

PART IV 

INDIGENEITY AND THE STATE



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INTIMATE ANTAGONISMS

Adivasis and the State in Contemporary India

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Introduction

It is commonplace in academic and popular discourses in contemporary India to see populations described variously as tribes, scheduled tribes, adivasis, *vanvasis*, or indigenous peoples as being locked in perpetual combat with the modern state.¹ Indeed, some even argue that if the state in India represents the forces of modernity, adivasis represent an amodern, counter-modern, or even premodern social formation. As a consequence, adivasis are sometimes believed to exhibit the “elementary aspects” of rural insurgency in colonial India (Guha 1983; for a critique, see Bates and Shah 2014) as quintessential subaltern radicals defending older, nobler ways of life in “arcadian spaces” with “visions of alternative moralities” (Shah 2010: 190). At other times, adivasis are simply taken to be the hapless victims of state-directed development, dispossession, and “everyday tyranny” (Kela 2012; Nilsen 2010; Padel 2009). Moreover, those seeking to critique modernity and its forms in India have found adivasis “good to think with,” in Claude Lévi-Strauss’s terms, calling into question the ways of states, archives, and the public sphere all at once (Banerjee 2006a; Chakrabarty 2011; Visvanathan 2006). None of the above ought to be seen as peculiar to present-day India: the prose of otherness associated with the seductive figure of the tribal or indigene has its origins in the colonial past (Chandra 2013a), and its imprint on the modern social sciences is widespread (see, e.g., Clastres 1987; Lévi-Strauss 1969; Scott 2009; van Schendel 2002).

At the same time, the politics of representing adivasis in contemporary India speaks to a wider conundrum that students of indigeneity now face globally (Chandra 2013b; Hodgson 2011; Jung 2006; Li 2010; see also Chapter 6 in this volume). The “strategic essentialisms” (Spivak 1988) on which indigenous activism rely are, as Renée Sylvain

(2014) has recently argued, at least as limiting as they are enabling. On the one hand, activists and scholars rallying around the indigenous acknowledge the hard-nosed instrumental actions that prove necessary to achieve their ends. Yet, on the other hand, the same defenders of indigenous rights are compelled to speak in the explicitly non-instrumental and affect-laden language of authenticity and belonging. As Adam Kuper (2003) perceptively noted a decade or so ago, indigeneity talk in today's world has revived racialized notions of the primitive Other from a bygone era, and the "return of the native" can hardly be regarded as an unproblematic matter (Béteille 1998; Mamdani 2013; see also Chapter 3 in this volume). Writing about indigenous or adivasi politics thus turns out to be fraught with many dangers, of which racial stereotyping, essentializing, and speaking for silent subalterns are among the most common. In fact, a number of social scientists have recently asked whether discourses of indigeneity, deployed strategically or not, are actually part of a global neoliberal regime of "hypermarginality" that makes the so-called indigenous even more vulnerable than ever before (Bessire 2014; Hale 2004, 2005; McCormack 2012; Muehlmann 2009; see also Chapter 4 in this volume).

In India today, where a Maoist insurgency has raged since 2004, some scholars and activists see adivasis as victims in need of protection (Guha 2007; Nigam 2010; Simeon 2010), while others, and society at large, see them merely as savages to be civilized or "developed" through a mix of educational and commercial initiatives (Chaudhury 2009; Patel 2012; Planning Commission of India 2008; Verghese 2010). In this scenario, adivasi politics is represented either in terms of tragedy or triumphalism. These contradictory representations place the modern adivasi subject in an "irresoluble double bind" (Banerjee 2006b). Playing the victim connects adivasis to an ever-expanding universe of sympathetic officials, activists, and scholars who are all too keen to write on "tribal issues." Equally, however, invoking the "savage slot" (Rolph-Trouillot 2003) can help remake local communities through violent means that defy the many civilizing missions that prey on adivasi life. In this manner, the politics of representing adivasis are tied inextricably, albeit uneasily, to the politics that adivasi men and women pursue in India today.

In interrogating adivasi politics in contemporary India, this chapter departs sharply from dominant representations of adivasi politics today. It does so by challenging the easy binary between the modern state and adivasis in India, based on three years of doctoral research on the relations between colonial and postcolonial states and rural adivasi communities since the late eighteenth century, in the forest state

of Jharkhand in eastern India. In my doctoral dissertation (Chandra 2013c), I show how the “state” and “tribe,” paradoxically, constitute each other over time in the margins of modern India. The “state” here is both an idea and a set of governmental practices (Abrams 1988; Mitchell 1991) just as the “tribe,” too, is an ideological as well as material formation. My argument here is, briefly, that the two are isomorphic, and that subaltern resistance, whether violent or peaceful, is best understood as the negotiation, not negation, of modern state power. This argument necessarily runs against a dominant strand of scholarship on South Asia that regards adivasis as subalterns *par excellence*, and identifies adivasi politics as primarily one of negating or opposing modern state structures (see, e.g., Bhadra 1985; Guha 1983; Mayaram 2003; Skaria 1999). Yet it also stands in solidarity with other scholars who have, in their distinctive ways, questioned these dominant logics of representing adivasi politics vis-à-vis the modern Indian state (Béteille 1974; Chatterjee 2013; Guha 1999; Prasad 2003; Sivaramakrishnan 1999; see also Chapter 11 in this volume). The two case studies in this chapter zoom in on intergenerational and gender divides within rural adivasi communities, and highlight how these intracommunity divides mirror divisions within modern state imaginaries. I rely here on my fieldwork in contemporary Jharkhand as well as a critical reading of secondary sources on Jharkhand and other “tribal” regions in India and beyond. Might the apparent opposition between “state” and “tribe,” I ask, be better characterized as an intimate antagonism? If so, what might be the implications of such a characterization of adivasi–state relations for global debates over indigeneity and its futures?

Case Study 1

“Sacrifice your today for the nation’s brighter tomorrow.” This was Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru’s call to his fellow citizens in the first decade after independence. “We have to make them [adivasis] progress,” he proclaimed. “What is good in the rest of India will, of course, be adapted by them gradually” (Singh 1989: 125). At the same time, Nehru hoped to avoid “dispossessing the tribal people” and causing “the economy of the tribal areas to be upset” (ibid.: 124). A delicate balance between the demands of economic modernization and those of cultural conservation thus characterized Nehruvian policy on the “tribal” areas demarcated by the last colonial constitution for India in 1935, as well as the subsequent postcolonial constitution of 1950. But if adivasis in the margins of the fledgling postcolony had to sometimes

suffer during the process of modernization, Nehru believed, they ought to “suffer in the interest of the country” (cited in Ghosh 2006: 65). Since Nehru’s time, the “greater common good” of the postcolony has remained the principal justification for displacing and dispossessing adivasi populations in the course of what Marx (1967: 714–15) called the “primitive accumulation of capital” (Roy 1999). In the context of Jharkhand, some writers have gone so far as to invoke the notion of “internal colonialism” (Hechter 1975) to describe the relations between the postcolonial Indian state and its adivasi margins (Das 1992; Devalle 1992; Sinha 1973). Elsewhere, on India’s northeastern frontier, the question has been raised whether the “postcolonial” has truly begun (Kar 2009).

One of the earliest public sector undertakings in postcolonial India, Heavy Engineering Corporation (HEC) was established in 1958 on the outskirts of the city of Ranchi, now capital of Jharkhand (then south Bihar). Roylen Gudiya of Lohajimi village recalled in a conversation with me what happened then: “They did not care that our *sasandiris* [burial stones] and *sarnas* [sacred groves] mean everything for us Mundas. They dispossessed the villagers, stomped all over their lands, and desecrated their ancestral faith. No one protested, no one resisted; they kept quiet because they did not know better.”

Around the same time, the government of the state of Bihar, within which Jharkhand was then subsumed, began surveying villages on the banks of the Koel and Karo rivers. This was the first step taken towards a major hydroelectric power project that promised to bring electricity to this “backward” adivasi region. Little else happened until 1976, when the headman of Lohajimi, Soma Munda, returned to his ancestral village. Soma had served as a mechanic in the Indian army for twenty-one years, traveling to the frontiers of the postcolony in Kashmir and the equally contentious areas bordering Bangladesh and China. He recalled for me an occasion when the army was setting up a camp in Kashmir and simply “kicked out” the local villagers in order to go about their business. He, like Roylen, also knew about the fate of those displaced by HEC in the Nehruvian era. But Soma was determined that his people would not suffer the same fate as those victims.

In 1976, the Bihar state government sent in engineers and workers to the villages along the Karo river. They were supposed to complete survey and measurement work in the area before embarking on dam-building activities there and along the Koel river farther north. As the village headman or *munda*, Soma exercised his traditional authority to mobilize villagers in what he called the “inherently consensual and democratic ways of adivasi communities” to protest and resist the pro-

posed hydroelectric project. This traditional authority had been shored up since the late colonial period by officials who had worked alongside adivasi headmen and elders to compile, codify, and enforce regimes of customary law in Jharkhand and elsewhere in “tribal” or scheduled areas (Cederlöf 2008; Karlsson 2011; Sen 2012). Faced with the proposed submergence of 256 villages by two dams on the Koel and Karo rivers, 44 and 55 meters respectively in height, and connected by a 34.7-meter canal (Ghosh 2006: 67), villagers were instructed by Soma Munda and his companions to resist peacefully. Initially, they demanded that all labor be done by local workers alone, not by Bihari plainsmen from superior caste backgrounds, which prevented them from dining with villagers. This demand went unmet. Then, the Karo Jan Sangathan, headed by Soma, declared a curfew, to prevent anyone from entering or exiting the villages in the proposed dam area. Mimicking state actions in this manner, Soma ensured that the government engineers and workers, who would not accept food or water from adivasi villagers, were compelled to ask for supplies from the subdivisional headquarters, over ten kilometers away. “They would bring water in tanks that would stop at the village boundary, from where the junior officers had to carry it in containers into their camps. It was great fun watching them toil in the sun,” says Soma. “We were determined to resist and protest, but peacefully. No arms or violence. If we got violent, they’d brand us as extremists [*ugravadi*], kick us out in an instant, and lay claim to all our lands.”

As dam building proceeded slowly but surely, new forms of organization and protest strategies evolved. The Jan Sangathans (“Popular Fronts”) on the Koel and Karo rivers were merged into a single anti-dam movement. The new Koel-Karo Jan Sangathan began to invoke adivasi customs strategically to oppose dam building, fully aware of the nature of customary laws that were in force locally as well as the state’s view of them as nature-worshipping, forest-dwelling primitives. Soma explained to me: “We told them that we, adivasis, have only three things: *sasan*, *sarna*, and the CNT Act.” The last of these is the Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act, a colonial-era law dating back to 1908, which prescribes rules for the ownership as well as the sale and transfer of adivasi lands. “These are tribal lands,” Soma proceeded, “defined by our religious customs and protected by law. We cannot allow them to be submerged. Koel-Karo *alo thalouka* [must stop].” Forced into negotiations by 1987, the Bihar state government offered to re-create adivasi villages elsewhere along with their *sasans* and *sarnas* as well as schools and hospitals. The offer followed a Nehruvian script of modernity: dams, as “temples of modern India,” would bring electricity, employ-

ment, education, and healthcare in their wake. In response, Soma told government officials: "Choose one village along each river, and resettle them according to proper tribal rites and customs. If you can do it, we will let you proceed with your work. Otherwise, you must leave." The government failed to keep its side of the promise, of course. But it also refused to leave.

The Koel-Karo Jan Sangathan was far from daunted, however. They shrewdly invoked customary arrangements to combat the government's obstinacy. The Sangathan instructed villagers to plant corn around government camps. "They were outwitted," recalls Roylen Gudiya. "If they stepped on our corn, we could lodge a case against them and demand compensation." Government officials had no choice but to tiptoe in and out of their camps every day. Next, the Sangathan passed a resolution to prevent these officials from accessing the nearby forests for firewood or purchasing it from villagers. It argued that forest regulations and customary laws assigned adivasi villagers the exclusive right to such use of the forests. Non-adivasis claiming the same rights would be designated as encroachers and subject to punishment under law. Soon after, the Sangathan, under Soma's leadership, passed another resolution to state that anyone living in government camps could not defecate in the village because that would necessarily pollute the *sarnas*. "We compelled them to basically cook, eat, and shit inside their camps," said Soma. In the light of these indignities, the Bihar government engineers and their staff beat a hasty retreat under the cover of darkness. Soma could barely suppress his smile when he told me that the Sangathan had "made the *sarkar* [state] bend to [their] will" through their reliance on custom, law, and clever but peaceful protest tactics.

In 2003, the chief minister of Jharkhand, Arjun Munda, officially scrapped the Koel-Karo project, though the specter of a possible return continues to loom today. For a movement led by and for adivasi villagers, its success contrasts strikingly with the celebrated Narmada anti-dam movement, led by middle-class activists and celebrity cheerleaders (Nilsen 2010; Whitehead 2010). As an anthropologist who participated in and studied the Koel-Karo movement extensively, Kaushik Ghosh (2006: 69) writes:

For journalists, the presence of urban middle-class activists at the heart of the NBA [Narmada Bachao Andolan] has been a key point of attraction, identification and communication. This presence could catch their imagination, they could relate to the middle-class leadership packaged into the familiar narrative of sacrifice where a privileged, elite person "gives up" his or her privileges and goes to awaken and mobilize the oppressed masses. This narrative form has direct continuity with the form of the

Indian nationalist biography of the nation's leaders: the unconscious, pre-political phase of life, the coming into awareness and the eventual assumption of leadership in mobilizing the people against the (colonial) state.

Soma, too, exclaimed with more than a small measure of pride: "We don't need to hold any meetings or rallies in Ranchi or Delhi. We are not like Narmada Bachao of Medha Patekar [*sic*]. Our politics is local. We will resist them here on our turf."

Soma and his companions had talked back to the state in its own language of "primitivism" (Chandra 2013a), itself the product of negotiations between adivasi headmen and paternalistic state officials since the mid nineteenth century. Strategic essentialism, in Spivak's sense, is alive and well in such circumstances. But the Koel-Karo Jan Sangathan went a step further, by reading the law back to the postcolonial state too, reminding it of a binding constitutional commitment to protect adivasi lands from alienation. This kind of claim making from below by rural subjects has been termed "rightful resistance" in the context of contemporary China by Kevin O'Brien and Lianjiang Li (2006). It is a classic instance of a "within-system form[s] of contention in the reform, not revolution, paradigm" (O'Brien 2013: 1,058). Contentious politics of this kind do not seek to negate, but to negotiate with the political authority represented by modern states. There is more than a slight resemblance, of course, between rightful resistance and another within-system form of contention, James Scott's (1985) "weapons of the weak" or everyday forms of peasant resistance against landed superiors. Rightful resistance adapts traditional weapons of the weak by the rural poor to a new context of claim making vis-à-vis the modern state. The performance of subaltern resistance-as-negotiation invokes and deploys adivasi customs and history creatively against a powerful state, yet "off stage," participants joke about how their ancestors, who formed these villages two or three centuries ago, did not bring any *sasans* and *sarnas* with them at all (cf. Scott 1990). The logic of resistance-as-negotiation is, therefore, endogenous to that of power, which is, ironically, what makes it effective in achieving its aims (Chandra 2015b; Haynes and Prakash 1992; Mitchell 1990). This is how tribe and state constitute each other in the margins of modern India.

Case Study 2

It is important to realize that the Koel-Karo Jan Sangathan's success is not appreciated by everyone locally. Kalyan, for instance, is a young

man from the nearby village of Tapkara, who resents the celebration of custom by older activists such as Soma and Roylen.² In a long diatribe against the village elders who led the Sangathan, Kalyan said: “What has the CNT Act done for us? We have been dispossessed again and again for the past century. Our elders keep acting like the *junglis* the government thinks we are: venerating ancestor spirits [*bhuts*], drinking rice beer [*hanria*], making sacrifices of fowl at the time of sowing and harvest. You are an educated person from the city: does anyone in Delhi believe that killing a chicken will bring more rain to the fields?” Another young Christian Munda man, Benjamin, points to widespread discontent with the elders in Munda villages: “In every village, the young and the old are at odds with each other nowadays. Our tradition is simply to listen to what the elders say. We must farm for them, our wives and sisters must cook and prepare rice beer for them. What is so good about such traditions?”

These voices of discontent, I found, point to deep-seated intergenerational and gendered conflicts within rural adivasi communities in Jharkhand. These intracommunity conflicts within villages are anything but new in the region: there is plenty of evidence of the same conflicts in the colonial archives (see, e.g., Sinha 2005). Nor is it the case that such conflicts are peculiar to rural Jharkhand: the Narmada valley in western India, for instance, exhibits strikingly similar tendencies with vital consequences for social movements and resettlement operations there (Thakur 2014). Even outside India, say, in West Africa, there is ample evidence of intergenerational and gender divides at the heart of civil wars and iconoclastic movements directed against the traditional authority of male elders in “tribal” society (McGovern 2012; Richards 1996; Sarró 2008). Young men and women thus form “war machines,” as Danny Hoffman (2011) explains with the help of a term drawn from Gilles Deleuze’s writings, as they seek to overturn established authority and replace it with new models of legitimate authority cast in their own irreverent image.

The politics of youth and gender have been at the heart of the Maoist movement in rural Jharkhand. Young women have typically comprised a clear majority among the armed Maoist cadres in Jharkhand, a significant anomaly in its overall operations across central and eastern India. This state of affairs in Jharkhand could not be more different from those in the Maoists’ strongholds in the plains of central and south Bihar, where men from subordinated caste backgrounds have taken the fight to their oppressors from the landed dominant castes since the 1980s (Bhatia 2005; Kunnath 2012). In Jharkhand, over the past decade, the Maoists have offered non-farm, non-traditional livelihood options for

young men and women. Where young men are keen to move away from farming and where women are prohibited by patriarchal custom from even touching agricultural implements, Maoism and migration to megacities have emerged as the two principal alternatives for adivasi youth. Victoria, an Oraon domestic worker in Delhi, pointed this out to a researcher recently: “Young women like me only have two ways of coming out of the household before marriage, to migrate for domestic work to a large city or join the Maoist movement” (Wadhawan 2013: 47). Alpa Shah (2006) has found that seasonal migrants from rural Jharkhand, especially women, discover spaces of freedom in big cities, away from the taboos and restrictions of traditional adivasi village life. On these trips away from rural Jharkhand, love affairs are common, although in most cases they would be deemed illicit by elders back in the village. As we can learn from the recent gang rape of a Santal woman, accused of having an affair with a Muslim man from a neighboring town, so-called “traditional” sanctions against errant women are imposed with a vengeance, especially when patriarchal honor and community pride are at stake (Chandra 2014). The “traditional” or customary gerontocratic order places clear restrictions on sexual and marital unions within clans of a tribe and across tribes. By contrast, the Maoists not only do not object to, but actively encourage marriages across class, ethnic, and religious lines. The simplicity of Maoist marriages, too, contrasts with the more ritually elaborate traditional ceremonies overseen by the *pahan* or village priest. In matters of domesticity and work alike, therefore, powerful incentives have attracted young women and men to the Maoist “war machine.”

Within Maoist ranks, adivasi youth enter a parallel universe of “modern” comradeship, in and of itself a critique of traditional village society. Maoist cadres participate in campaigns to raise the minimum wage, to ensure MNREGA (Mahatma National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) funds are paid fully and in a timely fashion, to help build homes for the poorer villagers, and to redistribute lands that are illegally held by non-tribals among the poorest. In Chatra district, at one point, the Maoists were even offering cheap loans at 2 percent interest per annum (*Hindustan Times* 2009). NGOs working in central and southern Jharkhand have rarely, if ever, been prevented by the Maoists from working for grassroots development, including in cases when their activities dovetail nicely with New Delhi’s counter-insurgency plans. The fiscal structure depends almost entirely on local forms of taxation (*rangdari*), especially on high-value forest products such as the lac resin and *tendu* leaves (Chandra n.d.; Suykens 2010). The need to resort to the “selective elimination” of an odd policeman, forester, or local trader is actually less common than is often assumed. Fear of the gun typically

works just as well, if not better, than the gun itself. Unsurprisingly, the greatest critics of Maoist youth are the village elders, natural defenders of the traditional Munda way of life. When discussing the raging Maoist insurgency in rural Jharkhand in 2009–10, Soma Munda, the Lohajimi-based leader of the Koel-Karo anti-dam movement, spoke to me of “misguided youth” and the “romance of violence.” Others, such as Sukhran Hao, a retired schoolteacher in the nearby town of Khunti, adopted a harsher tone to condemn the adivasi youth who joined the Maoists: “These party people are destroying our culture [*sanskriti*]. They don’t care at all for the past or for us elders. When we were young, we always listened to our parents. But our children will not do so. This is the sad state of affairs today.” There can be little doubt that village elders, recognized by colonial and postcolonial states as bearers of customary or traditional authority, have found themselves under attack from young men and women who refuse to accept their authority as legitimate. The elders’ politics must, perforce, be anti-Maoist.

The story of Masi Charan Purty, one of the best-known Maoist icons in central Jharkhand, neatly illustrates the aforementioned points about adivasi youth politics and the desire to erect new forms of legitimate political authority. Masi’s fame ascended to the status of folklore after he contested the Jharkhand state elections in December 2009. A shy, intelligent boy educated by Catholic missionaries in the highland village of Bandgaon in West Singhbhum district, Masi moved to the capital city of Ranchi to pursue a Bachelor’s degree in Commerce. By all accounts, he was a good student, and a bright future lay ahead of him. However, in 2003, a couple of years into his degree, he found his family embroiled in a land dispute with the village headman or *munda*. With the headman’s contacts in the local police, the Purty family faced the risk of losing its family plot. The legal system in these adivasi villages, as elsewhere in India, was so far skewed in favor of the dominant lineages of rural society that a fair fight in court would have been nearly impossible. So, when the local Maoist unit offered its help, Masi could hardly refuse. He took on the village headman, literally, and ensured his family could hold onto their land. But there was no going back for Masi. He joined the Maoists in Khunti district, and rose swiftly to become a key lieutenant of the area commander, Kundan Pahan.

A couple of years into his new job, Masi led a Maoist operation to rescue female comrades from a detention facility for women in Hatia, barely five kilometers from the state capital of Ranchi. These young women, mostly adivasis from nearby villages in Ranchi and Khunti districts in central Jharkhand, had been arrested for their participation in local Maoist party activities. Like Masi, they too had escaped the

traditional patriarchal and gerontocratic set-up of their rural homes, in pursuit of new forms of comradeship within the Maoist movement. One of the women arrested and then rescued in the Masi-led break-in at the Hatia detention facility was Masi's future wife, Protima. Unlike the other women, Protima came from a village in Northeast India on the border between the states of Assam and Meghalaya. After running away from home as a teenager and working in Shillong and Delhi as a domestic worker, she had ended up with the Maoist women by sheer chance. They had rescued her from the rail tracks, where she was attempting to commit suicide because, as Masi put it, "life had nothing left to offer [her]." She had been abused as a domestic worker in Delhi and had no home to go back to. The Maoist women took Protima under their wing, nursing her back to health and teaching her the party's basic gospel of personal and social liberation.

Both Masi and Protima had seemingly entered the local Maoist ranks by accident rather than design, a fact that both have repeatedly emphasized to me. Theirs was a shotgun marriage. Protima could not, as she put it, refuse him. Masi, by this time, had run into a glass ceiling within the local Maoist organization. He had served as deputy to the area commander, Kundan, who himself had not risen up the organizational ladder in nearly two decades. With his ambitions frustrated within Maoist ranks, Masi was keenly seeking alternatives. Protima, in turn, was not looking forward to a life dictated by Maoist discipline and jungle warfare. She told me: "We couldn't even talk to each other like we are now. We didn't feel a personal connection with them. One day, five of us, including Masi and me, ran away from the [Maoists] and came back to our village here in Bandgaon. We started our own [rebel] group, settling old scores with the local *munda* and ensuring people like us could hold onto their land without the elders deciding everything."

This new breakaway group was named the Jharkhand Liberation Tigers (JLT), though they now call themselves the People's Liberation Front of India (PLFI) to indicate their national ambition. In reality, however, the PLFI operates in Khunti and West Singhbhum districts, where it enjoys an uneasy, fractious relationship with its parent organization. Masi has been in jail since 2008; the PLFI supports his wife and two sons, paying for their daily expenses and school fees.

Many locals believe that Masi actually won the Khunti seat on a Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) ticket in the state election in December 2009, but bribery and vote rigging helped his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) rival, Nilkanth Singh Munda, win officially by 438 votes. Protima told me, "we were celebrating at the election center at 4.30 [p.m.], and went off to the village to tell everyone. Later, we were told that cash-

filled boxes meant for sweetmeats were taken into the [counting] office by BJP party workers, and the ballot boxes [sic] were subsequently tampered with.”

By Indian standards, 438 votes is a slender margin of victory, and popular rumors of electoral fraud say as much about how Mundas see the state today (Shah 2007) as about the actual course of events on election day. Today, Masi is a modern Munda youth icon: he married whom he wished, regardless of ethnicity or religion; he used the power of his gun to fight for the poor; he settled land disputes extra-judicially against the interests of the rural elite and policemen in their pay; he avoided what his followers call “mind-numbing” rituals. This is the example through which the PLFI wishes to remake village communities in central Jharkhand. Despite being in jail, Masi was certain that he would contest the next state election, and remained confident of an outright victory.

It is important to recognize that Masi and other adivasi youth in rural Jharkhand are as much in dialogue with the postcolonial Indian state as with the elders of their own communities. As Philip Abrams pointed out long ago, the state–society binary is itself illusory: “[T]he state is not the reality which stands behind the mask of political practice. It is itself the mask which prevents our seeing political practice as it is” (Abrams 1988: 82). Students of power and resistance have thus sought to transcend this binary by examining how state and society shape each other in everyday life (Fuller and Bénéï 2001; Migdal 2001). Accordingly, the logic of resistance, conceptualized as the negotiation of everyday relations of power in society, cannot be regarded simply as a governmental affair. It is, equally, about the constitution of a social “field of struggles” (Bourdieu 1984: 244) and contestation therein, whether on the basis of class, ethnicity, gender, or, as in this instance, generational differences. The rural adivasi “community” we encounter today is far from a vestige of a pristine precolonial past, but an artifact of the constitution of modern state–society relations in India with its peculiar set of intergenerational conflicts that define the nature and limits of governmentality. Intergenerational conflicts within this “community,” therefore, map onto competing statist visions of adivasi communities as well as the ways by which adivasi subjects negotiate the modern Indian state today.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown two different ways in which adivasi subjects respond to two faces of the postcolonial Indian state. They can

play helpless victim before the state and civil society in order to make claims on them vis-à-vis the complementary domains of custom and law. Yet they can also fit the savage slot by invoking the bloodthirsty image of the tribal rebel. Academic scholarship and media coverage routinely replicate, circulate, and legitimize these images, reifying them as the “truth” about adivasis as quintessential subaltern actors. Scraping beneath the surface, however, we can appreciate how this two-faced “tribal” subject promoted by our pundits may be a mirror image of the duplicitous state in the margins of postcolonial India (Nelson 2004). The state pledges to protect adivasi land rights and empower local democratic institutions, yet it also covets the minerals and forests around their dwellings and auctions off their lands to the highest bidder. Thereafter, the adivasi tribal subject is constituted as “poor,” and hence a worthy object for the multi-million dollar poverty industry. Cunningly, the state is often described as being “absent” from tribal areas (Misra and Pandita 2011), whereas it may, in fact, be omnipresent. It suffuses the processes of self-making and community-making for adivasi subjects, causing them to mirror the two-facedness of the state.

The gender and intergenerational struggles within Munda villages in Khunti district today blur the distinction between what Chris Fuller and Véronique Bénéï (2001) term “the everyday state and society.” Whereas village elders resort to their customary privileges to defend a “traditional” anthropological vision of community, young adivasi men and women are determined to remake the community in their own “modern” image. These everyday social antagonisms are intimate, and so, too, are the negotiations of power within the governmental realm that follow. Peaceful and violent repertoires of resistance-as-negotiation compete with each other within rural adivasi communities, but they are also interlocking political strategies that enable adivasis to negotiate the terms of their subjecthood in postcolonial India.

Quite apart from romanticized representations of adivasis as subaltern rebels *par excellence*, we find, in Jharkhand and beyond, empirical cases of adivasi resistance, both violent and peaceful, negotiating rather than negating modern state power. Thus, we see adivasi youth enter the electoral fray after their Maoist adventures, even as their elders invoke colonial anthropological notions of the “tribe” to talk back to the state in its own languages of customary law. The contradictory tropes and images of modern state making in these tribal margins have defined adivasi subjectivities recursively. In turn, these political subjects have reworked the logics and languages of the modern state to remake it from below, thereby remaking their own “communities” in the course of resistance-as-negotiation. The antagonisms between adivasis and the

postcolonial state in India today are, therefore, far more intimate than they are often taken to be. Students of indigeneity worldwide will find that this thesis carries relevance far beyond the South Asian region. My argument resonates strongly with those of Latin Americanists such as Gilbert Joseph and Daniel Nugent (1994) and Wolfgang Gabbert (2001), Africanists such as Paul Richards (1996) and Mahmood Mamdani (1996), and Southeast Asianists such as Anna Tsing (1993) and Tania Li (2007). If “state” and “tribe” are mutually constituted, this is far from an arcane academic discovery. The centrality of the modern state in adivasi/indigenous lives is an inescapable empirical reality that no amount of anthropological romanticizing can wish away.

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Notes

1. For deeper discussion of these terms and the politics associated with each of them, see Chandra (2015a). In this chapter, I use the term “adivasi” consistently throughout because it is most widely accepted across academic and activist milieus.
2. Here and elsewhere in this section, the real names of my interlocutors have been changed to protect their identities.

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