

Introduction

Nature, Culture, and Knowledge in the Study of Social Movements in Rural India

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In the summer of 2010, the Annual General Meeting of mining conglomerate Vedanta Resources found itself rudely interrupted by Na'vi protestors in Westminster, London. Vedanta, which sought to mine bauxite in the Niyamgiri hills, came under severe attack for proposing to displace and dispossess the Dongria Kondh tribal populations living in these forested hills in the eastern Indian state of Odisha. Much like the Na'vi in James Cameron's celebrated film *Avatar*, the Dongria Kondhs became a symbol of popular resistance against the avarice of multinational corporations and their growing alliances with national governments. 'We are', they declared in London, 'the real Na'vi.' Here, as in other movements in the Narmada valley and the forests of central India, the gulf between the local and the global, the cultural and the material, and the signifier and the signified, seems completely obliterated, leaving us with a fleeting moment of global solidarity.

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And yet we must exercise caution, because at the same time, these differences are alive and well, taking on newly mediated forms. The social movements on the ground in the nearby POSCO case were, by many accounts, far more strongly organized. Yet the people in the area did not conform to dominant Western notions of indigeneity, and this meant that POSCO, compared to the Niyamgiri hills case, received far less attention in the national and international press, and seemingly, following from that, less attention from international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and activists. This relative lack of attention points to the tensions within and between social movements in rural India today, and these tensions disrupt the ways in which activists and scholars aspire to and sometimes even presume seamless solidarities at work globally.

In *Staking Claims*, we attempt to understand these disparate movements against capital and the state in contemporary rural India in three complementary ways. First, in what ways do they simultaneously make material and cultural claims of dispossession in particular rural contexts? Second, how do new forms of sociocultural organization shape contemporary claim-making practices as well as political subjectivities in rural India? Third, how might we, as researchers, situate ourselves with respect to these movements, their organizations, activists, and participants?

What makes this volume distinctive is its emphasis on *nature*, *culture*, and *knowledge* as three interlinked modes of political action that share complex relationships with each other, that is, they may complement each other at times and yet contradict or even cancel out one another at other times. This is, therefore, not a volume that seeks, as in the case of subaltern studies and similar projects, to recover subaltern voices from the past. This is also not a volume in which our concern with contestation over natural resources makes us prioritize, following theorists of ‘deep ecology’, Nature over Culture. Lastly, this is not a volume in which scholars make themselves invisible, in the manner of ‘traditional intellectuals’ in the Gramscian sense, to give the impression that our theoretical commitments and empirical arguments are somehow free from the everyday politics and macro-structural contexts of these social movements. Instead, we propose to study Nature, Culture, and Knowledge together via a single transdisciplinary framework,

encompassing political economy, cultural politics, social ecology, and the sociology of knowledge.

Towards a New Materialist Ontology of Social Movements

Social movements, according to one of its leading theorists, are ‘modular forms’ of collective action that make a particular set of claims on the modern state through certain stable ‘repertoires of contention’ (Tarrow 1998: 29–42). Such collective action that mediates between state and society is less-than-revolutionary, even revisionist, insofar as it does not threaten the state upon which claims are made. American post-war social science attempted to explain the ubiquitous nature of social movements in the modern world in four ways. The first explanation focused on popular grievances as the key driver of collective action (Gurr 1971; Smelser 1962); the second emphasized the availability and mobilization of resources, whether human, financial, or intellectual, in transforming popular grievances into meaningful collective action (McCarthy and Zald 1977); the third reposed its faith in the intellectual frames and cultural symbols that drew ordinary men and women together in popular forms of claim-making vis-à-vis the state (Snow and Benford 1988; Snow *et al.* 1986); and finally, a fourth explanation focused on opportunities or openings in political structures that became available to claim-making groups at particular historical junctures (McAdam 1982; Tilly 1978). Subsequent research on social movements moved away from a focus on why collective action emerged to reveal ‘cycles of contention’ or dynamic potentialities for political transformation that were endogenous to the movements themselves (Beissinger 2002; McAdam 1995; Tarrow 1989). Similarly, cutting-edge research on ‘rightful resistance’ (O’Brien 1996; O’Brien and Li 2006), ‘moral protest’ (Jasper 1997), and ‘passionate politics’ (Goodwin and Jasper 2003; Goodwin *et al.* 2001) have shifted the study of contentious politics away from causes and conditions to the creative logics of collective action and their varied forms of engagement with political authorities, of which the state is the principal but by no means the only example.

From the perspective of the Global South, especially South Asia, social movement studies in the United States seems much too narrow in its focus on urban politics, primarily in liberal-democratic societies

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in the North Atlantic world. Scholars working on social movements in South Asia have tended, by contrast, to study contentious politics in the countryside, where liberalism and democracy typically part ways. Marxists zoomed in on agrarian class struggle in the countryside without sufficient attention to their relationship with rural state structures (Desai 1979, 1986; Dhangare 1983). Others avoided an exclusive commitment to dialectical materialism to set up elaborate typologies that distinguished between movements by peasants, tribals (Adivasis), ex-untouchable (Dalits) and other subordinate castes, women, and religious minorities (Omvedt 1993; Oommen 2010a, 2010b; Rao 2000; Ray and Katzenstein 2005; Shah 2004) or were enthralled by the enigmas of peasant religion in colonial and post-colonial times (Amin 1995; Fuchs 1965; Guha 1983; Shah 2014; Singh 1966). None of these scholars, it must be noted, committed themselves to studying simply grievances or resource mobilization or framing of political opportunities. They were different, in this sense, from their American counterparts in sociology and political science departments. Such a limited focus would have been unhelpful to those studying social movements in rural India because it would have actively ruled out the possibility of developing synthetic models to understand claim-making by diverse groups. It is this quest for synthesis in the study of social movements (see Tarrow 1998) that marks our own point of departure in this volume on contentious politics in rural India today.

By synthesis, we mean at least three overlapping kinds of bringing together of disparate ideas, concepts, and theories. First, as stated before, we seek to bring together Nature, Culture, and Knowledge in a single transdisciplinary framework to study social movements in rural India today. Second, we intend to bridge the gap between Marxist and non-Marxist, particularly post-structuralist, understandings of contention in ways that can facilitate a more productive dialogue in future between oft-opposed scholarly camps. Third, we share with the leading social movement theorists in the United States, most notably Sidney Tarrow, Charles Tilly, Douglas McAdam, and Donatella della Porta, the need for combining the study of why and how social movements emerge in particular contexts with attention to the dynamics of contention as they transform from within and without in the course of interactions with both state and society. Social movements,

in this sense, as much as those who study them, are engaged in a politics of mediation between disparate actors, ideas, practices, and institutions. This politics of mediation takes place within distinctive moral and political economies that give both meaning and context to what we do as scholars and practitioners.

Let us consider, firstly, the relationship between nature, culture, and knowledge in social movements. To bring these three seemingly distinct objects together, we propose a materialist ontology of social movements. This ontology takes as its starting point the dictum of the Greek philosopher Parmenides, later made famous by Lucretius in *De Rerum Natura: nihil fit ex nihilo* or ‘nothing from nothing ever yet was born’. In other words, everything has material causes or origins, and nothing material can be reduced to something insubstantial. Now, materials combine and recycle, taking on new forms, through multiple causal pathways. Thought and action are, on this ontological perspective, both immanent in the complexity of the material world. This is the kernel of an open-ended materialist ontology, which following Marx’s doctoral writings on Epicurus and Democritus (see Foster 2000), ought to be seen as dynamic and non-deterministic. Dynamism ensures that change or flux, not stasis, lies at the heart of our materialism, and the non-deterministic orientation of our proposed ontology implies that material causes may be necessary but not sufficient in explaining our object of study, namely, social movements. These movements, like all else around us, have multiple causes and are dynamic in nature within a complex, ever-changing material world.

This open-ended, non-deterministic, and dynamic materialist ontology may sound overly abstract and arcane, but its implications are, in fact, surprisingly straightforward. It helps us understand why nature and culture, far from being material and immaterial, constitute each other dialectically. That dialectic between Nature and Culture, of course, is what Marx had in mind when he posited in *The German Ideology* a dialectical relationship between the means of production and the social relations of production (Burkett 2006). Relations between things correspond, accordingly, with relations between human beings. As these relations are to be conceptualized in dynamic rather than static terms, we may speak of enmeshed webs of causation, in which multiple causes are linked reciprocally to

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each other rather than in a one-sided, deterministic manner. These dynamic webs of reciprocal causes undergird every aspect of our existence, and social movements are certainly no exception. There is little scope here for artificially separating the all-too-material conflicts over natural resources from sociocultural categories such as caste and tribe that are central to those conflicts.

The challenge for scholars of social movements is, undoubtedly, to disentangle and examine these causal webs in particular nature–culture matrices. This is where the ontological underpinnings of ethnography, as a way of seeing and knowing, matter. Vivid, fine-grained ethnographic accounts are, after all, geared principally towards understanding the human world in all its complexity in an open-ended, non-deterministic way (Hobart 1996). Through the practice of ethnography, as the contributions to this volume show, the ontological bases for our knowledge of social movements can be tethered to the kind of materialistic ontology of nature and culture outlined above. However, it is also important to point out that our scholarly knowledge of social movements stands in some relationship to the knowledge of actors involved in those movements. In other words, to the extent that we, as scholars, are part of the social world that yokes us to our research subjects, our pretence of objectivity must be called into question. Ethnography, as a way of understanding the world, sits uneasily with a positivist ontology in which the researcher simply collects and analyses data about the objects of her research. Reflexivity and empathy are intrinsic to the way ethnographers engage with their research subjects and field-sites. As a consequence, our knowledge about social movements in contemporary rural India or elsewhere cannot be independent, ontologically speaking, from the knowledge of actors in these social movements within the nature–culture matrices in which they are embedded. These different forms of knowledge, as they emerge in different social locations, are inextricably intertwined, albeit the interests at work in producing each kind of knowledge may undoubtedly differ. It must also be stated here that these different forms of knowledge are not typically treated on par with each other, that is, they are ordered hierarchically with scholarly knowledge of movements taking precedence over the knowledge of the movements' participants. Such a hierarchy of knowledge, it

must be added, places the habitus that produces academic scholarship in a definite power relation with the habitus of actors engaged in contentious politics. This disconcerting yet inescapable reality mocks the progressive credentials of critical social science today even as radical calls for a ‘perspectival anthropology’ and ‘controlled equivocation’ promise to relativize all forms of knowledge and regard them alongside each other on the same plane (Viveiros de Castro 2004). As this volume, especially its final section, shows, our ethnographic practices can go quite far in response to these radical calls without going all the way. Nonetheless, ours is far from the last word on the subject, as our open-ended materialist ontology pushes us to clarify.

In bringing together nature, culture, and knowledge in a new materialist ontological framework to study social movements, we find it necessary to explain, furthermore, how this framework relates to existing Marxist and non-Marxist, especially post-structuralist and postcolonial, theories of contentious politics. In recent years, Marxists have been drawn into increasingly polemical contests with their peers who appear to favour post-structuralist and postcolonial approaches. Vivek Chibber (2013) and Vasant Kaiwar (2014) have, for instance, criticized postcolonial studies for neglecting the material dimensions of everyday life and politics in the Global South. Both Chibber and Kaiwar argue that the culturalist approach apparently preferred by postcolonial theorists ends up reproducing orientalist dichotomies between the modern West and its exotic Others. Worse still, they argue that postcolonial theorists’ deep reliance on post-structuralist thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida leads them to study power and culture in a disturbingly conservative manner by avoiding questions of political economy altogether. In response, postcolonial theorists such as Partha Chatterjee (2013) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2014) have accused the likes of Chibber of re-asserting Western Marxism blindly without critically inspecting the Eurocentric assumptions of its universal concepts and theories. From our perspective, the hostile polemics and caricatures of rival arguments that accompany these recent debates are largely unhelpful. In terms of our materialist ontology of social movements, recent debates between Marxists and non-Marxists merely attempt to reinforce a false dichotomy between nature and culture.

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From our vantage point, Marxist, postcolonial, and post-structuralist theorists have much to learn from each other's modes of analysis, especially as far as the study of social movements is concerned. In this volume, we put a Marxian sociology of social movements (Barker *et al.* 2013) into dialogue with postcolonial and post-structuralist interpretations of social nature in the Global South (DeLoughrey and Handley 2011; Huggan and Tiffin 2010; Teverson and Upstone 2011). The study of complex, even hegemonic, power relations is not only compatible with but actively warrants a close attention to the material bases of power. Likewise, social movements and other forms of contentious politics challenge hegemony not simply in the realm of ideas or culture but in the material world that ordinary men and women inhabit. The circulation of power, discourse, and materials are enmeshed in ways that sustain not only intersubjectivity in social movements but also 'interobjectivity' (Morton 2013). This is why it is possible for scholars such as Timothy Mitchell (1990, 2012) to study resistance in terms of 'everyday metaphors of power' in a Foucauldian vein before moving on to examine the linkages between the oil-based world economy today and divergent political regimes that produce and consume oil. Similarly, the 'articulation' of identities in everyday politics can hardly be severed from the material contexts that give rise to them (Clarke 2015; Slack 1996). Consider, for instance, how the articulation of Adivasi or Dalit identities in social movements in rural India is tied inextricably with the material conditions of domination and subordination, which these movements seek to undo (Singh 2014). Class analysis can be central to an understanding of such political articulation without losing sight of the sociocultural contexts of class formation (Herring 2013; Herring and Agarwala 2006). Accordingly, we urge readers to think beyond existing binaries in the scholarly literature, which caricatures Marxist analysis as inherently Western or Eurocentric and non-Marxist studies as hopelessly culturalist or orientalist. The materialist ontology we outline in this volume will, we hope, pave the way for a more fruitful, productive dialogue, if not synthesis, between these oft-opposed intellectual camps.

Lastly, let us return to where we started, namely, social movement studies focused on the North Atlantic world. We share with the leading theorists of social movements in Europe and North America

an interest in developing synthetic models that combine a nuanced appreciation of how and why movements emerge with an in-depth understanding of the dynamics of contentious politics as movements transform, splinter, coalesce, or re-orient themselves in response to internal and external challenges. Where we differ, apart from our geographical focus, is our materialist ontology that recognizes that nature, culture, and knowledge crisscross and interpenetrate each other in social movements. There are at least three key implications of such a recognition for the study of social movements in rural India and beyond. First, we do not believe that the social movements we study can be understood without engaging deeply with the nature–culture matrices that give rise to them. As such, it makes little sense to us to simply study conflicts over nature without appreciating the cultural politics of articulation in the life of a social movement. Likewise, we find it unhelpful to focus exclusively on cultural repertoires of contention without a clear grasp of the material stakes for the actors involved in social movements. Second, social movements and the transformations they undergo over time, we argue, ought to be understood in terms of a dynamic politics of mediation between actors, ideas, practices, and institutions. We simply cannot assume we know about the aims and concerns of, say, the Narmada anti-dam movement or the Maoist movement in India by reading their official public pronouncements and stated programmatic agendas. Aims and agendas as well as the modalities of mediation change over time in response to both internal and external pressures. To what extent a movement’s leaders, factions, and followers pull in divergent directions at different historical moments, whether due to the role of the state or immanent cycles of contention, is always an empirical question. Third, we do not pretend that academic scholarship on social movements, encased in abstract formalisms and disciplinary jargon, is wholly separable from the knowledge generated by the movements themselves. The dividing line between scholarship and activism is fuzzy for a number of contributors in this volume because they are so deeply immersed in the politics of mediation that is central to the workings of the movements they study. In other words, contentious politics as much as the scholarship on it is situated within distinctive moral and political economies of mediation, which breathe meaning into the work we do as movement activists and scholars. In saying

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so, we do not advocate a particular relationship between scholarship and activism, but we do argue for a politically engaged and reflexive understanding of movements, whether on the part of those who participate in these movements, those who study them, or those who find themselves in both camps. In sum, the new materialist ontology of social movements we propose in this volume advocates a holistic study of contentious politics that brings together nature, culture, and knowledge in ways that, we hope, can unsettle settled ideas on movements and their dynamics.

An Outline of the Volume

This volume is divided into three sections on nature, culture, and knowledge, each of which merits examination on its own terms as well as in relation to the other two sections. Readers will find a certain intertextuality at work in terms of the works cited and the concepts and theories that our contributors find helpful in framing their empirical analyses. At the same time, there is no procrustean bed into which each chapter is made to fit, whether the empirical material available to the author warrant it or not. The materialist ontology of social movements that we laid out in the previous section ought to be seen, therefore, as a flexible framework that accommodates a range of theoretical and methodological orientations rather than compels contributors to reproduce a sterile party line mechanistically.

Nature

By 'nature', we do not just refer simply to the materialities of rural life in India today, but also the social relations that undergird contemporary capitalism in the countryside. Following Noel Castree and Bruce Braun (2001), we are speaking, therefore, of 'social nature'. In doing so, we move away from a narrow economic or environmental understanding of rural 'resources' towards a broader conceptualization of human geography, taking in the social landscape in which the myriad contestations over the rural means of production are situated, shaped by wider processes of accumulation. In *Staking Claims*, the contributors in this section of the book focus on three rural sites. Alf Gunvald Nilsen offers a detailed account of Bhil Adivasi struggles

in the rugged, forested terrain of western Madhya Pradesh. Bengt Karlsson critiques theories of 'subaltern resistance' following his encounter with those being displaced to erect the Mapithel dam in Manipur on India's northeastern frontier. Matthew Shutzer carefully analyses how Kondhs in western Odisha, 'empowered' and spurred on by the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act (FRA) (2006), are making new kinds of territorial claims over *jal*, *jangal*, *zameen* (that is, water, forests, land).

Let us delve into these three contributions and their understanding of 'social nature' in their respective field-sites. Alf Nilsen's chapter discusses the 'everyday tyranny' suffered by Bhil Adivasis in central India at the hands of autocratic and extortionary forest officials. The origins of everyday tyranny in the Bhil heartland, Nilsen shows, are ultimately traceable to colonial policies that produced a distinctive 'state space' after dismantling older relationships, those binding Bhil communities to principalities in the region. It is against this backdrop that Nilsen offers a nuanced account of the Adivasi Mukti Sangathan (AMS), a movement started in the early 1990s by two ex-communist middle-class activists among the Bhils of Khargone district, and explains how the AMS 'effectively broke the spell of everyday tyranny in the Adivasi communities in the district'. In other words, the AMS's militant activism compelled state officials to pay attention to Bhil claims on local lands and forests, creating a 'vernacular rights culture' that sought to undo the long-term effects of colonial state-making. Contestations over 'social nature' and cultural geography thus lay at the heart of the AMS's success. These contestations, as Nilsen shows, need to be understood in relation to long-term processes of modern state-making, including the dynamics of accumulation implied by them, in colonial and postcolonial times. To understand the present-day workings of 'agency' within activist-led movements, therefore, we need to take a more nuanced and complex approach to the power relationships and social practices in which such agency is embedded.

Bengt Karlsson's contribution to this volume engages a similar set of issues in the context of a different dam project by inverting and subverting the notion of agency. His is a study of villagers about to be displaced and stripped of their traditional livelihoods by the Mapithel dam in Manipur. Karlsson has, much like Nilsen and

others in this volume, focused in the past on subaltern resistance to the state, particularly in the garb of indigenous rights activism. However, he cautions here against prioritizing ‘resistance’ against state projects such as big hydroelectric dams over what he describes as ‘the more low-key intention of working the system to the minimum disadvantage with the ultimate aim of individual “survival and persistence”’. Karlsson thus asks us to consider the ways in which capitalist forms of social domination work in India’s Northeast and elsewhere, and how we should avoid the neo-liberal tendency to automatically ascribe a certain kind of ‘agency’ to those who bear the brunt of social domination. Perhaps agency must be broadened or modified to take in endurance, waiting, and persistence in carrying on with daily life in the face of adversity. That big dams *will* be built is a matter of fact for those who are displaced and dispossessed, for whom ‘waiting’, ‘endurance’, and ‘survival’ are more pertinent than what we would commonly understand as ‘agentic’ acts of everyday resistance. In sum, in these contests over social nature, David does not slay Goliath, and the capitalist transformation of the countryside continues apace in our neo-liberal times. Without returning to any naïve notion of social structure, one has to acknowledge that people face limits in their lived lives that they cannot necessarily overcome, and that this calls us to diversify our understanding of agency, and to situate it far more concretely in people’s lived experience, rather than making the possibility of transformative or resistive agency a necessary starting point for analysis.

Matthew Shutzer’s contribution explores the complexities of how ‘agency’ takes shape in another setting, one that brings to the fore its messy implication with material complexity. Shutzer takes a Foucauldian approach to postcolonial subject-making, as produced by the FRA (2006), among the Kondhs in highland Odisha today. Indigenous rights activism in this context is less a claim to cultural authenticity, as is often assumed by sympathetic scholars and journalists, than a by-product of dialectics between state-making tools such as the FRA and Adivasi subject-making. Closely related to these dialectics between the modern state and its Adivasi subjects are the forested territories that are often taken to be the dwelling places of these subjects since time immemorial, but which are, in fact, the objects of re-mapping from below using the language and

logics of the FRA. In this post-structuralist reading of forest dwellers' responses to the FRA, resistance is a function of power relations that bind the modern state to its 'primitive' subjects. Accordingly, social nature is mapped and re-mapped continually over time, following the intertwined logics of state-making and subject-making, in a way that keeps on redefining the social landscape, and what it means to act within it.

To sum up, this section on 'nature', therefore, offers three case studies to show how the materiality of rural life in contemporary India leads to different kinds of contestations over social nature, each with its own theoretical salience and distinctive set of political implications. All of them shed light on the nature and kinds of agency that are enmeshed in everyday material practices in a social landscape.

Culture

By 'culture', we do not mean the American anthropological notion from Franz Boas to Clifford Geertz that emphasizes non-biological yet inherited traits shared by a group of individuals. Following Adam Kuper's (2000) critique of this 'culture' concept, we focus on structural contradictions and subjectivities within social movements. Not only do we thus avoid any putative opposition between the 'material' and the 'cultural', but we also circumvent the easy binaries that separate 'civil' and 'political' society in contemporary India (Chatterjee 2004). Yet the three chapters in this section, drawing on extensive rural fieldwork in Bihar, Kerala, and West Bengal, yield a nuanced, fine-grained understanding of the social bases of movements and the social contradictions that they embody.

Nicolas Jaoul's chapter discusses how the All India Agricultural Labour Association (AIALA) or the Khet Mazdoor Sabha (KHEMAS), an offshoot of the Maoist party (Communist Party of India [Marxist-Leninist] [Liberation]—CPI-ML [Liberation]) in rural Bihar, negotiated 'class subjectivity' via the veneration of popular cultural icons of peasants. Why did a Maoist group, then led by upper- and middle-caste leaders, abandon Leninist notions of intellectual authority ('vanguardism') and acquiesce towards rural cultural idioms? The answer, Jaoul suggests, lies in the 'concessions' these leaders grudgingly made to their peasant cadres from historically

subordinated Dalit castes. These concessions, which typically took the form of iconization and the erection of local monuments across villages, point to two contradictory tendencies in rural Bihar since the late 1990s: on the one hand, peaceful democratic assertion despite many odds by those at the bottom of rural hierarchies within organizations purportedly advancing their interests, and on the other hand, the formation of ‘class subjectivity’ in the sociocultural milieu of rural Bihar in ways not necessarily intended by party leaders. There is nothing inherently emancipatory at work here. The formation of class subjectivity is intertwined with social memory, represented symbolically and materially through Dalit memorials. What we find here are the social contradictions within the Maoist movement in Bihar, which push us towards a more complex assessment of these negotiations between radical party leaders seeking popular legitimacy and the rural masses embedded in a vibrant popular culture. These negotiations occur within previously established normative terrains of ethical practice, imbued with forms of social memory, and serve to articulate desired collective futures.

Luisa Steur takes a slightly different approach to rural movements, whilst still exploring the social contradictions inherent in them. Rather than looking at the tensions between ‘vanguardist’ leadership and its re-articulation by those who are led, she looks at how shifting socio-economic forces can generate complex and often contradictory social responses in terms of how forms of identification emerge. As Steur shows, the pursuit of neo-liberal economic policies by the communist government in the state of Kerala created an increasingly precarious economic situation for marginal Paniya agricultural workers, who began turning to discourses of ‘indigenism’ to articulate what are essentially class differences from dominant caste groups. These assertions of indigenous belonging, far from being the products of instrumental cost-benefit calculations or assertions of cultural authenticity, take the form of claims over land in villages from which Paniyas have been forced to migrate seasonally over the past two decades. Without the efforts of their upwardly mobile leaders of the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha (AGMS), the Paniyas would have been pushed entirely off the land by upper-caste affiliates of the ruling communist party so that they would be rendered what Jan Breman (1994) has called ‘wage hunter-gatherers’. Nonetheless,

the turn to ‘indigenism’ in Kerala goes to illustrate the severing of a class-for-itself from a class-in-itself in the face of the complexity and pace of constant socio-economic reconfiguration that we see in neo-liberal times. The partial, fragmentary nature of the politics of ‘indigenism’ in neo-liberal Kerala shows how terrains of struggle can be constituted through the mobilization of identities in the face of socio-economic pressures, but the generation of such new terrains must contend with the way that new regimes of accumulation, and thus new challenges to identity-related claims, keep emerging.

Kenneth Bo Nielsen’s study illustrates the social tensions and contradictory subjectivities between the middle-caste cultivators or *chasi* and the landless labourers or *khet majur* who constituted the Singur movement against land acquisition in West Bengal. The long-standing communist government of West Bengal, eager to revive industrial capital in the state, had invited the Tatas to set up a small-car factory in the fertile agricultural tracts of Singur. Protests followed against the state’s highhanded land acquisition attempt, supported avidly by the leading opposition party, the Trinamool Congress (TMC). The protestors were, however, far from homogenous. As Nielsen shows, there were significant caste and class cleavages within the movement, and the protests led by the *chasi* were not seen in an altogether positive light by the *khet majur* who stood to gain little from the movement. In fact, political organizations of the *khet majur* were routinely denounced as ‘Naxalite’ (or Maoist) by the leaders of the Singur movement. The social contradictions here are starker than in Jaoul’s study of rural Bihar, and it is difficult to paper over them, nor to presume such contradictions add up to an emancipatory trend. Rather one must ask questions that unpack the dynamics for the social groups in question, and which reveal the various futures that they desire and are struggling for.

To put it another way, emancipation must be unpacked and reassembled, in order to be properly understood. To retrace our steps somewhat, one can say that difference counts, but it is also not a desirable end-point for analysis, for one must then start to look at how things fit together again in practice, and how forms of sameness or solidarity are thus constituted, and how rationalities are formed (Nilsen and Cox 2013). In sum, when looking at Nielsen’s case, it seems that the immanent contradictions that characterized

the party-state in communist West Bengal, ironically, pervaded the Singur movement itself. This state of affairs gave rise to surprising trajectories for the movement, which departed sharply from the dominant scripts of popular emancipation with which the movement had become implicated.

Knowledge

If rural social movements in contemporary India are not necessarily as emancipatory as many academics and activists would like us to believe, then what does it tell us about the politics of knowledge-formation around these movements? To put it another way, how are new terrains formed within these shifting social landscapes, and how are the elements of them critically examined? To inquire into the politics of knowledge as part of our volume on rural social movements in India is not a particularly 'post-modern' endeavour. After all, the traditional image of the research scholar as a producer of objective truths has now been under sustained attack during most of the last three decades, and from several directions at once. Moreover, a rich strain of Marxist scholarship, following Antonio Gramsci, has revived the notion of the 'traditional intellectual' as mediators between civil and political society. Traditional intellectuals, Gramsci argued, were able to preserve the myth of intellectual autonomy and unbiasedness, whereas, in fact, they were not shy of going about everyday life as an ordinary member of bourgeois society in dialogue with the political and business elites of the day (see Selenu 2013 for an excellent overview of this point). Accordingly, in our third and final section, we reflect critically on the politics and ethics of scholarship on social movements in rural India today, especially the productive tensions that exist between researchers and activists and how they shape both research and activism. This final section on *knowledge* features two dialogues on indigenous rights activism and forest rights legislation in contemporary India. Each dialogue puts a scholar of these rural social movements into conversation with an activist embedded in these movements. This, we believe, is a novel intellectual exercise, from which there is much for both scholars and activists to learn. Not only does this exercise shed light on the precise differences in the

terrain in which scholars and activists operate, but also how such terrain is constituted politically and intellectually.

The first dialogue, on indigenous rights activism in India, focuses on the Dongria Kondhs of Niyamgiri battling the multinational mining corporation Vedanta via a distinctive cultural politics rooted in their 'tribal' identities. For Felix Padel, Dongria struggles against Vedanta's bauxite mining plans provide a real-life instantiation of the fictional Na'vi in James Cameron's Hollywood film *Avatar*, and hence, it is not at all far-fetched to utilize the popular figure of the Na'vi in the anti-mining movement. Padel thus defends Survival International, the NGO that led this campaign outside Vedanta's headquarters in London, and their controversial slogan 'Save the Real Avatar Tribe', though he is aware of the tensions between grassroots organizations in Niyamgiri and NGOs such as Survival International, Action Aid, and Amnesty International. The campaign succeeded in getting the Church of England, a stakeholder in Vedanta's plans in Niyamgiri, to pull out and Congress leaders such as Jairam Ramesh and Rahul Gandhi to support the Dongrias. However, Padel is honest to admit that such transnational activism does have its blindspots as it picks and chooses, say, Niyamgiri over the anti-POSCO protests in Odisha or the movement against uranium mining in Jadugoda in neighbouring Jharkhand.

Here, Padel charts out how international NGO-driven activism grapples with questions of indigeneity, particularly how they attempt to constitute the 'indigenous' as a global subject. His contribution draws attention to how these efforts are implicated with the ongoing attempt to constitute a new terrain of activism. Whereas activist-academics such as Padel as well as groups such as Survival International may exercise a measure of social power as they project their voices internationally, relative to those they are representing and fighting for, they also face their own challenges in contending with corporations and governments that have even greater power and resources than they do. This pushes them to produce forms of 'strategic essentialism' (Spivak 1988) as they attempt to constitute and operate within complex terrains of international struggle.

Of course, it is not always clear where the 'authentic' struggle is to be located or whether the strategizing, underlying such essentialisms, is necessarily fruitful (Sylvain 2014). This is why the various realms

of power-laden knowledge along with their effects within movements as well as the varied terrains and scales of social movements need to be interrogated carefully before we arrive at simplistic either-or alternatives (Escobar 2008).

Madhuri Karak's study takes us on a provocative intellectual history of the Adivasi or 'indigene' from colonial and nationalist representations in India through the efforts of the Subaltern Studies collective of historians and their admirers in Latin America to contemporary activism in Latin America and Asia. For Karak, strategic essentialism is part and parcel of indigenous rights activism, though activists and academics in Latin America now readily acknowledge the limitations of such activism in representing the interests of *all* members of a tribe, or indeed, the limits of indigeneity as the basis for claim-making. A practical solution, as Latin Americanists have found, is to let a hundred flowers bloom with the same set of people making claims on state and non-state actors using the languages of indigeneity, class, gender, and so on. Sometimes, this may lead to competing claims that need to be sorted on a case-by-case basis, but this does not disqualify the languages and tropes of indigeneity per se.

In the context of contemporary rural India, Karak argues, there is much to be learned in moving beyond old debates between activists speaking for 'tribes' and academics criticizing activist representations as inauthentic or disingenuous (Rycroft and Dasgupta 2011). Academic research may certainly produce inconvenient truths for indigenous rights defenders (see, for example, Chandra 2013; Shah 2010), but such situations can also motivate activists to work more closely with those they claim to represent in national and international fora. Even then, tensions between scholarly and activist knowledges and terrains remain, and they cannot be simply wished away. As Karak explains,

[g]lobal indigenism is also tied to expectations of a pristine otherness embodied in distinctive environmental management practices, a fact made explicit through Adivasi activist repertoires within India and abroad. Solidarity networks forged by tribal subalterns, elites, and intellectuals pursue alliances and objectives that do not necessarily coincide.

We need to pay closer attention, therefore, to the causes and consequences of activism and scholarship on indigeneity. How do

forms of solidarity overlap or not overlap? In what ways do various objectives of rural social movements come into conflict with each other? In charting the dynamics of solidarity and conflict in everyday practice, it is not adequate to limit ourselves to the discursive alone. Ultimately, we must come to grips with the materiality of these social dynamics in order to bridge the apparently irreconcilable gap between scholars and activists on the question of indigeneity.

The second dialogue, on forest rights legislation, takes up these questions of multiple overlapping terrains through a discussion of the same topic, forest rights in India, from quite starkly contrasting viewpoints. The first contribution, from Anand Vaidya, focuses on what Stuart Hall and others have called 'articulation' (Slack 1996). Vaidya discusses 'word traps' placed by bureaucrats in the Ministry of Environment and Forests as a way to show the tortuous path from activism to legislation on forest dwellers' rights to land. What is striking about his study is the incredible access that activists have in drafting laws that concern rural India. Vaidya's focus is on the Campaign for Survival and Dignity (CSD) and their access to powerful individuals from high-ranking bureaucrats in the environment and forests ministry to the then prime minister Manmohan Singh. And yet, there is no clear correlation between activist agendas on forest rights and what gets drafted as law. In the case of forest rights, the vexed question of 'encroachments' is an example of how activist demands for land distribution may be limited by the forest department, but based on struggles over terminology found earlier on in the drafting process. To understand how and why this takes place, it is necessary, as Vaidya does, to chart out the various debates and terrains that concerned parties operated within—conservation, law and order, local governance, and so on—and the ways in which those debates and arguments entered into, overlapped, and conflicted within the drafting process. What emerges is how haphazard and contested the drafting of such a law is in practice, which gives some antidote to a sense that the intention of a law is neatly and singularly embodied as an author within the text of the law (Foucault and Gordon 1980), and clarifies how the institution of the law, as with all other social institutions, is actually a site of ongoing struggle, occurring simultaneously on multiple overlapping terrains.

These concerns raised by Vaidya are echoed by Shankar Gopalakrishnan from the CSD. Gopalakrishnan outlines the patterns of capitalist accumulation in India's forests today and the mobilization against these patterns by the parliamentary and extreme left as well as 'people's movements'. It is interesting to see how issues such as 'encroachment' raised by Vaidya in his discussion of the drafting of the FRA, appear also in a different context in Gopalakrishnan's paper as an official justification for evicting forest dwellers from forest lands held by a state that is deeply complicit with private interests in mining and logging. On the one hand, 'word traps' acquire a more sinister connotation in discussions of primitive accumulation in rural India today. On the other hand, however, we may appreciate how 'word traps' also keep activists and researchers in business as they campaign for fresh legislation and produce new forms of knowledge that interrogate these campaigns.

Readers may also be interested to learn that the process of editing this section of the volume was also a contested process along the lines suggested by these case studies of indigeneity and forest rights. Contributors inclined towards activism tended to stress the everyday realities of running campaigns and the practical need to forge and maintain their support bases whereas those who defined their scholarly practices in terms of their professional academic habitus would zoom in on the contradictions of articulatory practices as well as the social tensions within movements. It might be said that what Michel Foucault (1977) termed the 'optics of surveillance' differed in how each set of contributors attempted to constitute their respective terrains of engagement with social movements. These divergent optics may be understood in relation to varied terrains of political engagement, which sometimes overlapped and sometimes conflicted during the process of compiling this volume. In many ways, these overlaps and conflicts in terms of optics and terrains of engagement with social movements reflect many of the contestations over meaning and articulation of activist agendas within movements themselves. This is why we must keep in mind that the line dividing scholarship and activism is necessarily fuzzy.

If we are to caricature how social movements in rural India are studied and how they are often studied, we might point to a tendency among academics to break things down to detailed description and analysis, often ethnographically, seeking out detail and complexity in a quest for comprehensive understanding. At the same time, we might characterize activists who locate themselves inside social movements as articulating their struggles in ways that engage universals and appeal to ever-widening circles of national and global engagement. If we go by these commonplace caricatures, academics stress difference and criticism whereas movement activists look for wider terrains of sameness. In rejecting these caricatures, we urge readers to join us in adopting a more cautious stance with respect to social movements in rural India and elsewhere. Not only do these movements embody contradictions that exist within their societies, but they may at times actually thwart emancipatory potentialities for those at the bottom of social hierarchies. Indeed, recent movements against corruption and rape in India embody these contradictions in a deeply stratified society, often leading to outcomes that in many ways reinforce, rather than call into question, existing hierarchical arrangements. What is more disturbing is that explorations of, say, the gendered politics of social movements in contemporary rural India, are exceedingly rare (notable exceptions are Desai 2015 and Nielsen and Waldrop 2014). Lacunae in seemingly 'objective' scholarship thus appear to mirror social realities, thereby pointing to the inescapable situatedness and limitations of our knowledge (Haraway 1988). And yet, we cannot be too pessimistic in taking our power-laden understanding of social movements too far. The chapters on the Bhils and Dongriyas of rural India, in their different ways, show how movements can make life more bearable for marginalized individuals and their communities. If this volume can teach us anything, it is that academic research on social movements in rural India and beyond is hardly an apolitical affair. By the same token, activists engaged in social movements are never innocent of the ways in which power and knowledge influence each other. And, most importantly, the fuzzy line between scholarship and activism means that readers ought to be sceptical of the 'truths' placed before them. Ours is certainly not the final word on the subject.

Indeed, the materialist ontology underlying our contributors' analyses of the relationships between nature, culture, and knowledge pushes us to consider our own subjectivities as academics vis-à-vis the restless activity of capital. To put a non-deterministic understanding of materiality at the heart of the study of social movements, we believe, can be the basis for productive exchanges across the academic-activist divide. The scale of the environmental problems we face today worldwide is sobering enough to make us rethink ethnography as more than a mere social-scientific method (Ingold 2000). Equally sobering are the crises of capital today, which connect rural India to the world economy at large, thereby linking issues of material scarcity and want with those of commodity production, labour precarity, and environmental degradation (Kliman 2012; Shrivastava and Kothari 2012). In the Indian context, as Kalyan Sanyal (2007) has reminded us, the mismatch between the promise of capitalism and the workings of dominant models of 'development' is an ever-present reality. Scholars pursuing ethnographic research must now grapple with the question of how the human sciences can be revitalized via an emphasis on the processes of being human (Ingold 2008). Doing so entails, on the one hand, abandoning a facile postmodern scepticism towards poverty and underdevelopment, and on the other hand, querying the ecological bases through which material deprivation is sustained in the guise of eradicating it (Burkett 2006; Woodward and Simms 2006). Such intellectual endeavours are, ultimately, inseparable from wider terrains of struggle over the workings of capitalism today. While acknowledging this inseparability destabilizes what we conventionally consider the 'field' in our research, it places a critical study of social movements within wider webs of material causes and meanings that transcend the local and the fragmentary (Marcus 1998). Ethnographic fieldwork thus becomes part of a collective venture of understanding the everyday materiality of the human condition, which permits a more open-ended dialogue with activists and social movements over our modes of inquiry and claims to knowledge.

To the extent that 'the dialectical relationship between stratified discourses of protest and the multivocal discourses of rule' (Sivaramakrishnan 2002: 240) pervade academic debates, those studying social movements cannot avoid feeling the competing

tugs and pulls of the myriad processes of social change in the world today (and, dare we say, take different positions and play different roles within them). The staking of claims by social movements in contemporary rural India and their chroniclers takes place necessarily in the context of the accelerations and flows of late capitalist modernity (Harvey 2005; Tsing 2005). Even as we question the 'will to improve' (Li 2007), we may commit ourselves to a dynamic, open-ended understanding of how ordinary men and women in the Indian countryside enter into vertical relationships with resource-rich activists and scholars in the course of social movements. To the extent the social dynamics of solidarity and conflict are embodied by these rural movements today, they represent, in a microcosm, the antagonisms that lie at the very heart of the social (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). To place ourselves within this contested social in this manner is, we believe, to retain our critical impulses without losing sense of what is at stake beyond us.

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