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Anthropology, Adivasi Movements, and the Politics of Indigeness

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As the social science that grew most directly out of the European encounter with the rest of the world, and that claimed as its subject matter non-western, 'primitive' peoples, anthropology has often been indicted for its complicity with colonialism and neo-imperialism. While earlier critiques of anthropology focused on its direct political utility, recent critiques have drawn attention to more subtle ways in which anthropology contributed to colonial rule, especially its role in the construction of colonial discourses. Because colonial ethnological categories and images are still reproduced and circulated in a variety of spheres, anthropology continues to be a politically loaded body of knowledge. Anthropological knowledge has been implicated particularly in relation to ethnic, indigenous and other identity-based movements.

A growing 'invention of tradition' literature in anthropology has documented the production of 'indigenous' identities and ideologies within political movements in regions such as Oceania and North America.¹ These studies illustrate the complex processes through which cultural difference is created and mobilised within identity politics. Hanson's (1989) work on the 'Mana Maori' (Maori Power) movement of New Zealand, for example, demonstrates that the 'traditions' valorised by the current cultural revival are not 'indigenous' (in the sense of being survivals from pre-colonial times) but were constructed as a form of resistance to European domination. Similarly, Thomas' (1992) analysis of several indigenous people's movements in the Pacific suggests that cultural objectification is often a *reactive* process in which traditions are constructed around specific reified practices, symbols or identities against another kind of constructed identity, especially under colonialism.²

Where colonialism has had a more sustained and repressive impact, indigenous peoples may come to couch their identity and resistance in terms made available by the dominant: they celebrate and affirm what colonialist discourse and practice subordinate and denigrate ... [Thomas 1992:216].

From this perspective, identitarian movements do not simply appropriate pre-existing social identities for political ends; rather, cultural 'traditions' and ethnic identities are actively constructed in complex ways through political struggle. Identity formation often involves politically motivated objectifications of culture, condensed in identity markers that represent the distinctiveness of the community or ethnic group. This process of objectification is a dialectical one in which "...dominant and dominated groups reify the attributes of both others and themselves in a self-fashioning process" (Thomas 1992:215).

The insights of the 'invention' literature have placed anthropology itself in a rather anomalous position, for anthropological texts and collections have been identified as major sources of the cultural knowledge that is deployed in identity construction within 'indigenous' peoples' movements.³ A number of scholars have argued that ethnic or 'tribal' traditions that are now regarded as important components of indigenous identity were 'invented' or 'rediscovered' by drawing upon colonial-era ethnographic texts or by reviving 'traditional customs' codified in colonial laws and policies. For example, anthropological writings were utilised in the creation of a repertoire of traditional customs and a foundational history for the Maori movement (Hanson 1989). The appropriation of anthropological texts by the former objects of enquiry in their quest to formulate a sense of cultural tradition and history has been a central feature of 'indigenous people's' movements in many places. Nor should this be surprising, given that many anthropologists have actively participated in such movements and acted as advocates for indigenous peoples. Also, in regions where indigenous people suffered extreme marginalisation, oppression and even extermination as a result of European colonisation, often the only sources available to the survivors in their struggle to reconstruct their cultural identity and history were those produced by the colonisers, including ethnologists.

This paper explores the connections between identity politics and anthropology in India with reference to adivasi politics and the politics of indigenism. I begin by outlining the colonial history of anthropology in India and the production of the category of 'tribe', and by arguing that anthropology continues to be closely involved in the projects of the post-colonial state. However, the anthropological discourse on 'tribes' has also contributed to the formation of adivasi identity and the ideology of 'indigenous people's' movements in India. As an illustration of this process, I examine the appropriation and reworking of the anthropological discourse on tribes by the Jharkhand movement. Finally I return to the wider debate about anthropology and indigenous people's movements in order to highlight some of

the complexities of the politics of anthropological knowledge. In conclusion I raise several theoretical and ethical questions regarding the political role of anthropology and the predicament that academics face in the study of social movements and subaltern groups.

Colonial ethnology, the state, and the invention of tribes

In India as in other colonies, anthropology played a major role in the production of new identities. The recent ‘colonial construction of identity’ literature argues that caste, religious and even regional identities were ‘invented’ by the colonial state through the operation of ‘technologies of power’, especially the various information-gathering exercises that required social categorisation. Anthropology, practised by both professionals and British officials, contributed to the process of enumeration and classification of racial and social groups in documents such as the censuses and *Castes and Tribes* volumes. According to the now familiar argument, the production of new systems of social categorisation by the colonial state, and the politics that flowed from them, served to redefine, ‘substantialise’ and rigidify group identities.⁴

One of the social categories created by colonial anthropology is that of the ‘tribe’. In the early colonial period the term ‘tribe’ was vague and was used interchangeably with other terms such as ‘caste’ and ‘race’. However, by the end of the 19th century it had acquired a specific meaning, designating certain kinds of social groups and distinguishing them sharply from those labelled as ‘castes’. Like enumeration by caste and religion in the census, the categorisation of social groups as either castes or tribes was a strategy employed by colonial anthropology to comprehend and govern a complex populace. In the anthropology of other colonised peoples, the term ‘tribe’, like ‘primitive’, was used to designate non-literate, ‘simple’ native societies that practised non-intensive and usually mobile modes of subsistence, and that were not incorporated into larger tributary or state systems. This sweeping classification brought together diverse social groups on the basis of their ‘primitiveness’, in opposition to (western) ‘civilisation’.⁵ But the ethnological classification of tribes in India was problematic from the start, precisely because of their coexistence with a larger ‘non-tribal’ society (unlike in the case of Africa, for example). Most of the Indian ‘tribes’ were never entirely cut off from ‘Hindu’ society, many were similar in terms of language, culture or religion to neighbouring ‘caste’ groups, and many were regionally dominant groups organised into independent states, belying the ‘primitive’ label. Clearly there was no common characteristic uniting the diverse groups labelled as ‘tribes’ that could justify such a

classification. This raises the question of why colonial ethnologists and administrators were so intent upon imposing this categorisation on what was obviously a more complex reality. Although this problem cannot be addressed in detail here, some account of the history of this category is necessary to understand its contemporary shape.

The category of tribe emerged out of 19th century European debates about the history of mankind and the origins of the various 'stocks' or 'races', debates to which ethnologists in India contributed by classifying and ranking the Indian populace in relation to other 'nations' or 'stocks' of the world.⁶ In constructing their arguments they drew upon the dominant paradigms of Victorian social thought, evolutionism and, later in the 19th century, 'race science' (Kuklick 1991; Stepan 1982). Their efforts were given a specific shape by the 'Aryan invasion' theory of Indian history, which grew out of the discovery of the Indo-European language family by Orientalist scholars in the early 19th century. This linguistic classification of human groups in India merged with racial thinking to produce the well-known theory that Indian civilisation was formed by the invasion of fair-skinned, civilised Sanskrit-speaking Aryans, who conquered and partially absorbed the dark-skinned, savage aborigines. This theory in turn produced the basic ethnological division of the Indian population into Aryan and non-Aryan races, which later became the 'castes' and 'tribes' (Bayly 1995; Trautmann 1997). The writings of 19th century ethnologists are replete with racial categorising; the Dravidians, the 'wild tribes' and aborigines were seen as racially distinct from the Aryan population and therefore not part of the Brahminical caste order (Bayly 1995:171). Campbell's *Ethnology of India*, for instance, divides the "black aboriginal tribes of the interior hills and jungles" from the "modern Indians" who cultivate the soil (1866:13, quoted in Trautmann 1997:162).

The collection of ethnological data on India was further stimulated by the production of district gazetteers from the 1870s, and a scheme for the systematic ethnological survey of India was sanctioned in 1901 (Bates 1995:242-45). H.H. Risley, who was appointed the first Director of Ethnography, introduced anthropometry into this enterprise, a technique that was used extensively in the early 20th century to construct an ethnological profile of India. The major ethnological problem of this period was to delineate the different 'races' of India, the historical relationship among them, and their relation to the white 'Aryan' British (Bayly 1995:168). Risley's well-known racial theory of caste was an elaboration of the Aryan invasion theory of Indian history; he proposed that the caste hierarchy reflects, in various degrees, the intermingling of the dark, primitive autochthonous (Dravidian and 'Kolarian') peoples with the invading Aryans. The distinction between caste and tribe, which became

entrenched in official writings by the late 19th century, was also based on this racial mapping of Indian society. The 'tribes' were understood as remnants of aboriginal groups who were not conquered and absorbed by the invading Aryans, like the lower castes, but were pushed back into the remote forests and hills. The construction of the category of tribe also drew upon the earlier evolutionist dichotomy of the 'civilised' and 'primitive'. But while the primitiveness of 'tribes' elsewhere was constructed in opposition to European civilisation, in India 'tribe' stood in opposition to Hindu 'civilisation' as defined by Orientalist scholars, i.e., caste society (Beteille 1992; Skaria 1997). Fundamentally, then, 'tribes' were defined *in opposition to* 'castes' rather than in terms of any concrete common characteristics of their own.⁷

However, Victorian ethnologists did not concentrate on physical characteristics alone; they also pursued research on the languages, religions, and 'manners and customs' of 'primitive' societies. The institutionalisation of racial theory as well as of a particular brand of ethnography in Indian anthropology can be traced to the work of official colonial ethnologists such as Thurston, who was recruited by Risley as Superintendent of Ethnography for Madras Presidency.⁸ Under the direction of these colonial officials, the collection and cataloguing of the racial, cultural and linguistic traits in order to document the diversity of Indian society became the hallmark of state-sponsored anthropology. This ethnological enterprise was also continually engaged with, and troubled by, the problem of classifying this confusing diversity into the two overarching categories of 'caste' and 'tribe'. In spite of repeated attempts to distinguish these categories clearly based on criteria such as religion (Hinduism vs. animism), language, mode of production, and biological features, census-takers and social surveyors continued to face difficulty in placing particular groups into one or the other category (Beteille 1992:71).

By the 1920s physical or biological anthropology had begun to separate from cultural anthropology, and racial theories of cultural difference went out of vogue. However, the refurbished concept of culture in many ways came to stand in for 'race' (Bates 1995). Now 'cultures' or 'societies' rather than races were labelled as 'primitive' or 'simple', and the presumed lack of intellectual and social development among primitives or 'tribals' was attributed to their unthinking submission to 'custom' and 'tradition' rather than to biological inheritance (Stocking 1968: Chap. 6). The reification of 'culture' as a concrete set of traditional beliefs and practices that determine human behaviour, together with the holism

characteristic of early 20th century anthropology, provided the conceptual foundation for the new cultural anthropology, which in India had as its subject matter the 'tribal' people.⁹

Although culture eventually replaced race as anthropology's central trope, the racial theory of Indian history continued to provide the basis for certain formulations about tribes that came to dominate Indian anthropology. Most important here is the notion that the tribes are the indigenous inhabitants of the country who were displaced and marginalised by the progressive invasion and expansion of the Indo-Aryan Hindus. (That indigeness is fundamental to the concept of tribe, especially in its more politicised versions, is evident in the term 'adivasi'.) One corollary of this thesis is the idea that tribes have been progressively 'absorbed' into the caste system (and continue to be so) at the bottom end, primarily through the assimilation of Hindu religion and values (Xaxa 1999a). The second major premise underlying the tribe concept is that of 'primitiveness' or 'backwardness', a characterisation that is grounded in both racial theory and its predecessor, social evolutionism. Third is the idea that tribal societies have always been culturally and politically independent of the larger 'Hindu' civilisation (except those segments that have been assimilated), an idea that is often still reproduced in ethnological writings in spite of so much evidence to the contrary. Recently, scholars such as K. Sivaramakrishnan (1995) and Sumit Guha (1999) have argued that the notion that tribes were isolated and distinct from Hindu society arose precisely because they were marginalised under colonial rule as a result of pacification, the imposition of forest and revenue policies, and forced sedentarisation. With the emergence of a 'discourse of exclusion', the tribal world was historically constructed as one of "autochthonous primitivity by the sympathetic ethnography of the 1930s and 1940s" (Sivaramakrishnan 1995:23).¹⁰ Whether one prefers to emphasise colonial discourses or the practices and interests of the colonial state, there was of course a complex interplay between these two elements in the constitution of tribes. It is to the latter element that I now turn.

Tribes and colonial governance

Evolutionism and the 'racial theory of Indian history' (Trautmann 1997) provided the intellectual framework for the construction of the category 'tribe', but its institutionalisation within the practices of the state must be understood in terms of its utility as an instrument of governance. Although the early ethnologists recognised that the boundary between what they called 'tribe' and 'caste' was quite vague and porous, such ambiguity did not suit the requirements of the modern state, which insisted that the constituent units of society be well

defined. Several scholars have argued that 'tribe' evolved mainly as a 'politico-administrative category' (Pathy 1984:3), to designate particularly troublesome and rebellious groups living in inaccessible forested regions (the latter incidentally being of great interest to the state because of their rich forest and mineral resources), and who needed to be pacified and brought under colonial rule. Devalle (1992:70-72), for one, suggests that the 'tribal construct' served to incorporate the people of regions such as Jharkhand into the colonial economic system in a subordinate position and to provide a cheap and captive labour force for mines and plantations. One need not accept a crude functionalist version of this argument to recognise that the classification of tribes was closely linked to administrative imperatives, and the latter to the exploitation of people and resources.

In their enthusiasm to define, settle and then administer the shifting and fractious populations that came to be called 'tribes', the state christened some with names that they themselves did not recognise, lumped unrelated communities together under one name, and divided other fairly uniform populations into different 'tribes' (Pathy 1984:2-3). The definition of tribes as culturally distinct -- from Hindu society as well as from one another -- hinged on a catalogue of fixed and presumably timeless cultural (as well as racial and linguistic) characteristics assigned to them by anthropologists. The tribes were labelled and classified according to language groups and biological 'races', and the uniqueness of each was established through the description of cultural practices and beliefs. Although the standard model of primitive people as culturally homogeneous and structurally undifferentiated clearly did not fit the Indian tribes very well, this did not deter official anthropologists from representing tribal cultures as discrete, seamless and timeless wholes. The anthropological gaze not only constructed the 'tribes' as unitary and well-integrated social units, it also objectified their 'cultures' by defining them in terms of age-old 'customs' and traditions. These in turn became the basis for the 'indigenous' systems of law and political organisation which the state attempted to impose on these areas in the name of 'customary law' (Sundar 1997:166-70).

The increasing marginalisation, impoverishment and exploitation of tribal peoples as a result of colonial rule, together with the notion of tribal difference and primitiveness promoted by anthropology, led administrators of tribal areas to argue in favour of a policy of protectionism for tribal areas. The anthropology of tribes was closely linked to the colonial policies of isolationism and indirect rule. Anthropologically inclined administrators of tribal areas such as W.V. Grigson and J.H. Hutton believed that knowledge of tribal culture would

facilitate better governance, and conversely they supported indirect rule as a means of maintaining native customs (Sundar 1997:160-61). In fact, the central aim of the tribal policies advocated by the British administrators was the preservation of indigenous 'culture', and the most important means through which this was to be achieved was the creation and implementation of customary law (1997:165).¹¹ The ultimate result of these policies was the designation of 'Excluded' and 'Partially Excluded' areas by the Government of India Act 1935 and the consequent scheduling of tribes. This act created a pan-Indian tribal identity that did not exist earlier, as well as political interests in maintaining this identity. The classification process also tended to convert what were originally fluid social systems, within which individuals were incorporated at multiple levels, into 'tribal societies' with fixed identities and rigid boundaries. Thus the official anthropology of tribes eventually produced the reality which it had imagined.¹²

The scheduling of tribes gave rise to the well-known debate between official anthropologists (mostly British ICS officers), who favoured a policy of isolation or protection, and the (mostly Indian) nationalists, who saw it as yet another attempt to 'divide and rule'. The arguments on both sides reveal the extent to which the 19th century ethnological discourse on tribes had permeated nationalist consciousness. The most visible spokesman for the protectionist side was the anthropologist Verrier Elwin, who advocated preservation of the 'tribal way of life' through state-enforced isolation from Hindu society. In *The Baiga*, he notoriously recommended the formation of a 'sort of National Park' to be administered directly by an expert commissioner, in which the tribals would be protected from contact with the outside world and allowed carry on their traditional way of life (R. Guha 1996:2379).¹³ The opposition between 'primitive' and 'civilised' that underpins the tribal concept is particularly marked in Elwin's work, but with the signs reversed. In his prolific writings he developed a romantic image of tribal life that became central to the formation of a discourse about tribals among the educated Indian and British public. Elwin's 'pure' aboriginal was characterised by a love of nature, high status of women, communal property, simplicity, social equality, cultural richness embodied in tribal music and dance, sexual freedom, a strong sense of community and equality, and zest for life. In the encounter between the civilised and the primitive, the latter were bound to lose their land, forests, culture, and their sense of self and community (R. Guha 1996:2378).¹⁴ The adverse effects of 'culture contact' (referring to contact with Indian 'outsiders' such as traders rather than with colonial rulers, considered to be protectors of the tribes) is a theme found in the writings of many of the early

anthropologists. Another legacy of 19th century ethnology that is reproduced in Elwin's writing is the idea that the tribals are the indigenous inhabitants of India:

The aboriginals are the real swadeshi products of India, in whose presence everyone is foreign. These are the ancient people with moral claims and rights thousands of years old. They were here first: they should come first in our regard [Elwin 1943:32, quoted in R. Guha 1996:2383].

On the nationalist side we find prominent sociologist G.S. Ghurye, who attacked Elwin's position in *The Aboriginals, So-called and their Future* (1943; republished in 1959 as *The Scheduled Tribes*). Ghurye pointed to the complex history of migrations on the subcontinent and to the close relations and cultural similarities between tribal groups and their Hindu neighbours in order to argue against the tribe/caste distinction. He regarded the tribals as 'imperfectly integrated classes of Hindu society' or 'backward Hindus', rather than aborigines.¹⁵ But Ghurye also reproduced the standard ethnological parable, asserting that Indian civilisation has been constituted through an ongoing process of "assimilation of smaller groups of different cultures into larger ones"; because incompletely assimilated groups appeared to the British to be different from the rest, they were designated as tribals. This, to Ghurye, was the origin of the "tribal problem", whose solution lay in assimilation or "strengthening the ties of the tribals with the other backward classes through their integration" (1959:207) rather than the preservation of cultural diversity.¹⁶

The controversy about assimilation versus isolation of tribals dominated the debate on tribal policy in the Constituent Assembly.¹⁷ Like Ghurye, many nationalist leaders construed independent India's central problem as that of 'national integration', and the nation was defined essentially as Hindu (official pronouncements about secularism notwithstanding). Cultural diversity posed a threat to the nation that must be kept at bay through appropriate policies of development and 'controlled integration' for tribals, while protectionist policies would only encourage separatism. However, as Sundar (1997:189-90) points out, this debate rather missed the point, for by the 1950s most tribal areas, with their vast resources, and many tribals themselves, transformed into migrant labourers, were already deeply integrated into the expanding capitalist economy. That most members of the Constituent Assembly could so concern themselves with the question of cultural diversity while ignoring the rapidly growing exploitation of tribal peoples and resources by the state itself (as well as by other interests

promoted by development policies), testifies either to their deep cynicism or to the great power of colonial anthropology to shape the terms of political discourse.

Anthropology and the state in post-colonial India

The category of tribe was enshrined in the Constitution of independent India through the provisions that permit certain concessions and preferences for Scheduled Tribes (ST), along with the Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Classes.¹⁸ The list of Scheduled Tribes promulgated by the President of India in 1950 essentially carried forward the list of 'Backward Tribes' earlier produced under the 1935 Act, with some additions (Galanter 1991:148-49). Now as in 1935, the criteria employed to designate the tribes were vague; tribes were defined partly in terms of habitat and geographical isolation, but more on the basis of social, religious, linguistic and cultural distinctiveness, with emphasis on their 'tribal characteristics', especially primitiveness (1991:150-52). In 1951 the Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes proposed that the following characteristics could be used to distinguish tribes from castes: tribal origin (!), primitive way of life, remote habitation, and general backwardness in all respects. These criteria for inclusion in the ST schedule have not been significantly challenged or altered since (Galanter 1991:152).

Like the concept of tribe, the basic contours of tribal policy -- a mixture of paternalism and repression -- also did not change greatly after independence.¹⁹ There is a fundamental contradiction in tribal policy, in that it mandates the preservation of tribal culture and a measure of autonomy for tribal areas while at the same time encouraging 'development' and 'integration' with the mainstream. The state alternately patronises adivasi groups and suppresses their resistance movements, all the while pursuing economic development policies that exacerbate the marginalisation of adivasis by destroying their resource base or displacing them altogether. In Jharkhand, for instance, the official policy of protecting adivasi culture is directly contradicted by the post-independence economic policy of rapid industrialisation and exploitation of mineral resources in the region; this contradiction is at the root of the Jharkhand movement (Corbridge 1993). Although the state is committed to tribal 'development', in the name of forest protection and the public good it reserves for itself the natural resources of their regions on the plea that they will be exploited by outsiders or destroyed by adivasis themselves.

The conventional anthropological image of tribals as simple, backwards and close to nature underpins official discourse on tribal development. This discourse, like development

discourse in general, partakes of evolutionism: tribes are seen as people who live in an archaic stage of human evolution, hence their need for development through ‘integration’ with the more civilised sections of society (the ‘mainstream’). The notion that tribals are prone to exploitation due to their simplicity, backwardness and isolation, tends to deflect attention away from actual exploitation by representatives of the state such as forest guards. In the view of many government officers, it is the ignorance and tradition-mindedness of tribals that is responsible for their immiseration, rather than their position within the larger political-economic system. The solution, then, is *more* development, defined as greater participation in the market economy, even while preserving those ‘cultural traditions’ that are regarded as non-threatening by tribal welfare officers (Devalle 1992:202-4). Although official policy on forests and tribal peoples has begun to be re-oriented away from paternalism and towards a recognition of the need for local autonomy (or at least consultation with local people in decision-making), it continues to be guided by the standard anthropological discourse on tribal society. In the context of reinvigorated movements for regional autonomy and tribal self-rule, the Bhuria Committee’s report (1995) echoed the same old themes: tribal societies have had “their own customary laws, traditional practices, community ethos,” and so on, that need to be preserved; “... many tribal communities have been living autonomously cut off from the rest of the society...”; they “have been practising democracy, having been characterised by [an] egalitarian spirit” and “communitarian and co-operative spirit” (*Vikalp* 1995:48-49). The report also asserts that tribals had a “harmonious relationship with nature [which was] ... an example of sustainable development” (quoted in R. Guha 1996:2388).²⁰

Modern anthropology in India also reproduces the colonial discourse on tribes. The basic premises of tribal anthropology are derived from this discourse: the caste/tribe distinction, with its underlying connotation of civilised/savage, and the concomitant implication that tribals are at a lower stage of social evolution (the ‘backward’ tribals in need of ‘uplift’ by the state); the notion that adivasis are culturally (and often physically) distinct elements of the population; and the belief that this cultural difference is the root cause of their oppression, poverty and marginalisation. Popular texts by anthropologists such as Furer-Haimendorf and Stephen Fuchs, for example, purvey the standard anthropological view of tribes to students and general readers. Furer-Haimendorf describes the Indian tribes as “...*autochthonous* societies which persisted until recently in an *archaic* and in many respects *primitive* life-style”, and which are under threat from “the mounting influence of economically advanced and politically powerful groups” (1982:1; italics added). In Fuchs’ book we find the

assertion that the “aboriginal tribes in India are in most cases survivals from the later prehistoric population groups” (1973:23). He suggests that ‘cultural self-sufficiency’ is the most relevant criterion for distinguishing tribes from castes, and that tribes have deliberately kept themselves apart from the “mainstream of national life”, holding on to “their own traditions and values” while the “majority communities in India marched on and progressed ...” (1973:25). Anthropology textbooks also regularly reproduce the Aryan invasion story (in which tribals appear as aboriginals or *dasyus*), identify tribal groups in terms of their ‘race’, and quote colonial texts as authorities (for example, see Vidyarthi and Rai 1977).

Further, tribal studies (many of them state-sponsored) tend to mimic the structure and content of the potted colonial ethnographic accounts of ‘castes and tribes’, but with the added concern for applied anthropology oriented to ‘tribal development’. Most are synchronic and descriptive, representing tribes as internally homogeneous and differentiated from other groups only in terms of their ‘customs and beliefs’.²¹ Most also commit the common anthropological sin of ‘allochronism’ (Fabian 1983), depicting tribal culture as timeless and outside of history.²² Although many studies address issues such as ‘social change’, the ‘absorption’ of tribes into Hindu society, or practical questions related to tribal development policies, the relation of adivasi groups to the regional and national political economy, their participation in wider historical processes, and evidence of internal stratification, have been largely ignored.²³ Instead, the anthropology of tribes privileges culture: standard ethnographic monographs concentrate on their customs, folklore, dances, and religion, highlighting the differences between tribal and Hindu culture. According to these texts, tribal society is characterised by unstratified lineage- or clan-based social organisation rather than caste; animism instead of Hinduism; the ‘high status of women’; relative sexual freedom; simple level of technology and economic organisation (primarily foraging and primitive agriculture); an egalitarian ethos; and the pursuit of pleasure (alleged fondness for drinking and dancing) rather than material wealth. Some anthropologists appear to regard tribal regions as anthropological museums and adivasis as cultural specimens to be preserved (Devalle 1992:203). The preservation of tribal culture is accomplished mainly through its objectification, as in the organised performance of ‘folk’ dances for urban audiences and the marketing of tribal art and artefacts.

By emphasising cultural difference, standard anthropological accounts as well as official discourses project an image of adivasis that accords very little with reality, either at present or in the recent past: they are portrayed as people who live off the forests by foraging or slash-and-burn cultivation using simple technology; who have long been isolated in hilly and

inaccessible regions and have therefore been cut off from wider civilisation and the market economy; and who existed for thousands of years in this condition until they were brought under colonial rule. Corbridge (1988) calls this the 'ideology of tribal economy and society': tribal economy is represented as a subsistence economy with little functional differentiation, communal ownership of land, equality of access to resources, and absence of the profit motive. Yet the available evidence, including easily available government statistics, largely contradicts this image: far from being 'autochthonous', many tribal groups are known to have migrated recently into their areas of current residence; most are settled cultivators; most have had extensive contacts with the outside world, including trade, even prior to the colonial period; and many have long depended on wage labour for their survival (Hardiman 1995:11-12). For example, the common notion that tribal groups in Jharkhand live off the forests through subsistence agriculture is contradicted by the fact that many have been working as unskilled workers in mines and industry and as agricultural labourers since at least the 1920s (Corbridge 1988:32-5). This raises the question of why, in the face of overwhelming counter-evidence, this 'ideology of tribal society' is so enduring. Although Corbridge (1988) suggests that this 'ideology' must be dispensed with in order to understand the current trajectory of Jharkhand politics, perhaps it is precisely on this ideology, and its deployment by political leaders, that one needs to focus.²⁴ The question is not whether the 'ideology of tribal society' represents social reality -- ideologies rarely do-- but how it has structured political practice.

As the now extensive literature on indigenous peoples movements suggests, the formation of indigenous or adivasi identity is a complex dialectical process involving political and cultural interaction among local groups, agencies of the state, and knowledge-producing practices such as anthropological surveys. Relatively little work of the 'invention of tradition' genre has been done on the formation of ideology within regional autonomy or adivasi movements in India. However, a survey of the literature on tribal movements suggests that such movements, like indigenous and ethnic movements elsewhere, have incorporated to a great extent the colonial discourse on tribes. To illustrate this process, in the following section I look briefly at the ideology of the Jharkhand movement, one of the earliest political movements in India to invoke the notion of indigeness. This example demonstrates how images and idioms of tribal culture derived from colonial ethnology and official accounts have gone into the making of an ethnic identity. But it also suggests that adivasi or indigenous identities have been internalised, acquired legitimacy and been reproduced precisely because

they have played a crucial role in mobilising tribal resistance to colonial rule and other forms of exploitation.

Anthropological discourse and adivasi movement: Jharkhand

According to most accounts, the Jharkhand movement arose around the turn of the century within the emerging class of urban-based educated tribals. Most researchers emphasise the influence of Christian missionaries, who provided education to tribals and contributed to the development of a separate tribal identity, in the genesis of this movement.²⁵ Christian-led reform movements that were active in the early 20th century evolved into a political movement. The demand for a separate administrative unit in Chotanagpur was first placed before the Simon Commission in 1928 by the Chotanagpur Unnati Samaj, led by Bishop Van Hoeck and Juel Lakra (Ghosh 1993a:1788). Several reformist organisations -- both Christian and non-Christian -- such as the Chotanagpur Improvement Society merged into the Chotanagpur Adivasi Mahasabha in 1937, which in turn gave rise to the Jharkhand Party.

Earlier, the identity of 'tribal' people of Jharkhand was tied to the local community or *jat*, such as Munda and Santal.²⁶ However, the Government of India Act of 1935, under which Chotanagpur and Santal Parganas were declared 'Partially Excluded' areas, as well as other political developments of that period, stimulated a movement for inter-tribal solidarity. A unified adivasi identity began to be strongly articulated with the founding of the Adivasi Mahasabha (Sen 1989). In fact, the term *adivasi* seems to have originated in this region around the same time, and the term was first used publicly by the Adivasi Mahasabha (Hardiman 1995:13, n.34).²⁷ Led by the Oxford-educated Munda Jaipal Singh, the Mahasabha's aim was to unite tribals against exploitation by 'outsiders' rather than to join the struggle against colonial rule (Devalle 1992:139). The rhetoric of Mahasabha leaders emphasised tribal language and culture and their long occupation of the region as grounds for demanding political autonomy (Sen 1989:149). Employing a 'reinvention of tradition' strategy, Singh invoked popular memories of the late 19th century anti-colonial struggle led by Birsa Munda in Chotanagpur, and Singh is alleged to have acted as if he were Birsa's reincarnation (Devalle 1992:139).²⁸ The creation of a region-wide tribal identity based on the notion of original inhabitants was particularly problematic in Jharkhand, with its diverse language and ethnic groups and complex history of internal and external migrations. Jharkhand leaders and intellectuals attempted to solve this problem by identifying similarities of language, culture and social practices across various groups in a conscious attempt at region-wide

assimilation (Sengupta 1980, 1982a), the ultimate aim being to construct a viable Jharkhand nationality (Ghosh and Sengupta 1982).²⁹ It was also in 1938 that the term 'Jharkhandi' was first used, although its meaning was ambiguous (Sengupta 1980:664).

A major strategy employed in the formation of adivasi or Jharkhand identity was the demonisation of an 'Other' -- the non-tribal outsider or *diku*. Although the origin of this term is not clear, most scholars believe that the category *diku*, as well as opposition by local people to migrants from the plains, existed even prior to colonialism (Sinha, et. al. 1969). However, the meaning and political significance of the term changed due to the Permanent Settlement, which increased the power of *jagirdars* and *zamindars* to extract rents and evict tenants, leading to widespread alienation of tribal lands. *Diku* came to refer to landlord or *zamindar*, and *adivasi* (or *jungli*, as the tribals were called by outsiders) to tenant or agricultural labourer, lending a strong class connotation to the adivasi-diku dichotomy (Devalle 1992:73; Sinha, et. al. 1969:133). Lower castes that were in a subordinate position to the dominant tribal groups were not regarded as *diku* (Singh 1985:165). However, after the term was incorporated as an important component of Jharkhand political ideology, it was used to refer to any outsider who does not identify with Jharkhand; the term also explicitly equated the outsider with 'exploiter' (Badgaiyan 1977). Thus the term *diku* was consciously reinvented and promoted by the Jharkhand movement in order to consolidate adivasi identity (Sinha, et. al. 1969:136-37). After the politicisation of *diku*, even non-tribals who had been resident in the region for generations were labelled as *dikus* or exploiters and blamed for the 'backwardness' of the tribals.³⁰

With the demise of the Adivasi Mahasabha and the formation of the Jharkhand Party in 1950, the emphasis on tribal identity was overshadowed by 'ethno-regionalism' (Singh 1983a:5-6). This was partly a response to the results of the 1951 Census, which showed lower figures for the tribal population than had the 1941 Census, suggesting that adivasis were not in a majority in most of the Jharkhand districts.³¹ Political strategy then began to emphasise regional rather than tribal identity in order to encompass a larger proportion of the population -- a necessary step to support the demand for a separate state -- and the Jharkhand Party began to open its membership to certain categories of non-tribals. This required a reformulation of basic ideology and liberalisation of the definition of 'Jharkhandi' to include *sadan* communities, which were rehabilitated as 'old *dikus*' (Devalle 1992:156; Singh 1985:201-2). 'Sadans' were defined as those outsiders (not included in the Scheduled Tribes) who, in addition to long residence in the region, observe "...various local festivals, share the

cultural heritage, take pride in adivasi martyrs and worship tribal deities under 'sarna' (sacred grove) as Jharkhandis..." (Ghosh 1993b:127). Although there has been a shift to regional identity, the emphasis on a *cultural* or ethnic (rather than geographical or political-economic) definition of Jharkhand has persisted, reflected in the increasing use of the concept of 'nationality' to describe Jharkhand identity.³² The Jharkhand Coordination Committee declared in 1987 that

the Jharkhand question is in essence a nationality question ... The foundation of the claim of this political-geographic region is its cultural unity, geophysical uniformity and structural similarity of economic life ... all the sons of the soil, both the tribes, the Sadans and others who share a common history and cultural heritage and practice a common value system of Jharkhand [sic] are indispensable parts of Jharkhandi people, are Jharkhandis [quoted in Sengupta 1988:1111].

The conception of the Jharkhandi community in the political ideology of the Jharkhand movement shifts between a narrow tribal definition and a broader regional one, yet the 'tribal construct' continues to underpin the 'imagined community' of Jharkhand (Devalle 1992:157). This can be seen in the recent struggle over the name to be given to the new Jharkhand state.³³

Cultural revivalism has been a key strategy of the Jharkhand movement, as it is generally in identity-based social movements, particularly among formerly colonised peoples. In cultural revivalist strategies, the presumed core values of 'traditional' society are objectified, idealised, and promoted as a basis for political organisation or resistance. In Jharkhand, such strategies have included the invention of traditions and the codification of customs, drawing upon the objectified knowledge of tribal culture produced over the years mainly by non-tribals. Early Christian-led reform movements stressed both the 'backwardness' of adivasis and the need for cultural revival (Devalle 1992:138). Later, when the Jharkhand movement needed to consolidate a region-wide adivasi identity, leaders drew upon images of tribal culture that had been produced by ethnologists as well as by missionaries who had been active in the region for a long time. This knowledge helped to form the sense of common culture and history needed to build a movement of tribal unity against 'outsiders' (Singh 1985:198). For example, in the 1920s 'traditional' political institutions such as the *parha* (tribal assembly) were dredged up from a rediscovered past and reinstated (Singh 1983a:4). The early movement also called for a return to a lost golden age when traditional culture and community flourished -- a common theme of tribal movements -- and lost 'scripts' that were

said to have been used by the tribes in the past were discovered (Singh 1985:200). The promotion of Birsa as the 'father' of Jharkhand and as a symbol of tribal assertion is another 'invention of tradition' strategy aimed at providing political legitimacy to the movement by establishing a connection with a heroic past (Devalle 1992:178). Anthropology was involved directly as well as indirectly in the growth of the movement: S.C. Roy, considered the 'father of Indian anthropology', championed the demand for tribal autonomy in Chotanagpur and drafted a number of the memoranda submitted to government bodies by tribal organisations (Singh 1983a:2-3).

Identity-based political movements must establish their claims to cultural authenticity and historical continuity in order to unify the people as well as to establish legitimacy in the eyes of the state. This requires the objectification and reification of 'culture' in a way not dissimilar to its early usage in anthropology. The understanding of culture as an object that must be preserved is a creation of this kind of politics. For example, the founder of the Horo Cultural Centre had to invent a word for 'culture' in Mundari, *sasankir*, and introduce it to the Munda people whom the centre is intended to serve (Devalle 1992:176). Even the Jharkhandi Mukti Morcha (JMM), a more radical party, did not shrink from the cultural revivalist strategy. It installed an 'ancient' system of tribal self-government, the *baisi* (village assembly), in Santal Parganas to function as a court (Singh 1983a:13), and advocated a return to the tribal 'tradition' of common ownership of land (Singh 1985:213). The JMM also has been active in initiating a cultural awakening by promoting tribal languages and literature (Ghosh and Sengupta 1982:246), and it has used invented traditions to introduce an alien conception of morality, such as the anti-liquor campaign, into adivasi society (Devalle 1992:189).

A variety of organisations have emerged to promote adivasi culture, and a series of conferences and meetings have been held for upper middle class professionals and intellectuals to debate the 'cultural crisis' and the issue of Jharkhandi identity (Raichaudhuri 1992:2553). Intellectual activity promoting cultural renewal is centred particularly in Ranchi University and its Tribal and Regional Languages Department (Sengupta 1988:1112).³⁴ Recent strategies of identity formation include the promotion of education, literature and publishing in the vernacular languages of Jharkhand, and the development of a *lingua franca* (Sadani) and a common script (Devalle 1992:174-76; Panchbhair 1983:43). For example, Raghunath Murmu spearheaded a movement for Santhal solidarity by advocating a common language (Mundari) and religion (Sarana) for the Mundari group of tribals, and by inventing the Ol Chiki script which he hoped would popularise tribal language and literature (Mahapatra 1983; Singh

1982:1382-83). Another example of objectification of culture is the transformation of adivasi dance from a collective expressive activity into a commoditised performance from which unacceptable elements (such as traditional dress, or undress) are excised (Devalle 1992:174).

One of the major revitalisation movements in Chhotanagpur has been the *sarna dharma* movement, which attempted to forge pan-tribal unity by constructing and promoting a common non-Christian tribal religion. This movement began in the early 1930s with a series of conferences, whose participants concluded that the sacred grove complex is the centre-piece of tribal culture. "The conferences agreed on a common name, Sarna dharam, to denote the ancient religion of the tribes of Chotanagpur" (Hembram 1983:88). Thus a regional tribal religion based on the sacred grove was virtually invented. The *sarna dharma* leaders identified the common symbols and rituals in the religious practices of different tribal groups, and these were in turn appropriated by the Jharkhand Party in its efforts to create a regional culture (Hembram 1983:89). In 1978 the Bhartiya Sarna Sangh was established "to preserve and develop the ancient (*adi*) culture of the Adibasis, to foster respect for the *Sarna* and to protect the religion based on it, to encourage tribal's [sic] dance, music and researches into all aspects of tribal culture ..." (Hembram 1983:90-91).³⁵

The point here is not simply that the reinterpretation of history and the preservation of 'tradition' in the form of language, customs, and institutions have been central to the autonomy movement in Jharkhand: these are features of ethnic and indigenous movements everywhere. It is rather that these representations and strategies have been profoundly shaped by the knowledge about tribals that was created over the years by ethnologists and other outside observers and to some extent institutionalised within the practices of the state.³⁶ While there is little direct evidence to point to the specific sources of conceptions of Jharkhandi culture and history promoted by the movement, it appears that at least some elements have been drawn from ethnological, official and missionary texts.³⁷ For example, one important marker of tribal-ness that has been identified by ethnologists from the 19th century onwards is 'tribal religion', considered to be distinct from Hinduism and usually defined as 'animism'. When the census became a major site of communal struggle in the 1930s and 1940s, this definition was contested by the Hindu Mahasabha, which argued that tribals should be categorised as 'Hindus'.³⁸ Hindu sabhas campaigned among tribals to convince them of the similarities between their religion and Hinduism. Hindu organisations pressed this issue particularly hard in Chotanagpur because of the strong Christian influence, but adivasis as well as Muslims opposed attempts to alter the enumeration process so that more adivasis would be

recorded as Hindus (Sundar 1999:110-11). At the same time, the Jharkhand movement induced some Christian tribals to 'reconvert' to tribal religion or *sarna dharma* (Hembram 1983:90-91).³⁹

In addition to the construction of tribal religion, standard anthropological understandings of tribal culture are echoed in various ways within the ideology of the movement. Devalle argues that the Jharkhand Party has promoted a conception of the Jharkhand community that derives from the 'ideological colonial legacy' she calls the 'tribal construct'. By adopting the official 'tribal discourse', the party is reproducing this tribal construct, which associates 'tribes' with 'backwardness', 'weakness' and 'ignorance', as well as the dependence of adivasis on the state (1992:153-54). Not surprisingly, this notion of tribal identity has been promoted by the educated rural and urban elite rather than by the 'backwards' tribals. Adivasi identity has been constructed by urban, educated (and even Christian) political leaders by selecting elements from a very anthropological notion of 'traditional culture'. For example, a Christian adivasi leader listed the five major qualities of 'tribal life' as: "equality, dignity of labour, common ownership of the means of production, dancing and singing to make life liveable, and efforts towards community welfare" (Devalle 1992:161). These characteristics clearly echo standard anthropological accounts such as those of Verrier Elwin or Furer-Haimendorf. Similarly, the Jharkhand Coordination Committee has chosen the following as markers of Jharkhand 'cultural identity': harmony with nature, social equality (including relative equality of women), and collectivism (Kelkar and Nathan 1991:22). By phrasing their identity in terms of the tribal model, "indigenous elites seek a share in power over their own societies by using a pool of common traditions and cultural codes" (Devalle 1992:154). However, this familiar argument about elite manipulation of identity within ethnic movements fails to account for the popular strength of autonomy movements and of the symbols they invoke.

The ideology of the Jharkhand movement posits an idealised past in which tribals lived in harmony and independence until the 'dikus' encroached on their territory. The identification of adivasis as the indigenous people of Jharkhand is used to claim prior rights to economic and political power in the region. The following statement by a tribal member of the Bihar Legislative Assembly is telling:

All our problems come from colonisation. The British were here for a hundred and eighty years, before them Muslims for seven hundred years, and before

them the Hindus for a thousand years. Before the Hindus, the tribals lived here alone. The lands, the best lands, were taken from the tribals by these invaders ... so that the tribals are now more or less slaves [quoted in Weiner 1978:157].

Further, Jharkhand ideology, while building a positive regional and adivasi identity, tends to reproduce the official view of tribals as 'backwards' and 'weak'. However, this image is reworked, turned against the state, and used to demand political autonomy. The incorporation of evolutionary notions about tribals, as well as the ethnological dichotomy between Hindu 'civilisation' and 'primitive' tribes, is evident in statements by political leaders. Even leaders of the radical Birsa Seva Dal have absorbed the ethnological image of tribes, even while resisting adivasi identity:

The adivasis think of themselves as subhuman, a people without rights. We try to teach them that they are not inferior to others. They feel that way because there is reason to be ashamed of being called a tribal. After all, what does tribal actually mean? It means a primitive way of living... A tribal doesn't believe in science He doesn't reason, but has faith ...

We believe in detribalisation. Some people want us to be proud of being tribal ... I am more interested in what we should change than what we should keep [Lalit Kurza, founder of Birsa Seva Dal, quoted in Weiner 1978:178].

Although Kurza rejects the designation 'tribal' because of its primitive implications, he accepts tribal names such as Munda and Ho as referring to different 'races', harking back to the earliest ethnological view of Indian society:

We can still be Oraons and Mundas and Hos, like the Welsh and the Scots, but that doesn't mean we are tribal... We belong to many different *races* -- the Munda, the Oraon, the Ho, they are different races -- but we all live in the same place [quoted in Weiner 1978:178-9].

Similar views are expressed in slogans recorded by Vidyarthi (1971) during a demonstration in Ranchi in 1966: "Tribal culture is the most primitive. It does not bear any impact of other religions" (quoted in Sahay 1977:52).⁴⁰

This brief look at the literature on the Jharkhand movement demonstrates the extent to which anthropological discourse has shaped the formation of identity, ideology and political strategy.⁴¹ However, this is not to argue that adivasi or regional movements simply absorb and reiterate identities and discourses that were produced by colonial ethnology (and reinforced by

the postcolonial state). Nor can the ideologies of movements such as Jharkhand be understood as expressions of authentic subaltern consciousness. Rather, as Sivaramakrishnan puts it, tribal resistance movements, like other political movements, develop through the “articulation of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses ... within ongoing processes of contention and struggle” (1995:33).⁴² The focus of research then has to be on the dialectical construction of identity and political ideology through the interaction of diverse discourses, both hegemonic and resistant, without privileging either colonialism or the pre-modern authentic ‘community’ as the source of subaltern consciousness. For example, the preoccupation of middle class Jharkhandis with the cultural assertion of adivasi identity through control over language and education suggests that the official discourse on tribes is deployed as a strategy of resistance (Devalle 1992:158-60). Xaxa (1999b:3595) argues that adivasi identity and consciousness has been crystallising across different tribal groups even at the grassroots level, due to ongoing marginalisation together with increasing activism and awareness of oppression. The assertion of adivasi identity is not just a reflection of official or anthropological discourses about tribes imposed from above, or of the international politics of indigenism, but stems from the common experience of powerlessness and oppression. A purely constructionist approach to adivasi identity would fail to acknowledge the political power of this discourse for resistance movements, focusing instead on the hegemony of the state. Similarly, Corbridge argues that the Scheduled Tribe classification has provided a basis for political mobilisation, and the reservations policy a source of social and economic mobility in Jharkhand, and that it is by deploying the tribal identity through such strategies that the Jharkhand movement has been able to succeed (2000:81-82). As he puts it, the “key to Jharkhandi politics has been a willingness to contest the state by colonizing the state/State” (2000:82). However, this dialectic between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses within adivasi movements contributes to the entrenchment of colonial categories such as ‘tribe’ within the policies of the state and in public consciousness, an outcome that may not always be positive.

Politics of indigenism and politics of knowledge

The colonial image of tribal society is reproduced not only within movements such as Jharkhand but by other political discourses as well. Various adivasi struggles against the state, for instance on the issue of displacement, have appropriated this discourse to make their case. The argument for tribal ‘difference’ has become even more compelling with the increasing recognition of indigenous people’s rights at the international level, which has put pressure on

governments to respect the prior rights of indigenous peoples to land and livelihood. The discourse of the indigenous people's movement and the international language of rights increasingly structure political discourses about tribes in India, reinforcing the notion that they are the indigenous people of the country. For example, an independent review of the Sardar Sarovar project (the Morse Commission), appointed by the World Bank in 1991, accepted the anti-dam movement's claim that most of the project affected people (Bhil and Bhilala) are significantly different from non-tribal people. The Commission was particularly concerned about the displacement of tribals in the project area because of World Bank directives that mandate special measures to be taken if a development project encroaches on 'the traditional territory of tribal people' (quoted in Baviskar 1995b:91). It recommended withdrawal of World Bank funding for the project in part because it would displace tribal people without providing adequate rehabilitation (Baviskar 1995b).

This situation has put the Indian state in an anomalous position. On the one hand the government is obliged by the Constitution and its own tribal policy to treat adivasis or Scheduled Tribes as a special category and to promote their 'development' and 'welfare', even while preserving their cultural traditions. On the other hand, in international forums it has consistently resisted the identification of the Scheduled Tribes as indigenous people, thereby refusing to recognise that they have special or prior rights to land or territory. The argument of the Indian government is that there is no proof that the Scheduled Tribes are the descendants of the original inhabitants of the territories in which they now live, and that there might be other unspecified categories of people who could claim indigenous status in the future (Pathy 1995).⁴³ India has not ratified ILO Convention 169, an international instrument that recognises the rights of indigenous peoples, nor is it likely to ratify the Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People. Adivasi and human rights activists, on the other hand, have tried to take advantage of the international trend by claiming indigenous status for adivasis as the basis for building legal arguments to fight for various kinds of community rights.⁴⁴

The growth of indigenous peoples' movements around the world has raised difficult political and ethical questions for anthropologists, who increasingly find themselves pulled into the identity politics of 'their' communities. The legitimisation of ethnic groups as political subjects in the international arena depends upon their self-objectification as 'indigenous', and organisations working for the defence of indigenous people's rights look to the anthropologist for expert knowledge that will further their own projects (usually to establish cultural

continuity within a given territory): “In this global ‘culturalist’ political environment, ethnographic discourse has become a strategic tool -- a symbolic mirror (in identity reconstruction) and a means of legitimation (by scholarly recognition)” (Albert 1997:59). Anthropologists may even be required to espouse a position of ‘anthropological advocacy’ as a pre-condition of the ethnographic relationship, forcing them to shift from their cherished fieldwork method of ‘participant-observation’ to a stance of ‘observant participation’ (Albert 1997:57-60). Thus scholars working with indigenous groups face the difficult political problem of how to represent their subjects -- to construct their own scholarly representations for their primary academic audience, to accept the self-representations of their subjects, or even to participate in the process of identity construction, jettisoning their usual objectivist stance. This dilemma has been sharpened by the constructivist tendencies of recent studies of indigenous movements, which stress the ‘invented’ nature of all traditions and thereby challenge the claims to cultural authenticity put forth by such movements.⁴⁵

The political problem for anthropologists in India is somewhat different, because the relationship between anthropology and adivasi movements in India has more often been mediated by the state. While anthropological discourse has been appropriated by adivasi politics in India as in indigenous movements elsewhere, there are clearly major contrasts between these two kinds of movement. In the case of indigenous movements in regions such as Oceania, anthropological knowledge has been used as a resource for cultural reconstruction, whereas in India cultural identities have been much more the products of state policies and official anthropology. Because Indian anthropology has from its inception been closely tied to the state, the anthropology of tribes cannot be understood without reference to state interests, and by extension to the wider political economic context. When the production of academic knowledge about adivasis continues to be controlled largely by the state, directly and indirectly, and this knowledge is derived primarily from colonial discourses, how is the anthropologist to move beyond the standard practices and categories? One option is to employ the kind of Saidian deconstruction of colonial discourse that marks some recent historical writing. Ludden, for instance, argues that because orientalist knowledge was appropriated in the construction of nationalism, “only intellectual labor that demolishes the nation as a cultural formation of social being and historical becoming can challenge the authority of orientalism as a body of knowledge” (1994:274). However, as critics of the ‘invention’ trend in anthropology have pointed out, this strategy ends up simply reasserting academic, and hence elite, control over the ‘truth’, and as a result can harm the interests of those who depend upon

‘colonial discourses’ in forming political strategies (Briggs 1996). Can academics find other ways to develop critical self-awareness about their disciplines and work towards a kind of knowledge production that is more progressive as well as politically sensitive towards the people they purport to understand, and for whom they often claim to speak?

Although the category of tribe was constructed through colonial and post-colonial discourses and practices, it now has a social reality that is rooted in adivasi’ own experience of marginalisation. Therefore to challenge the authenticity of adivasi identity and claims to indigenusness through academic work may be to strengthen the hand of the state and of those who already hold power against the interests of some of the most marginalised and powerless groups in society. The anthropologist or scholar who writes on adivasi and their movements must then decide whether to maintain an objectivist stance and produce work that may challenge claims to indigenusness, or to orient her writing to the defence of such claims even against her better academic judgement. This dilemma will become more acute in the coming years if adivasi rights movements find it expedient to utilise anthropological knowledge as they incorporate the international discourse on indigenous rights.

Finally, we need to consider whether the production of cultural identities by state-sponsored anthropology inhibits the development of progressive politics by channelling political energy into other struggles, such as nativist movements, and diverting attention away from ‘hard’ issues such as the distribution of resources in society. When groups engaged in identity politics must seek legitimacy, rights or autonomy on the basis of ethnic or regional identities, and when the state recognises such claims only on these bases, the discourse of culture becomes a closed circle. As we have seen, in the present political context cultural assertion can take a movement only so far; after a point the state can assert its prerogative to redefine subaltern identities according to its own convenience (in this case, denying indigenous status to Scheduled Tribes). However, we also need to ask why indigenusness and ethnicity have become the only legitimate grounds for the assertion of rights by subaltern groups, and whether anthropological work must continue to support this kind of politics or could instead be redirected to the exploration of other avenues of struggle that have received less scholarly attention.

Notes

¹The seminal texts for this school of thought are Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) and Anderson (1991). The invention of tradition argument has also been applied by anthropologists to ethnic and nationalist movements. Frequently cited work of this genre includes Handler (1988), Hanson (1989), Keesing (1989, 1994) and Linnekin (1983, 1991).

²This argument is similar to that found in Partha Chatterjee's (1986) work on nationalist discourse in India.

³As can be seen from the repeated but necessary use of inverted commas, even the terms used to label those peoples who have been the traditional object of anthropological knowledge are fraught with politics. Older terms such as 'primitive' and 'savage' are long since discarded, the more modern designations of 'preliterate', 'simple', or 'non-complex' are full of evolutionary connotations, 'tribal' in most places has been compromised by its colonial origins, and 'indigenous' now invokes a different kind of politics. In this paper I have consciously avoided dealing with this problem by using the terms employed by the sources referred to, usually in inverted commas to indicate their problematic nature.

⁴See for example Appadurai (1994), Cohn (1968, 1987), Dirks (1996, 1997a), Kaviraj (1997), Pandey (1990) Pant (1987). The literature on the classification of certain tribes and castes as 'criminal' illustrates substantiates the view that "Indian anthropology was ... born directly out of the colonial project of ruling India" (Dirks 1996:291). See Nigam (1990), Radhakrishnan (1989), Tolen (1991), and Yang (1985). Dirks (1997b:205) argues that ethnography in Madras Presidency in fact originated with concerns about criminality.

⁵On the 'invention of primitive society' see Kuper (1988).

⁶Trautmann (1997) provides an excellent account of the complex history of the discipline in India from its inception in British Orientalism, through its early separation from philology and its later engagement with the 'race science' that dominated European ethnology in the latter part of the 19th century. Also see Bates (1995), Bayly (1995) and Dirks (1992, 1996).

⁷Skaria (1997, 1999) offers a more complex account of the history of the tribal category within colonial discourse.

⁸The surveys that were carried out under Thurston's supervision compiled physical as well as ethnographic data on the various castes and tribes, and his *Castes and Tribes of Southern India* (1907) provided a model for subsequent surveys and became a standard reference work for Indian anthropology. On Thurston and the anthropology of this period, see Dirks (1996, 1997b).

⁹This is a very scanty rendition of a complex transformation, but there is no space here to elaborate on this important period in the history of anthropology.

¹⁰This is not the place to elaborate this point. There is now an extensive literature on colonial policy in 'tribal' areas, especially forest policy, its consequences for tribal people, and on 'tribal revolts' in the 19th century. See Arnold (1982), Bates and Carter (1994), Gadgil and Guha (1992), R. Guha (1989), S. Guha (1999), Hardiman (1995), Rangarajan (1996), Sengupta (1988), Skaria (1999), Sivaramakrishnan (1995), and Sundar (1997). Several of these scholars have also written on the construction of the tribe category under colonialism; see, in addition to the above references, K. Ghosh (1999) and Skaria (1997).

¹¹The connection among customary law, indirect rule, and the employment of anthropology in administration was common to British colonies in Africa as well the tribal regions of India (Sundar 1997:165), but British colonial rule in general emphasised the need to understand custom and tradition. The relation between anthropology and colonial rule was two-way: Dirks (1997b) shows that early anthropology in India drew heavily upon even earlier colonial reports, which were considered to be authoritative sources of knowledge on customary practices. "The British displaced their own politics into such domains as custom and tradition ... But increasingly, the norms of custom were established by official anthropologists who claimed scientificity and neutrality for their discipline even as they worked directly for the state apparatus of colonial rule. By the late nineteenth century, anthropology became the discourse in which the policing of tradition was transformed into the knowledge of tradition" (Dirks 1997b:205).

¹²That 'tribe' is an administrative rather than a sociological category, and continues to be so, is shown in the fact that for most researchers, a "tribe is a tribe which is included in the list of scheduled tribes" (Pathy 1984:5).

¹³See Elwin (1977) for his defence against the criticism that he wanted to keep the Baiga in a 'zoo'.

¹⁴On Elwin's career and work also see R. Guha (1998, 1999).

¹⁵Ghurye held the relatively progressive view that the cause of the tribals' misery was not contact with 'civilisation' but British colonialism and the economic changes it had wrought. Calling Elwin a "no-changer and a revivalist" (1959:173) and anticipating much of what anthropologists have only recently begun to understand regarding the 'invention of tradition', Ghurye argued against the former's proposal to codify tribal customs in civil matters on the ground that this would simply 'fossilize' them (Ghurye 1959:171).

¹⁶The romantic anthropological discourse about tribals and the debates about their integration into the 'mainstream' developed in tandem with the construction of an Indian or Hindu 'nation' within nationalist discourse. Both discourses presumed a homogeneous and monolithic Hindu culture to which tribals should or should not be assimilated, ignoring evidence that Hinduism has been constituted by a long history of multiple and mutual borrowings among diverse groups, cults and 'religions', both 'Hindu' and 'animist' (Sundar 1997:183).

¹⁷See Sundar (1997:180-88) for a good discussion of the Constituent Assembly debates and the formulation of tribal policy in independent India. Also see Ghurye (1959, Chap. 6) for the views of several anthropologists of this period on the 'tribal problem'.

¹⁸The Constitution does not include a definition of STs nor does it provide detailed guidelines by which the tribes may be determined, but the power to designate communities as SC or ST is vested in the President. It is the function of the Office of the Commissioner of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, established in 1950, to advise the President in these matters.

¹⁹On tribal development policy see Bhandari and Channa (1997).

²⁰Although Guha attributes the origin and spread of these ideas about tribal society specifically to Elwin, these themes run through much of the ethnological literature on India and anthropological writings on 'primitives' in general. What is interesting is the revival of this anthropological discourse in government circles as a response to various autonomy movements, which themselves have drawn on these images of tribal life in constructing an ideology of indigenism.

²¹The relationship between anthropology and the post-colonial state goes much beyond tribal studies and tribal policy. The Anthropological Survey of India (ASI) has played a part in the production of an official bank of knowledge about Indian society. The recently completed 'Peoples of India' project, for example, clearly reproduced the colonial anthropological practice of identifying communities in terms of fixed cultural, linguistic and biological characteristics, but with perhaps a different intention. By producing representations of various communities and castes, anthropology helps to substantiate the ideology of 'unity in diversity', which in turn feeds into the state's project of 'national integration'.

²²The reification of 'custom' as the marker of community difference, and the understanding of custom as fixed and timeless, derives not only from anthropological discourse but more fundamentally from the colonial governing practice of 'fixing tradition' (Dirks 1997b:203).

²³In this discussion I do not intend to tar all anthropology in India, which is a diverse field, with the same brush. I am referring only to mainstream and state-sponsored anthropology (such as studies produced by the Anthropological Survey of India and the various tribal research institutions), that takes as its subject matter the 'tribal' population and is heavily oriented to 'applied' work. There are of course exceptions; several radical scholars (most not linked to tribal research institutes) have focused on issues such as the exploitation of the tribal resource base and tribal people and labour migration within a political economy or historical framework. See for example Pathy (1984), Sengupta (1982b, 1988). Also see Xaxa (1999a) for a critique of the conventional theory of assimilation of tribes into caste society. More recent work in historical anthropology has brought the 'tribes' back into history; see for example S. Guha (1999), Skaria (1999) and Sundar (1997), as well as the Subaltern Studies volumes.

²⁴In a recent article, Corbridge (2000) provides a more nuanced interpretation, arguing that adivasi identity, though based on the 'ideology of tribal society', has been a positive force in political mobilisation.

²⁵Ganguly (1969), Sen (1989), Sengupta (1982a), and Singh (1983b).

²⁶These names are not indigenous but were probably invented by outsiders: groups such as the Santal, Munda and Ho, like many 'tribal' communities, called themselves by the terms that in their own languages mean 'man', such as 'ho' and 'hor' (Sen 1989:145).

²⁷The term 'adivasi' was further popularised by A.V. Thakkar, prominent social worker and spokesperson for (and reformer of) tribals, in the 1940s (Ghurye 1959:147; Hardiman 1995:13). Because of its political connotations 'adivasi' has not been widely adopted by Indian anthropologists, who still use terms such as 'tribe' or 'scheduled tribe'. It is significant that the terminology for this category has itself been problematic: because the words for adivasi in other local languages were usually derogatory, Gandhians and social workers coined terms such as 'girijan', which were still patronising and connoted 'jungliness' (Hardiman 1995:13). Adivasi is the term now most widely accepted by the people themselves because it connotes their common experience of exploitation by moneylenders, traders, landlords and government officers which has given rise to a consciousness of common identity *vis-à-vis* 'outsiders' (Hardiman 1995:15).

²⁸See Ganguly (1969) for an account of Jaipal Singh's life.

²⁹This discussion of the Jharkhand movement focuses on the deployment of the idea of culture and anthropological discourse in building identity; there are of course many aspects to the movement that cannot be discussed here. There is a fairly large literature on the Jharkhand movement; a short list would include Corbridge (1988, 1993, 2000), Devalle (1992), Ganguly (1969), Ghosh (1993a, 1993b), Sengupta (1980, 1982b), and Singh (1983a, 1985). See Ganguly (1969) for some of the proceedings of the Second Adivasi Mahasabha, which articulated the notion of indigenism and the need for separation in order to achieve "moral and material advancement" (1969:83).

³⁰While it has usually been the *diku* who has been defined as the enemy of adivasis, increasingly Hinduism and caste society in general are being perceived as a threat to tribal society (Devalle 1992:161-2). This displays a growing awareness of the danger posed by Hindu fundamentalism, but it also reiterates the anthropological dichotomy of caste and tribe which, as Jharkhand leaders themselves acknowledge, could never be clearly differentiated in this region. More recently, the BJP has also sought to exploit the division between Christians and non-Christians in Jharkhand by defining 'Sarna', the 'original tribal religion', as a form of Hinduism.

³¹The politics of the designation and enumeration of Scheduled Tribes is a complex issue that cannot be discussed here, except to note that in administrative decisions and court cases pertaining to this issue, one finds the same ethnological discourse of cultural difference and primitiveness being reproduced; see Galanter (1991).

³²One reason for the repeated rejection of the demand for a separate Jharkhand state by the centre is that the Congress Party never recognised ethnicity as grounds for state formation, except in the north-east, but favoured language-based reorganisation (Singh 1985:201). 'Lack of viability of the area as a linguistic unit' was the reason given by the States Reorganisation Commission for rejecting this demand (Ghosh 1993a:1790). The choice of language rather than 'culture' or 'territory' -- usually key ingredients of the nationalist argument -- as the basis

for legitimate sub-nationalism tells us something about the trajectory of Indian nationalism after independence.

³³In the negotiations regarding the constitution of the new state, there was a struggle between the regional identity, which includes a positive adivasi identity, that was promoted by the movement, and the name 'Vananchal' favoured by the BJP, a term that imputes backwardness, primitiveness, and the need for civilising by Hindus (Fernandes 1998).

³⁴Here again we find the direct involvement of an anthropologist in tribal politics, in the person of L.P. Vidyarthi (Raichaudhuri 1992:2552).

³⁵For similar revivalist strategies in other movements, see the accounts in Singh (1983b). However, cultural movements among tribals have not always been revivalist in nature; tribal culture also became the object of social reform by political leaders in their quest for respectability, as for example in anti-liquor campaigns (Devalle 1992:187-89). Sanskritisation and socio-religious reform movements, such as the Devi movement in the Dangs (Hardiman 1995), have been perhaps as common among adivasis as have revitalisation movements.

³⁶It can be assumed that the construction of adivasi identity in the modern era has drawn on a variety of sources in addition to the ethnological; these may include images of tribal people already circulating within the dominant society, the impressions of missionaries and other outsiders which are then retailed to tribals through educational practices, and adivasis' own knowledge of the past preserved in oral histories, folk tales and songs. Although this subject has not received adequate attention, there have been several recent attempts to rethink the question of 'tribal' identity in the pre-colonial period and its reconstruction under colonialism; see S. Guha (1999) and Skaria (1999). While recognising these complexities, this paper focuses only on the appropriation of ethnological discourse in the construction of adivasi identity.

³⁷The role of missionaries in the documentation and objectification of tribal culture was probably crucial in many areas, but this has not been sufficiently researched. However, in the current political climate this is one facet of tribal movements that perhaps should not be over-emphasised.

³⁸Dirks argues that the 'petition wars' of the 19th century "worked to secure colonial discursive hegemony over the taxonomies, legitimacies, and meanings of local social action" (1997b:199). Struggles over census definitions and enumeration also aided in the formation and inculcation of tribal identity. Also, the scheduling of tribes reversed the earlier, predominant process of absorption of tribes into caste society, with some groups that earlier had transformed themselves into castes now claiming classification as tribes (Beteille 1992:77-78).

³⁹The ethnological construction of tribes as the 'Other' of Hindus, and the definition of their otherness (or sameness) in terms of religion, continues to infect right-wing politics, as seen in the recent attempts by the VHP and its sister organisations deny this difference and 'reconvert' tribals to Hinduism. The Sangh parivar refers to tribals as 'vanvasis' (forest-dwellers) rather than adivasis in order to emphasise place of settlement rather than religion, and echoing

Ghurye, they consider them to be 'backward Hindus' who need to be reformed (Shah 1999:316).

⁴⁰This was a demonstration by non-Christian tribals who were agitating for the de-scheduling of Christian tribals. The demonstrators also raised slogans in support of 'Sarna Devi' (tribal goddess) and against Christianity (Sahay 1977).

⁴¹The ethnological discourse on tribes has influenced other arenas of politics, such as the environmental movement. Some environmentalists romanticise the lifestyles of forest-dwellers as ecologically harmonious yet biologically sufficient, regarding adivasis as hangovers from the past and ignoring the reality of poverty and oppression suffered by most (Krishna 1996:89-92). Amita Baviskar (1997) argues that a romantic image of tribals pervades grassroots environmental movements led by activists from the urban middle classes. Their strategies are based on a model of sustainable development that includes village self-sufficiency, traditional culture, and local control over resources, and that is premised on a notion of the tribal-nature relationship that hardly accords with contemporary reality. Although it has begun to clash with the adivasis' own aspirations for their future, this idealised image of tribal culture tends to be reiterated uncritically even by social movements in defence of adivasi rights. In reaction to such cultural domination by non-adivasi officials and activists, some adivasi leaders have been promoting a different path of development that emphasises self-respect not by affirming adivasi identity but by abandoning it and joining reformist religious sects (Baviskar 1997:219). See also Baviskar (1995a) for a different example of identity formation within an adivasi movement.

⁴² The appropriation of anthropology or history is not unique to subaltern struggles, for "both the ideologies of rule and the rhetoric of resistance make selective use of the past" (Sivaramakrishnan 1995:33).

⁴³Such arguments have been made before the U.N. Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities and the Working Group on Indigenous Populations.

⁴⁴See the articles in *Vikalp* Vol. 4(4), 1995 for discussions on this issue.

⁴⁵The very sources that have been appropriated by indigenous movements to construct a sense of identity are increasingly being questioned by contemporary anthropologists, who point to the 'invention' of traditions. This kind of work has been opposed by indigenous groups in several cases for casting doubt on the authenticity of their cultural identity, leading to sharp conflicts on questions of control over sources of historical knowledge and the definition and interpretation of their cultures. See Briggs (1996).

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