial and postcolonial archives; the precolonial histories of groups labeled as Adivasi today, for instance, Bhils or Mundas, may require wholly different terms of reference; written historical or archaeological sources for understanding the histories of, say, Oraons or Nagas prior to their entanglements with the Raj are exceedingly sparse; Adivasis appear in official state archives primarily during periods of activism or insurgency with relatively little known about the nuances of everyday life in these communities; knowledge of Adivasi languages, endangered as some are, is largely absent from practices of history-writing today; lastly, so far, virtually all Adivasi history has been written by non-Adivasis.

Undoubtedly, some of these problems go beyond historical methods. A new generation of scholars from Adivasi or tribal communities ought to drive historical and social scientific research in future[[6]](#footnote-6). As Dalit histories remind us, representation matters in more ways than one. Yet it is not necessarily a debilitating concern that writing Adivasi history is an irreducibly present exercise. Adivasi demands for “autonomy” lie at the heart of activism as much as scholarship today.[[7]](#footnote-7) Nor is it problematic to claim, as I shall argue below, that Adivasis, much like Dalits, sought and received recognition and rights within the domain of colonial governmentality, and these subaltern histories, overlapping as they are, must be placed at the core of this new historiography. Beyond political activism, missionary and anthropological sources offer distinctive yet complementary perspectives on everyday life and customs among a wide range of Adivasi or tribal communities. Careful analyses of mission archives or anthropological writings can lead us to a better understanding of long-term socio-religious change in particular communities, histories of migration within and beyond British India or Adivasi women’s histories, all of which offer possible ways to move beyond the old historiographic focus on social movements and rebellions[[8]](#footnote-8). Finally, as our Africanist counterparts realized long ago,[[9]](#footnote-9) oral histories remain untapped sources for staging a dialogue between the past and present by centering the subjectivities of tribal communities themselves. After all, what we choose to remember and how as well as what we prefer to forget and why are equally relevant for writing history[[10]](#footnote-10). The methodological problems in writing Adivasi history are not, in sum, as insurmountable as they might appear.

In the pages to follow, I am interested in sketching out what a politically engaged historiography of tribal or Adivasi groups might look like. First, since the bulk of the colonial archives deals with the dynamics of insurgency or rebellion, a reappraisal of these episodic events and how historians have read colonial sources is sorely needed. Second, the centrality of the modern state, as a clearing house of competing claims, in defining and recognizing tribal or Adivasi communities is yet to be fully acknowledged by historians and anthropologists who prefer to view these communities as inherently opposed to or resisting the state. Both of these interrelated strands of a distinctive Adivasi History articulate an epistemic politics of “coevalness,” as opposed to Othering.[[11]](#footnote-11)

**Insurgent Politics**

 Among the more eccentric traits of Indian nationalist historiography is an insistence on insurrectionary anti-colonial pasts. Just as the Revolt of 1857, Swadeshi, and Quit India occupy pride of place of school textbooks and academic histories of modern India, we may discern a parallel tendency in writing histories of Adivasi insurgencies. Three historical episodes on the western frontier of the Bengal Presidency came to be reified as exceptional cases of anti-colonial rebellion: the Kol Insurrection (1831-32), the Santal Hul (1855-56), and Birsa Munda’s *ulgulan* (1895-1901).[[12]](#footnote-12) The historians chronicling these episodes relied on extensive colonial records of counterinsurgency, which contained details of the causes and organization of the rebellions as well as military tactics used by the rebels and countered by British armed forces. All three rebellions were interpreted as reactions to the intrusions of a new colonial order, a subset of a broader all-India response to British rule in India. This fledgling historiography may be understood against the backdrop of the tumultuous years around the visit of the Simon Commission and the passage of the Government of India Act, 1935 when the Congress began reaching out to Adivasis in the scheduled areas, divided between partially and fully excluded areas (later, Schedule V and Schedule VI areas).[[13]](#footnote-13) Although movements for socio-religious reform such as the Tana Bhagats among the Oraons and the Hari Baba movement among the Hos had drawn inspiration from the figure of M.K. Gandhi, the Congress had not actively courted Adivasis because they were assumed to be firmly in support of the Raj.[[14]](#footnote-14) The turn in nationalist historiography to incorporate Adivasis into a wider anti-colonial struggle thus ought to be seen as paralleling the efforts of the Congress to reach out to these groups and to negate demands for an autonomous Jharkhand or separate nation-states among the Mizos and Nagas.[[15]](#footnote-15) Such efforts in politics and academia continued in tandem in the early decades after independence.

 When Ranajit Guha and his colleagues assembled Subaltern Studies in the late ‘70s and early ‘80s, they relied on not only the historical knowledge produced by nationalist historians on Adivasis, but also, somewhat surprisingly, their historiographical assumptions. Early Subaltern Studies subtly replaced the portrayal of Adivasis as proto-nationalists with a freshly-politicized depiction of those Eric Hobsbawm had termed “primitive rebels” as authentic anti-colonial rebels.[[16]](#footnote-16) Guha turned to the same triad of rebellions studied by a previous generation of historians, but rendered them vis-à-vis the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure and the structuralist anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss as basic units of analysis in a broader study of peasant insurgencies.[[17]](#footnote-17) Guha also followed here the prevailing sociological consensus in India on the “tribe-caste continuum,” which characterized Adivasis along a linear axis from simpler to more complex, hierarchical forms of social organization.[[18]](#footnote-18) In the same way that the sociologist Émile Durkheim had studied the “most primitive” religion in the world to reveal the “the religious nature of man” as “an essential and permanent aspect of humanity,”[[19]](#footnote-19) Guha had turned to nineteenth-century Adivasi rebellions to explore the “elementary aspects of peasant insurgency” in India and beyond. For Guha, in comparison to the Gandhi-led struggle for independence, “the peasant movements of the first three-quarters of British rule represented a somewhat inchoate and naïve state of consciousness.”[[20]](#footnote-20) Quite apart from the disconcerting evolutionism at work here, it has been pointed out that Subaltern Studies emerged from a sense of failure within the Indian left to “adequately engage and mobilize the peasantry”.[[21]](#footnote-21) By giving a twist to an older nationalist historiography and situating it in a wider comparative context, Adivasis, as the simplest kinds of peasants in India, could be claimed to be inherently opposed to the Raj.

 Take, for instance, Guha’s analysis of the Santal Hul. Guha writes that the Hul showed the “first glimmer,” albeit “feeble and incipient,” of a political consciousness among the Santals.[[22]](#footnote-22) The brothers leading the insurgency, Sidhu and Kanu, for instance, understood “some of the basic elements of economic exploitation and the political superstructure which legitimized these.”[[23]](#footnote-23) “Negation,” the next step for the rebels, according to Guha, may be seen in Sidhu-Kanu’s statement that the Thakur or deity that appeared before them was a “white man” who sat and wrote orders to them. For the radical historian, this was “clearly a case of overdetermination, the power of the colonialist sahib and that of the pen-pushing dhoti-clad babu were telescoped here in a composite vision and raised to divine power.”[[24]](#footnote-24) What Guha omits to tell us is that the same files show that Thakur’s sanctum sanctorum had “wrapped up in a white cloth and tied round with a piece of gold string…four books, which it is reported fell from heaven” containing “the orders of the Thackoor,” and hence, they “were read every day at the Thackorbaree”.[[25]](#footnote-25) The four books turned out to be “translations of the Gospel of St. John into Bengalee and other languages,” perhaps left among the Santals by a passing missionary.

If the novel and hybrid political theology of the Santal rebels isn’t striking enough, consider Guha’s equally striking omission that the rebels’ *parwana* or proclamation to the government says: “The Amlahs [judicial officers]…made the whole Rules and Regulations bad and this is sin to the Sahebs”.[[26]](#footnote-26) The Thakur allegedly told Sidhu-Kanu: “Tell the Sahib to cut your claims [;] you must not run away. Tell the sahib to let the Manjees go.”[[27]](#footnote-27) Kanu actually “told all the Sonthals that they were…to pay all the revenue to Govt” and to place themselves “under the charge” of him and his brother Sidhu.[[28]](#footnote-28) In other words, the Santals were expected to remain loyal to the Raj, but simply treat Sidhu-Kanu, both manjhis (village headmen), as local state authorities in place of the existing set of officials. Far from dealing with a feeble or incipient political consciousness here, we are compelled to recognize the Santal Hul was far from a straightforward anti-colonial uprising. The social forces at play in Santal society did not drive the rebels to negate the colonial state, but to *negotiate* with it as a distant sovereign. At the same time, we ought to appreciate Adivasi rebellions, as Tanika Sarkar has argued in a recent reappraisal of her earlier Subaltern Studies essay on Jitu Santal, a form of "modern self fashioning."[[29]](#footnote-29)

 The same set of assumptions that guided Guha and early Subaltern Studies haunted a generation of scholarship on Adivasi rebellions. In the decades leading up to Birsa Munda’s *ulgulan*, another episode of peasant insurgency examined in *Elementary Aspects*, upwardly-mobile Mundas had petitioned the colonial state to recognize their land rights, opposed the established authority of Hindu *zamindars* and *rajas* as well as the *mankis* and *mundas*, and declared themselves loyal subjects of the Raj. When the *ulgulan* broke out in 1895, Birsa and his lieutenants sought a Munda Raj under colonial overlordship.[[30]](#footnote-30) Once again, a logic of *negotiation* with the colonial state rather than its negation seems to be the object of Adivasi rebellion. In a related vein, some historians have noted that discourses of “wildness” make available to Adivasis a creative resource to negotiate with the colonial state.[[31]](#footnote-31) The simplistic binary between Adivasis and the modern state is unsettled precisely at the moment of insurgent politics. Colonial constructions of “tribe” may be far more collaborative ventures than historians have imagined.[[32]](#footnote-32) When we now read colonial-era insurgency records in the scheduled areas, it is impossible to simply retreat into the tired tropes of nationalist historiography.[[33]](#footnote-33)

It is equally noteworthy that the Birsaites, much like the Santal rebels, were shaped by Christianity as much as Vaishnavism. Birsa *Dharm* survives today in the villages of central Jharkhand as a minority cult. Such dramatic ruptures in Adivasi religiosity were first analyzed in a monograph-length book by David Hardiman on the Devi movement in Kheda, Gujarat.[[34]](#footnote-34) Without implicating entire communities, Sangeeta Dasgupta’s work on the Tana Bhagats among the Oraons and Sanjukta Das Gupta’s analysis of the Hari Baba movement among the Hos reveal similar cataclysmic changes within a tribe in the direction of vegetarianism, teetotalism, and ritual purity.[[35]](#footnote-35) What were once seen as movements of social reform among remote peasant communities may be rather closely related to the politics of rebellious youth who sought to turn ritual worlds upside down. Adivasi rebellions are as much about negotiating colonial statemaking from below as it about transforming rural communities from within. Village elders, who acted as stipend-earning interpreters of customary law, seem to have borne the brunt of these rebellions as much as elderly or single women condemned as witches.[[36]](#footnote-36) It remains the task of a new historiography of Adivasi rebellions to rethink them in terms of changes in the everyday lives of particular communities, or sections within them, in an era of political ferment and religious revivalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

**Community and State**

 Although it is fair to say that there were no self-ascribed Adivasis prior to the early twentieth century, precolonial polities in the Indian subcontinent incorporated forest- and hill-dwelling groups into the ambit of their sovereignty in myriad ways. Forests, which covered over half of South Asia until c. 1850, have long been spaces for royal hunting expeditions, princes and warriors in exile, monastic orders and *ashrams*, and floating communities specializing in foraging and hunting alongside subsistence agriculture.[[37]](#footnote-37) There is little evidence that these are stateless or state-repelling spaces, as Southeast Asianists have proposed and debated recently.[[38]](#footnote-38) The political fortunes of Bhils in western India, for instance, were closely connected with those of Mughal, Maratha and British colonial, and Indian postcolonial regimes successively over four centuries.[[39]](#footnote-39) Similarly, forest dwellers in Bastar and highland Odisha were enmeshed in complex ritual and political-economic exchanges with their jungle *rajas* and patron goddesses.[[40]](#footnote-40) Royal power and patronage ensured that customs such as *meriah* or the ritual sacrifice of humans, deemed offensive and outlawed by British colonial officials, were actively encouraged as magical rites in forest polities.[[41]](#footnote-41) Drawing on Frederik Barth’s study of the Swat Pathans, Sumit Guha has proposed that tribalism ought to be seen as a special kind of ecological adaptation in environments that encourage small-scale, relatively egalitarian forms of social organization.[[42]](#footnote-42) Groups that exist in these ecological niches display a political malleability that allows us them to adapt flexibly to multiple, overlapping orders of sovereignty. Guha urges us to take seriously, in a Weberian vein, the close, even constitutive, relationship between *jati*, *zat*, *qaum*, *biradri* and other cognates on the one hand and states on the other.

 If we take seriously Indian constitutional provisions that empower the modern state to decide on who gets to become a tribe and under what circumstances, we may discern a significant historical shift from precolonial arrangements in forests and hills. Against much academic and popular commonsense, tribes in India and elsewhere are not vestiges or fossils from a bygone era.[[43]](#footnote-43) Additionally, we are not speaking of tribal social structures as environmental adaptations, but of Adivasis as artifacts of modern statemaking over the past two centuries.[[44]](#footnote-44) In other words, Adivasi history begins with efforts by particular groups, regardless of their ecological niches, to remake themselves as aboriginal or first-settler communities in the eyes of colonial and postcolonial states. The early history of encounters between these groups and civilian and military officials of the East India Company state gave birth to colonial anthropology.[[45]](#footnote-45) Thereafter, the post-1858 “ethnographic state,” in Nicholas Dirks’ terms, recorded and counted these groups and, following the Scheduled Districts Act, 1874, demarcated their dwelling places as protected areas.[[46]](#footnote-46) Fuzzy precolonial histories known to us through royal chronicles and oral historical traditions lent, and continue to lend, weight to modern political claims by groups referring to themselves as tribes or Adivasis.[[47]](#footnote-47) It is through varied ethnopolitical practices of “hailing the state”[[48]](#footnote-48) that groups became tribal or Adivasi over the long nineteenth century.[[49]](#footnote-49) In nearly every case, we cannot verify these claims through archaeological or written historical sources. In fact, such exercises in scholarly verification or fact-checking are unlikely to further the cause of either Adivasi politics or history-writing.[[50]](#footnote-50) As such, Adivasi histories, centered around genealogies of claims upon the modern state, are left with little choice but to abandon the temptation to pursue *longue durée* narratives, whether romanticizing cultural loss and alterity or positing a linear historical trajectory across millennia, and to limit themselves to available sources and contemporary concerns.

 Studying historical processes of “becoming Adivasi,”[[51]](#footnote-51) we must reckon with the centrality of the colonial state as a clearing house of competing claims. When some Oraons and Mundas petitioned the colonial state to recognize their claims as *bhuinhars* or first settlers, they appealed to English common law to protect and further their interests vis-à-vis those of their *zamindars* and village headmen.[[52]](#footnote-52) It was Edward Tuite Dalton, the Irish ex-military officer and pioneer of ethnological studies in the eastern and western frontiers of colonial Bengal, who commissioned land surveys, ensured the passage of the Chota Nagpur Tenures Act (1869), and pursued ethnographic research on tribes claiming aboriginal status. In Dalton’s words, “the eastern portion of the extensive plateau of Central India” was a “watershed” that became a home to “a heterogeneous collection of non-Aryan tribes…driven from their original sites at different periods by Braminical invaders, gradually fell back…and formed new nationalities in the secure asylum they found there.”[[53]](#footnote-53) Dalton’s officially policy of “favor bordering on partiality”[[54]](#footnote-54) towards the “non-Aryan” or “pre-Aryan” tribes of Bengal came to inform anthropologist-administrators in the hills and forests of Northeast India, the western Indian tribal belt along the Arabian Sea, the central Indian tribal heartland, the Madras Agency Tracts, and the North West Frontier Province. Evidently, the post-1858 ethnographic state was unusually responsive to its tribal subjects, whose peaceful petitioning and calculated acts of strategic violence[[55]](#footnote-55) led to the eventual codification of customs in laws such as the Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act (1908), the Central Provinces Land Alienation Act (1916), and the Agency Tracts Interest and Land Transfer Act (1917). K. Sivaramakrishnan has argued that the colonial anthropology of tribal India can be profitably read as an anthropology of the colonial state.[[56]](#footnote-56) At the same time, civilizing missions[[57]](#footnote-57) against head-hunting or human sacrifice took place, and commercial and conservationist interests in newly-defined “reserved” and “protected” forests made scheduled districts truly exceptional spaces in British India.[[58]](#footnote-58) With colonial governmentality as the only game in town, claim-making by Adivasis not only softened and negotiated processes of modern statemaking from below, but co-produced the ethnopolitical categories that enshrined tribal custom and autonomy in the statute books.

 Autonomy has, over the past century, become the rallying cry of Adivasi politics across the Indian subcontinent. It is rooted in colonial discourses of “primitivism” and “wildness” that became the basis for a political existence separate from the workings of caste society in the plains.[[59]](#footnote-59) The long transition from the colonial to the postcolonial has eroded some of this autonomy, most notably due to the demands of “development” in the form of big hydroelectric dams, mining and logging interests, and greater market penetration that see to blur the distinctions between Adivasis and the rest of Indian society.[[60]](#footnote-60) In postcolonial India, therefore, the role played by sympathetic anthropologist-administrators is now taken by up civil society activists who oppose the construction of dams, highways and other development projects that seek to convert natural resources into capital.[[61]](#footnote-61) It is tempting to view Adivasis as inherently antagonistic to the state or “keeping the state away,”[[62]](#footnote-62) and activists often rely on a host of strategic essentialisms or “simplifications,”[[63]](#footnote-63) which have irked scholars in varying measure, to claim their constitutionally-mandated rights. Yet Adivasis have negotiated with the logics of state developmentalism and democratic politics in canny ways, whether in the Narmada Valley, Jharkhand, Sikkim or Tripura.[[64]](#footnote-64) Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh came into existence in 2000 after longstanding movements for statehood that sought to preserve Adivasi autonomy.[[65]](#footnote-65) Over the past quarter century or so, new laws have extended panchayati raj to the scheduled areas and devised innovative models of joint forest management and co-ownership for forest dwellers.[[66]](#footnote-66) When secessionist or Maoist insurgents have entered scheduled areas, they have found fertile ground without necessarily weaning Adivasis away from their entanglements with the postcolonial state.[[67]](#footnote-67) The ongoing *pathalgadi* movement in the villages of Jharkhand shows how far the postcolonial state and its laws suffuse the political imagination of Adivasi women and men.[[68]](#footnote-68) Prathama Banerjee has contrasted the Adivasi emphasis on autonomy with the Dalit interest in representation, particularly in democratic politics.[[69]](#footnote-69) This is apt, but once we appreciate that Adivasis do not rely on electoral democracy to negotiate their claims with the modern state, the difference between their activism and Dalit struggles for dignity and property becomes clear enough.

Where the state is the only game in town, its enchantments are endless.[[70]](#footnote-70) By staking claims on the state, rights accrue to specific groups, not others. Amidst this new zero-sum game, Dipesh Chakrabarty has called for a “politics unlimited” with regard to Adivasi politics today.[[71]](#footnote-71) Claims to tribal (ST) status are commonplace in India today as marginalized agrarian groups seek official governmental recognition and the material benefits of affirmative action.[[72]](#footnote-72) Yet reservations have been a mixed blessing for Adivasis, who have been far less enthusiastic than Dalits about this distinctive form of affirmative action.[[73]](#footnote-73) The groups that now seek ST status would not think of registering themselves as scheduled castes (SC) due to the stigma and discrimination attached to this status. Unsurprisingly, questions of who is really Adivasi (and who is not) have come to the fore now. For Dr. Ram Dayal Munda, the late scholar-activist, the future lies in defining Adivasi religiosity as distinct from Hindu, Muslim, Christian and other faith-based identities.[[74]](#footnote-74) Recent activism, particularly in Jharkhand, has pushed in this direction, yet there is no all-India consensus on whether the religious practices of over 100 million Indians can be recodified in this manner. It is also worth pointing out that many Adivasis claim to be Christians or Hindus, the latter under the growing influence of the Hindu Right,[[75]](#footnote-75) and hence, the adherents to what colonial ethnographers called “animism” in its latest guise, may be far more limited than may appear at first glance. Of course, this battle, too, will be waged within the sphere of postcolonial governmentality and law. How the state will define tribal identity in future is far from obvious.

**Conclusion**

This reappraisal of the relationship between Adivasis and the modern state is driven by an epistemic politics of what the anthropologist Johannes Fabian called “coevalness.” Such a politics eschews attempts to Other by exoticizing or romanticizing Adivasi politics and histories, particularly via Anglophone multicultural discourses of “indigenous alterity.”[[76]](#footnote-76) When we rethink Adivasi insurgencies or rebellions by looking closely at colonial records, we recognize the politics of negotiation, rather than negation, that informs relations between Adivasis and the modern state. Adivasis “recovering liberties” were not that different from the male Hindu elite figures studied by C.A. Bayly[[77]](#footnote-77), or indeed, from Dalit icons such as Jyotirao Phule and B.R. Ambedkar seeking rights and freedoms denied to them.[[78]](#footnote-78)

If Dalits have sought representation and Adivasis autonomy, as Prathama Banerjee has argued, it owes to the different ways in which these social groups have negotiated their claims to recover lost liberties or claim new ones. By 1947, people and places described as “tribal” or Adivasi were understood by scholars and policymakers to be outside the social pyramid of caste in modern India. Adivasis owned and farmed their own land, and they foraged and hunted in the forests around them. Dalit struggles for dignity sought land and other forms of property to craft new kinds of personhood and to transform democratic politics from below. To bring Adivasi and Dalit historiographies into conversation with each other does not necessarily mean returning to older all-encompassing notions of subalternity. It entails staging an altogether new dialogue between both sets of groups as well as both academic literatures. Such a dialogue was, of course, conspicuously absent during the Constituent Assembly Debates and their aftermath.[[79]](#footnote-79) Today, the modern state offers the common ground on which eclectic affinities can exist between both populations claiming and defending rights and dignity. Historians, too, can reimagine social histories of modern India by placing struggles for autonomy and representation, sometimes parallel, at other times overlapping, at the center of their endeavors.

Politically engaged histories of Adivasis are, in sum, histories of the present. The search for timeless tribes in the distant past is, ultimately, a futile one. Nor is it particularly helpful for scholars to disparage Adivasi claims to land, dignity or autonomy by insisting on the obvious, namely, that there were no tribes in the Indian subcontinent prior to c. 1800. Alongside focused comparisons with Dalits across India, future scholarship on Adivasis can benefit immensely by adopting a comparative framework that takes into consideration “tribes” in neighboring Pakistan and Bangladesh. Autonomy and identity are, for instance, key planks of regional politics in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan and Balochistan as well as the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh.[[80]](#footnote-80) At the same time, the old colonial logics of frontiers as spaces of disorder and pacification have, as in India, remained alive in the other two states carved out of British India.[[81]](#footnote-81) Finally, modern South Asia also continues to be at the center of critiques, elaborations, and extensions of the idea of “indigeneity.”[[82]](#footnote-82) By adopting a comparative outlook, critical histories of people and places designated as “tribal” can pave the way for fresh thinking in and outside South Asia on borders, development, and ethnicity. The way ahead is unashamedly presentist, but as is the case for writing histories of gender and race, this article suggests that the benefits will invariably outweigh the alleged risks or costs.

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