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# PRIMITIVE ACCUMULATION AND "PRIMITIVE" SUBJECTS IN POSTCOLONIAL INDIA: TRACING THE MYRIAD REAL AND VIRTUAL LIVES OF MEDIATIZED INDIGENEITY ACTIVISM

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**indigeneity**  
**media studies**  
**postcolonial India**  
**primitive accumulation**  
**social activism**  
**subalternity**  
.....  
*In late 2008 a five-minute video clip entitled Gaon Chodab Nahin (literally, "We Shall Not Leave Our Village") came into circulation among activists and grassroots NGOs in the forest highlands of eastern India. To those who watched and passed on the video throughout the eastern Indian states of Jharkhand, West Bengal and Orissa, it summed up the plight of adivasi or "tribal" populations in the region as they battled an emerging state-corporate nexus whose plans for rapid industrialization in India relied on greater access to forest and mineral resources. This essay critically interrogates the myriad lives of this video clip through a close study of the real and virtual arenas in which it came to be viewed and engaged by different audiences. Drawing on extensive fieldwork in the forest state of Jharkhand in eastern India, I examine how developmental NGOs, indigeneity activists and rural adivasi villagers came to view and interpret this video differently. These different interpretations, I show, simultaneously perpetuate and destabilize established ideas of "primitivism"*

*in postcolonial India, especially when some adivasi subjects talk back to their well-meaning patrons and critique representations of themselves. Might the production of “primitive” subjects be, I ask, paradoxically conjoined to processes of primitive accumulation in postcolonial India?*

## Introduction

In late 2008 a five-minute video clip titled *Gaon Chodab Nahin* (literally, “We Shall Not Leave Our Village”) came into circulation among activists and grassroots NGOs in the forest highlands of eastern India. The musical score that runs through the clip, it claimed, was “inspired” by Bhagwan Maaji, a key leader of the struggle against bauxite mining in Kashipur, Odisha. The images did not belong to any particular place, but formed a *bricolage* that sought tell a common tale of oppression and exploitation under today’s neo-liberal economic regime. The film was directed by K. P. Sasi, an activist and documentary filmmaker from Kerala, and funded by ActionAid, a global anti-poverty NGO with its headquarters in South Africa. To those who watched and circulated the video clip throughout the eastern Indian states of Jharkhand, West Bengal and Odisha, *Gaon Chodab Nahin* (henceforth, GCN) summed up the plight of *adivasi*/tribal/indigenous populations in the region as they battled an emerging state–corporate nexus whose plans for rapid industrialization in India relied on access to forest and mineral resources (Padel 2009; Padel and Das 2010; Whitehead 2010; Varma 2013).

This new wave of “primitive accumulation”, as the Marxist geographer Harvey (2003) explains, lies at the heart of contemporary capitalist expansion in regions hitherto deemed marginal or peripheral. What Harvey terms “accumulation by dispossession” is the dominant mode of appropriation today outside the core of the capitalist world economy (Glassman 2006). Such accumulation is “primitive” or originary in the sense that it is foundational to the workings of capitalism, whether in its classical or contemporary avatars (Perelman 2000). As Karl Marx (1967, 714–15) wrote in Part VIII of *Das Kapital* (Volume 1),

the so-called primitive accumulation ... is nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production. It appears as primitive, because it forms the prehistoric stage of capital and of the mode of production corresponding with it.

Marx refers here to enclosures in England or the conquest of the Americas as precursors to the rise of industrial capitalism and its more familiar, everyday forms of accumulation. But it is useful to heed the political economist Sanyal’s (2007) warning that primitive accumulation is not necessarily prior to

capitalism proper. It is better understood as an ongoing process in the frontiers of the capitalist economy. Equally, as Sanyal argues, primitive accumulation does not inevitably turn communities of peasants into exploitable wage-labour in the manner suggested by an older Marxist teleology. These processes of accumulation, especially in the ex-colonial world, curiously reproduce what Sanyal calls “non-capital” or social relations of capital that either pre-date wage-labour or are distinct from it. Non-capital encompasses various forms of kinship, ethnic and gender relations that are reinforced rather than extinguished by the expansion of colonial and postcolonial capitalism. In Sanyal’s (2007, 61) terms, in the postcolonial world, capitalism’s “arising is never complete, its universality never fully established, its being forever postponed”. This perpetual postponement of the apparently universal logic of capitalism may be attributed, on the one hand, to colonial policies that sought to preserve “traditional” hierarchies (Mamdani 1996; Mantena 2010), and on the other hand, to the postcolonial workings of electoral democracy and popular welfarism (Chatterjee 2008). As capital expands, therefore, so too does the space for non-capital.

In this essay I focus on a particular form of non-capital, namely, subjects deemed to be “primitive” by postcolonial states, non-governmental agencies and transnational activist networks. “Primitive” in this anthropological sense is, it must be clarified, a-priori unrelated to socioeconomic processes of primitive accumulation. I refer here to postcolonial subjects, who are labelled as “tribes” by the Indian government and as *adivasis* (literally, “ancient inhabitants”) by activists sympathetic to their plight, and are represented simultaneously as hapless victims as well as fierce warriors in defence of Nature and Freedom (Varma 2002; Bates and Shah 2014). What appears as a discursive contradiction here, in fact, reflects a central tension in colonial and postcolonial policies towards *adivasis* in modern India, or what may be termed “primitivism” (Chandra 2013a). This tension is reproduced in the languages and logics of resistance when *adivasis* and their benefactors negotiate the modern state from below (Chandra 2013b). Such resistance is, as I shall explain in this essay, necessarily reliant on “strategic essentialisms” (Spivak 1988) that invoke the figure of the “primitive” talking back to the state and state-like actors in its own languages, domestically and globally (Chakrabarty 2006; Jung 2006; Li 2010; Hodgson 2011). Although this is a risky venture on many counts (Béteille 1998; Kuper 2003; Banerjee 2006; Shah 2010; Mamdani 2013; Sylvain 2014), it is in this sense that the GCN clip came to be presented in rural eastern India and beyond as a key symbol of resistance by postcolonial *adivasi* subjects to emerging forms of primitive accumulation. “Primitive” subjects and processes of primitive accumulation, therefore, became conjoined in peculiar historical circumstances in contemporary India.

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This essay critically interrogates the myriad lives of this video clip through a close study of the real and virtual arenas in which it came to be viewed and engaged by different audiences. In doing so, I follow recent trends in the anthropology of media that emphasize studying practices of production, consumption and circulation (Bräuchler and Postill 2010) in the making of new “media worlds” (Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin 2002). I also draw on long-term ethnographic fieldwork in the forests of Jharkhand in eastern India to examine how developmental NGOs, indigeneity activists and *adivasi* villagers came to view and interpret this video differently. These different interpretations, I show, simultaneously perpetuate and destabilize long-established ideas of “primitivism” in postcolonial India, especially when some *adivasi* subjects question the wisdom of their well-meaning patrons and then proceed to critique representations of themselves as “primitives”. Beyond my fieldsites in rural Jharkhand, I examine the virtual audiences of GCN on YouTube, Facebook and other online peer-to-peer video-sharing portals. These audiences, albeit different from those offline, connect local *adivasi* struggles to a wider canvas of global activism in the name of the “indigenous” (see Ginsburg 1995; Wilson and Stewart 2008). By doing so, they seek to transcend “militant particularisms” (Harvey 1995) even as the specificities of particular lives and places are progressively stripped away. These articulations of “indigeneity” keep alive the all-too-modern figure of the “primitive” as a symbol of ineradicable difference and as an object of our neo-romantic longings for a past that arguably never existed. In doing so, the reproduction of “primitive” subjects in contemporary India ought to be understood not in opposition to the logic of primitive accumulation, but, in fact, within it.

### **Gaon Chodab Nahin as a cultural text**

GCN opens poignantly with a scene that is apparently meant to depict an eternal sense of *adivasi* existence. A melancholy flute plays in the background on a dark night in the forest, where villagers congregate around a flickering fire, singing self-absorbedly in communion with each other. The next scene zooms in on butterflies fluttering by day around some creepers in the forest, and a livelier tune takes over to accompany the vivacity of life on display. At the very outset, we thus encounter two contrasting scenes of *adivasi* life in the night and day. Both scenes, however, complement each other insofar as they delineate together a life of nature, freedom, joy and community, away from the sights and sounds of big cities, modern technology and the insignia of the state. This complementarity is emphatically brought together in the next scene, which is a computer-generated white-on-brown image of

a Warli-style painting that shows an idealized *adivasi* village nestled amid trees, clouds and mountains. Women perform household chores under a smiling sun. The beat of the *nagāda* drum, played at the centre of the painting, binds their labours together within a village community. In roughly half a minute, an undisturbed rural idyll is conjured before our modern eyes, an object of longing and loss simultaneously.

It is this “primitive” idyll, we are asked to contemplate, that is under threat from the primitive accumulation of capital in India today. The lyrics of the song, written by the Ranchi-based activist-filmmaker Meghnath Bhattacharya, then erupt in a male baritone: “We shall not leave our villages / We shall not leave our forests / We shall not leave our motherland / We shall not give up our fight.” Scenes of an *adivasi* woman drawing water from a well and several others sowing paddy in the fields accompany the lines that mention the “village” (*gaon*) and “motherland” (*maar maati*), whereas forest-covered hills and a protest march of *adivasi* women depict “forests” (*jangal*) and “fight” (*larai*), respectively. There is an undeniable eco-feminist undertone to these depictions that suggests the centrality of women to rural *adivasi* communities. Women labour and protest as well as tend to home and hearth. Men play drums, by contrast. Behind this celebration of the *adivasi* feminine that undergirds the village community lies, however, an ambiguity, whereby women’s voices are seemingly silent or at least drowned by male drums and song in the video clip.

Nonetheless, the male singer accuses a mysterious “It” of wreaking havoc with these feminine-centred communities. “It” builds dams, submerges entire villages, builds factories and mines, destroys forests and creates sanctuaries. A chorus of *adivasi* women follows the male lead and repeats the accusation against “It”. Images of trucks carrying coal from mines and dynamite blasting through the surface of the earth reinforce these accusations. “Where”, the male lead asks the God of Development (*vikās ke bhagwān*), “can we go if we leave the land and forests [*jangal-jameen*]?” “It” then turns out to be the God of Development invoked here. It is a mysterious amoral force acting in various guises to displace and dispossess *adivasis* throughout India. As if to underscore what is at stake in the current wave of primitive accumulation, the “primitive” idyll of community life reappears as another Warli painting. Women labour and play music in and outside their homes, some with children. This scene, the clip suggests, may end up merely as a painting for posterity, not as lived reality.

The next sequence of images (and the next stanza of the song) identifies and addresses an audience. It tells this audience of viewers in metropolitan centres of privilege in urban India and beyond that, as a result of their apparently innocent everyday acts of consumption, the Yamuna, Narmada and Subarnarekha rivers are drying up and the Ganges is now a filthy drain and the Krishna simply a black line. Images of dry river beds and clogged streams

reinforce the lyrics of the song. Additionally, this segment of GCN accuses its audience directly (“you” or *tum*) of drinking Pepsi and bottled mineral water (“Bisleri”) even as *adivasi* villagers are increasingly forced to drink contaminated water (*kachrā pāni*) from drain-like streams and rivers. Primitive accumulation of capital then, ultimately, affects everyone through its impact on local, regional and national ecologies. The audience of GCN must take the blame for the current circumstances *adivasis* find themselves in even as it ponders dire ecological consequences for itself in future. This is a political argument that hitches the *adivasi* cause firmly to the environmental one in India today. It averts the possibility of *adivasi* resistance being dismissed as merely another species of identity or sectarian politics in the Global South. The upshot is that the audience ought to be interested in, if not part of, the “fight” (*larai*) against the amoral forces of “Development” (*vikās*) just as *adivasis* are.

Insofar as the audience and the subject of GCN are united by the middle of the video clip, this is achieved by a clever sleight of hand. None of the makers of GCN are *adivasis*, though a number of them have had lengthy careers in social activism on behalf of *adivasis* and the environment. GCN’s appeal to the predominantly urban middle-class audience in India and abroad is borne out of a familiarity with the milieu that this audience inhabits. Yet the makers of GCN, assuming the mantle of the indigeneity activist, endeavour to speak *for adivasis to non-adivasis*. Hence, the non-*adivasi* viewer of GCN is addressed as “you” (*tum*), and the subject of the clip is “we”, the *adivasis* and the filmmakers (*hum*). The sleight of hand lies in the middle-class indigeneity activist speaking to his own kind based on a prior familiarity, albeit with a you–we distinction. A conversation within bourgeois society over *adivasis* thus seeks popular legitimacy by speaking in complete identification with the modern tribal subject. An aspiration to fictive kinship is posited between the filmmakers and *adivasis* all over India, though as we shall see in the next section, this aspiration runs into some real-world difficulties. It is this sleight of hand based on an aspirational “we” that, of course, makes the video so powerfully evocative.

GCN moves swiftly from “you” to “we” as if to sharpen the contrast. The next scene takes us back to the rural *adivasi* idyll in the darkness of night, illuminated only by a community fire. We then see an *ojha* or witch-doctor warding off malevolent spirits with a broom in the darkness of a thatched hut. A *pahan* or village priest worships by day, invoking ancestral spirits in a sacred grove with *sal* (*Shorea robusta*) leaves and a ritual pot of water. The male lead sings: “Were our ancestors fools [*moorakh*] that they protected the forests, kept the earth green, and the rivers flowing with honey?” There is a tone of defiance here. The arrogance of the urban middle-class beneficiaries of Development are being questioned here. The singer goes on to accuse these votaries of Development of setting fire to the earth and denuding it of

vegetation, killing fish and driving away birds in unknown directions. The time-honoured wisdom of *adivasis* is explicitly contrasted here by the makers of GCN to the modern-day gospel of industrial progress in India and elsewhere. “We” are putting “you” in their place, so to speak. And yet “we” are also vulnerable thanks to “you”, as we see the computer-generated Warli paintings with moving figures portraying fragile but heroic communities under threat today.

“Development” in the scheduled or “tribal” areas of contemporary India is, GCN then reminds us, directly related to the primitive accumulation of capital there. “Companies” interested in acquiring land occupied at present by *adivasi* villages are represented by a computer-generated image of a white businessman with a US flag on his hat and necktie. The US businessman holds in his clutches a greedy-looking Indian politician (*mantri*) in his grey safari suit and Nehru cap – his *dalāl* or broker in GCN’s words. This politician, in turn, holds up a policeman in khaki uniform to “seize lands” occupied by *adivasis*. The policeman holds an old-fashioned wooden rifle in his hand. The trio moves steadily towards the Warli depictions of rural *adivasi* idylls as the background score speaks of “platoons” (*paltan*) accompanying them. Visuals of police atrocities against villagers in Singur and Nandigram, West Bengal, follow to give a graphic sense of how brutally the state attacks its own citizens in order to acquire land for private companies. “The officer becomes a king [*rājā*],” goes the GCN song, “and the contractor becomes wealthy [*dhani*]. Our village becomes their colony”. This, then, is a critique of the primitive accumulation of capital in the name of “primitive” subjects in the margins of the world capitalist economy. In the postcolonial context, *adivasis* are, GCN alleges, doubly victimized in the form of primitive accumulation at a global scale and in the form of internal colonialism within the nation-state framework.

In response to these nested regimes of victimization and exploitation, GCN asserts, there is no alternative but to fight (*larāi*). The precise nature of this fight is ambiguous, perhaps unintentionally, albeit in a productive sense. It is not clear whether violence is to be abjured or adopted, and as we shall see in the next section, this ambiguity propels GCN’s popularity in rural Jharkhand today. The final stanza of the GCN song invokes Birsa Munda, the legendary leader of a late nineteenth-century rebellion in what is now Jharkhand (Singh 1966; Chandra 2016), to call for unity among disparate *adivasi*/tribal/indigenous groups as well as Dalits (ex-untouchable castes) and fisherfolk (*machchuāre*). This kind of unprecedented subaltern unity will “break this silence”, says the video clip, which is believed to be characteristic of everyday *adivasi*, indeed, subaltern life in India. Images from different parts of India conjure up a vision of subaltern unity. The call to arms, metaphorical or literal, follows: “Sound the battle drums [*nagārā*] from the fields and mines. There is no recourse but to fight, fellow countrymen [*deshvāsi*].”



## Multiple audiences, multiple meanings

In late 2008 I was introduced to GCN in Khunti district of central Jharkhand by those working in a non-governmental organization committed to rural development that I shall name “Utthaan” here. Utthaan’s officials were young middle-class urban professionals from small towns and cities across the eastern Indian states of Bihar, West Bengal, Assam and Odisha. Knowing my interest in *adivasi* involvement in social movements, especially the Indian Maoist movement, Sushil greeted me enthusiastically and hastened to show me GCN as I entered Utthaan’s Khunti office on a warm afternoon. He told me in Hindi: “You have to watch this video. It is all about indigenous peoples’ rights in India.” After watching the video, I asked Sushil if he felt uncomfortable with the references to “Development”. That was, after all, what he and his colleagues were engaged in. My question took him by surprise. He replied:

No, not at all, [my name]. We are here for capacity building. This will help *adivasis* become more self-sufficient in terms of food security and household finances, and then they can define their own future without anybody’s help. This “Development” that you see in this video is what the state and private companies do to *adivasis*. Ours is the true development. You know Amartya Sen has said the true meaning of development is freedom. We follow that.

His colleague Vinod had overheard us and joined the conversation. He had seen GCN too. I asked Vinod what he took to be the main takeaway point of the video. He responded in English: “It is a manifesto for *adivasi* liberation. This can only happen through a mix of rights-based activism and developing sustainable livelihoods options.” But if *adivasis* liberated themselves, what would organizations such as Utthaan do? Vinod smiled and responded: “Good question. We will be here as long as *adivasis* cannot stand on their own two feet. We are like coaches; they are the players. They must play and win. We can only coach and then watch from the sidelines.”

A month or so later, we drove in a jeep to a forest village named Longa on the western edge of Khunti district. For that evening, Utthaan had combined forces with Meghnath, the lyricist for GCN, to screen the video for *adivasi* villagers in Longa. There was a technical challenge, of course: Longa had no electricity. Utthaan’s solution was to take along in the jeep a portable generator alongside a CD player, a CD with the GCN video, a white screen and projector. On the way to Longa, Meghnath told us how much he loved coming to *adivasi* villages, but his poor heart condition meant he could not travel much from his home in the outskirts of Ranchi, the capital of the state of Jharkhand. I asked him about the making of GCN and what it sought to achieve. He said: “*Adivasis* are the original inhabitants of India, and still, you see how we are

treating them.” “We must learn from them”, he added, “they know more than any university can teach”. Did he, I asked, feel that GCN presented an overly romantic portrait of *adivasi* village life? After all, the village we were visiting, Longa, was hardly the image of harmony that GCN presented to its audiences. It was, like many other villages in rural Jharkhand, torn apart by intergenerational conflicts that lay at the heart of the Maoist movement in the region (Chandra 2013b). Meghnath listened carefully to my question, pondered it and paused before replying: “These days, young people are the same everywhere. They want money, mobiles, guns. They don’t respect their own traditions. That is a major cause of the problems *adivasis* are facing today.” But why did he not ask the filmmaker to include this internal challenge to the *adivasi* village community in GCN? “How could we put it? All our middle-class friends in Delhi and Bombay will say these communities are backward and the problem lies within them.”

In Longa that evening, villagers had assembled to watch the film. Usually, when film screening equipment arrived, it was a night of revelry in the village. GCN would last only five minutes, but then Meghnath would participate in a free-ranging discussion of the video. What most villagers looked forward to, however, was the screening of the Bollywood film *Dabangg*, starring the muscular youth icon Salman Khan.<sup>1</sup> Glasses of home-brewed rice beer (*hanriā*) and dancing would extend well into the wee hours of the morning. At the film screening, I sat next to a couple of friends of mine in the village: Johan and Barnabus.<sup>2</sup> Everyone watched GCN with their eyes glued to the screen. Then they requested a re-run of the video twice. Johan, who teaches at the village school, turned to me afterwards and muttered in the local Mundari language: “Maybe if we did less fighting [*larāi*] this village would have electricity. We have to go three kilometres to charge our mobile phones now.” Barnabus, who works as a village-level representative of one of Utthaan’s rival NGOs nearby, chimed in: “Whenever city people make these films, I feel proud to be an *adivasi*. But I also know the reality here. There is so much hardship. No one wants to farm. Everyone wants to go and work in big cities.” None of this, of course, implied that they endorsed the displacement and dispossession of *adivasis* by private corporations backed by the Indian state. Primitive accumulation was real enough as a phenomenon for them, but the solution for Johan and Barnabus lay in fighting for a share of the revenues from mining. “When they need land for building factories and mines”, explained Barnabus, “companies should be made to pay a lump sum amount plus a share in their future profits for a certain number of years. Even if we go and work in Delhi, the money will be in our bank accounts”. Johan added:

Whenever companies ask us for land, villages are divided on what to do. Can anyone get twelve months of food from their land today? Every household has at least one or

1 Interest in watching a Bollywood film here should not be taken to imply a lack of interest in GCN. It was, after all, watched with keen interest not once but twice by the audience in Longa. There is arguably space for both here, though they certainly do elicit different affective responses.

2 It would be a mistake to see the likes of Johan and Barnabus as “elite” in an unqualified sense. While they do hold college degrees, they were not the only graduates in the audience at Longa, and their families, in fact, counted among the land-poor locally. Education is certainly a resource in

contemporary rural India, but it ought to be seen alongside other resources that individuals and households possess or lack. It is important here to appreciate that the village headman in Longa actually lacked any substantial education or wealth but exercised certain inherited privileges associated with his office.

two members who migrate to big cities in search of work and that is what keeps our households running.

Were films such as GCN not helpful then, I asked? “No, they help in telling city people about how we live here”, replied Barnabus, “but it cannot help us. We know the truth of the whole thing”.

Four months later, I was back in Longa for another screening of the film. This was part of a Maoist night meeting, in which the local leadership would communicate their ideas to ordinary villagers after the film. Shailendra, as I shall call him, was a local Maoist party leader from south Bihar known to me from my fieldwork in Khunti district. I attended as his guest. Johan and Barnabus were again present at the screening, but we did little more than exchange quick glances that evening. After the film, Shailendra gave a long, passionate speech in Hindi. He exclaimed:

This video shows how the government is looting and killing [*loot-mār*] *adivasis* and seizing their lands for companies to make profits from ... During the British Raj, Birsa Munda, Sidhu-Kanu, Baba Tilka Manjhi and others laid down their lives for the sake of freedom. We must follow in their footsteps now ...

He proceeded later to discuss the naturally revolutionary character of *adivasis*:

Today, the whole world is learning how *adivasis* conserve forests and farm sustainably. We have come to learn from you. But we also want to teach you how to fight against the state [*sarkār*] and its brokers/pimps [*dalāls*]. Your fight is the fight of oppressed people all over India and the world. We are with you.

The audience agreed solemnly. They could, of course, do little but agree. The village headman (*mundā*), an ageing patriarch, met me after the Maoist meeting. Karia Munda said he supported the *adivasi* fight against the state and corporations, but he did not know if the Maoists were their best bet. “They say they will arm us. But what will happen when the CRPF [state paramilitaries] come to question and torture us? Will they save us then? Will the youth who join the Maoists come back to us?” These are genuine concerns harboured by *adivasi* elders in Longa and its neighbouring villages. Shailendra himself did not know the answers when I put the same questions to him. He told me: “These headmen have always sided with the state. Even during the Birsa rebellion [*ulgulān*]. The youth will always support us. They have no future without us, you see?” I asked Shailendra what he thought of the video. He said it was an excellent addition to their existing propaganda materials: short, hard-hitting, and with memorable lyrics and music. “It brings out the need for Maoism [*Maovād*] clearly for all to see.”

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3 These audiences and interests are, I suggest, best understood in terms of social interfaces between the *adivasi* village community and other lifeworlds that intersect with it. I resist the temptation here to distinguish between “elite” and “non-elite” because, theoretically as well as empirically, the quest for the authentic subaltern subject may ultimately prove to be a futile one. Tensions between younger and older villagers over what it means to be *adivasi* were, I found during my fieldwork, reproduced throughout the village community.

4 I am not suggesting that these virtual voices can be unproblematically treated as coeval with those voices that we encounter during fieldwork. But I am also not arguing for a sharp divide between political realities online and offline. To the extent that my argument contributes to a vast, growing body of scholarship on mediated

Across these multiple audiences<sup>3</sup> and strands of meaning, what stands out is how our distinctive interests shape our appreciation of GCN. For Sushil and Vinod at Utthaan, the video is about “true” development, in which *adivasis* can liberate themselves through a fight against poverty and deprivation. For Meghnath, it is about learning from the subaltern and supporting her fight for survival and dignity in a hostile modern world. For Johan and Barnabus, it is about raising awareness among urban middle-class viewers about the plight of *adivasis* in India today, though the real issues faced by *adivasis* are, in their view, an altogether different matter. For Shailendra and the Maoists, it is about raising revolutionary consciousness among *adivasis*. Arguably, my own reading of the film may be linked to my own positionality as a researcher who is not himself an *adivasi*. The *bricolage* of images in GCN thus mirrors the myriad audiences and interests that encounter it to produce disparate meanings of indigeneity and its discontents.

Equally important is an emerging set of contestations in the public sphere in rural Jharkhand over indigeneity, or more precisely, *adivasi*-ness. For the makers of GCN as for Meghnath, *adivasi*-ness is a given and needs to be salvaged by rural *adivasi* communities with the aid of sympathetic outsiders. For Utthaan and the Maoists, a modernist vision of progressive social change is quite compatible with assertions of *adivasi* identity. Yet the *adivasi* voices in this essay are surprisingly sceptical of how they are represented in the video. Whereas they see the wisdom in educating non-*adivasis* about *adivasi* lives, they attack frontally the basic premise of GCN; that is, the neo-liberal developmental regime is antithetical to the existence of the modern *adivasi* subject. Effectively, they say, the “primitive” emerges alongside processes of “primitive accumulation”, but an inclusive modernism is not beyond the realm of negotiable possibilities for *adivasis* in contemporary India.

These contestations become even more visible in virtual public spheres, especially on social media portals such as YouTube and Facebook.<sup>4</sup> On YouTube, where the earliest video of GCN was posted in March 2009, non-*adivasis* are most prominent in voicing their appreciation. Alok Kumar Mishra, a commenter on YouTube, wished to “dedicate [GCN] to all those who migrated to cities ... because for their survival, they have to fulfil the greedy needs of corporates and corrupts”. Prem Anand says,

What a State we have reached ... in the name of development we have become greedy [;] success is measured in money value and not in terms of making positive impact on people ... basic human rights and inclusive growth is lost ... PAIN PAIN every where.

Another commenter named Puru Ekta writes: “This song is a grim reminder of our shameful apathy while the tribals were being uprooted from their homes.

political environments in contemporary India, I urge readers to reflect on how different forms of media and society are enmeshed with each other as they consider the evidence offered below.

We pay for our sins in the form of Naxalism [Maoism] now.” A fellow traveler adds: “the video really shows the true side of the maoist struggle in india”. The poster, a Bengali man named Kaustav De, responds angrily to these comments that link *adivasi* struggles to the Maoist movement:

where did Maoists come into this? This is a plane [*sic*] and simple song about the exploitation of the *adivasis* and their way of living by the Indian state and big capital, and *adivasis* are protesting all around. It is only some people who find the Maoist way of protesting a thing to be hyped and mentioned. That is why millions of *adivasis* protesting non-violently are neglected or silently butchered, while violent resistance enjoys all the limelight and attention of the State, and the media.

Others such as “Shashwat DC” take a more explicitly nationalistic line:

150 years ago we Indians fought against the exploitative Company Raj (East India Company), I guess the time has come again to fight against the new “Company” raj of the high and mighty in the hinterlands of India ... Need a rallying cry like Vande Mataram!!!

Another writes “my national anthem this week”. A third laments, “I’m sad to know all the thing happen in my country, we have to come forward and appose these tings [*sic*].” Finally, there are those that express scepticism over the core message of GCN. Abhilash Nambiar notes, “Bhagavan maaji can hedge his bets if he copyrights this song. If his song inspires enough people to save the forests, he can live there. If not he can live off the royalty payments from this song.” Another sceptic, Ganapathi Bhat, writes:

However noble their idealism may be, even people in village want development. We can not live without electricity. Can we? from where we get it? No hydro power, No coal, No nuclear. What is the remedy? I am sympathetic to their feelings. Living in a village, I can understand their feelings much better. But don’t they also want education, health care and progress?

In sum, there are those who react in a positive manner to GCN spontaneously because it matches their own thoughts on the ills wrought by developmentalism, especially environmental degradation and the suppression of *adivasis*’ rights; there are those who hitch the *adivasi* cause to the national one, the former constituting a part of the latter’s wholeness; lastly, there are those who appreciate GCN in some ways but question the naivety of its political idealism. If this is the intended audience for GCN, it is clear enough that some awareness of *adivasis*’ circumstances is being generated. But insofar as YouTube commenters absorb GCN’s message into their own pre-existing ideological schemas, those who are likely to be sympathetic to GCN are

self-selecting to view the video and comment on it. Those who do not care continue not to, of course.

Besides the fundamental axis of sympathy–apathy among viewers of GCN, there is also the not-so-small matter of representing *adivasi* in contemporary India. In a discussion on Facebook related to GCN, Subuddhi, a Ho friend from Chaibasa in southern Jharkhand, posted an article by the anthropologist B. K. Roy Burman, who argued “it will perhaps be always better to avoid using the ... nomenclature ‘*Adivasi*’ in the tenors of serious academic discourse when dealing with the notion of indigenous groups in the Indian context”. A young *adivasi* man who goes by the name of “Roi Raj” on Facebook commented in response:

All indian groups are based on linguistic identity no matter how minor that group is in no of population – each language should be honored in referencing n identifying a race – Hi I am a Munda sounds much better and respectful than hi i am a tribal *adivasi* i live in the wilderness with no clothes i have no internet ...

When asked about his views, Subuddhi explained himself:

[my name] well as i know there is no such term Adiwasi or Tribe in our dictionary, these terms are given by some outsiders of our society and we are feeling proud without knowing whats its real meaning.

Ya i am agree what Roi Raj is saying we should call ourselves as I am a Ho – I am a Munda.

... They have termed us as tribes. We have accepted this without questioning and without shame. The term tribal or tribe is humiliating and insulting. We are not challenging social theories evolved by others. This is nothing but social construction. It seems to be sometimes we so called educated people are merely literate. It is a clear manifestation of mental slavery on our part. How long will it take for us. Or i must assume that we do not want to come out from this psychological slavery.

Note that these challenges to the notion of “tribe” and its cognates (*adivasi*, *janjati*, indigenous, etc.) come from aspirational *adivasi* youth. To dismiss them as somehow exceptional would not only neglect a longer historical relationship between *adivasi* communities and a range of print and electronic media (Schleiter 2014; Choksi, forthcoming), but also reinforce the colonial and postcolonial logics of primitivism in which they are entrapped. Just as in offline exchanges discussed earlier, online interactions, too, generate a distinctive critique of the “savage slot” (Trouillot 2003). The politics of “primitivism” is thus called into question in both real and virtual fora, albeit in different ways, even as its usefulness in producing tropes that popularize the *adivasi* cause may be grudgingly acknowledged. Youthful critiques of

primitivism and, indeed, of the notion of indigeneity itself are a mirror image of non-*adivasi* representations of *adivasis* such as GCN, and they destabilize tropes of backwardness and savagery associated with the “primitive” even as they popularize a new imagery of an “eco-savage” (Shah 2010, 107; cf. Whelan 1999) for our times. These competing articulations of indigeneity, paradoxically, nourish the figure of the “primitive” under conditions of primitive accumulation in contemporary India. The modern *adivasi* subject thus continues to be regarded as an oxymoron in activist and popular discourses.

## Conclusion

This essay has attempted an analysis of one particular instance of mediatized indigeneity activism in contemporary South Asia. GCN, as I have shown, is a complex *bricolage* of words, images and music that seeks to claim the “indigenous slot” (Karlsson 2003) for those who were cast previously in the “savage slot” (Trouillot 2003) as primitives and who now face the full onslaught of primitive accumulation in India. But the audiences that view GCN are an equally complex *bricolage* of interests, ideologies and agendas. The mere fact that the bulk of India’s mining resources are located in the scheduled areas does not necessarily imply that all *adivasis* are equally affected by extractive industries or land acquisition bids. Munda *adivasis* in Khunti do not identify with the politics of GCN in any straightforward way. They appreciate the good intentions of their urban middle-class patrons but do not, in fact, claim the indigenous or savage slots for themselves.

No one denies that mediatized activism in the form of music videos such as GCN spreads awareness of the problems faced by *adivasis* in India today. Such activism certainly transcends the militant particularisms of specific local circumstances, but it is also accurate to say that it homogenizes disparate *adivasi* experiences into a neat, coherent “activist simplification” (Chandra 2013c). At the heart of this activist simplification is the figure of the “primitive” fighting against primitive accumulation, a struggle that is both ours as the audience and not ours. As different audiences offline and online interpret GCN, the activist simplification refracts once more according to our different interests as viewers. Indians relate to the “primitive” in different ways, and the threat to this bulwark of subcontinental modernity (Ghosh 2006) brings out their deepest fears and anxieties over their own future as a nation, civilization, and indeed, humanity at large. It is useful to remember, however, that these fears and anxieties are not the same as those of *adivasis* in Khunti or Kashipur. Despite the “primitive” or “indigenous” being a key symbol of ineradicable difference in our postmodern times, it is also an object of our neo-romantic longing for cultural authenticity that arguably never existed at all. The political-economic and sociocultural logics that make and remake “primitive”

subjects in modern India cannot be counterposed to the logics of primitive accumulation because they, in fact, coincide.

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