

# Indigenous identity: burden or liberation?

With the rise of *'adivasi'* ('indigenous' or 'tribal') movements in different parts of South Asia in the past two decades, the question of how to understand *'adivasi'* identity has become hotly debated: is it a burden, inviting distorted stereotypical depictions of subaltern people, or is it a promising means toward their liberation? As Luisa Steur's fieldwork on the *Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha* (AGMS), the main *adivasi* movement in Kerala, demonstrates, answers to this question can be of immediate political consequence.

Luisa Steur

A DECONSTRUCTIONIST APPROACH to indigeneity considers *'adivasi'* identity a colonial and/or bourgeois-nationalist construction (see e.g. Bates 1995, Bindu 2009) that mixes notions of supposed indigeneity, a 'tribal' way of life, and an official legal category ('Scheduled Tribe') into an essentialist, romantic myth. This approach warns against the danger of the xenophobic shadows of indigeneity: nativism, 'communalism', as well as 'oppressive authenticity' through which proletarian *adivasis* who fail to fit romantic images of *adivasisness* become marginalised even further (see Baviskar 2007; Shah 2007).

A strategic essentialist approach, on the other hand, sees *'adivasi'* identity as a social fact and a generally accepted reference to a shared (though not uniform) history of marginalisation and resistance and a different way of life, embodied in those people asserting themselves as *'adivasi'* (see e.g. Xaxa 1999). This approach warns that deconstruction can undermine the legitimacy of *adivasi* identity as a political discourse and thereby disempower the many democratic initiatives based on it (see Karlsson 2003).

**The Muthanga struggle: where the dilemma becomes real**  
The dilemma between these two approaches to the question of *adivasi* identity politics was particularly stark during the 'Muthanga struggle' of the AGMS in Kerala. The over-determination of *adivasi* identity by colonial historiography, bourgeois imaginaries, and the state, and the problems this causes for movements like the AGMS, were salient. Yet, criticism of these identity constructions ran the danger of being misused by opponents of the movement.

Leading up to the struggle was a march organised in 2001 by what was then still called the 'Adivasi-Dalit Action Council' – an alliance of formerly 'untouchable' groups (today calling themselves *'dalit'*/'oppressed') and 'indigenous' or 'tribal' groups (*adivasis*). As a result of the march, CK Janu, the *adivasi* woman leading the movement, signed an agreement with the then Chief Minister of Kerala for the redistribution of land to landless *adivasis*. The agreement was met with general approval in Kerala as *adivasis* were seen as a generally 'destitute' but 'innocent' community, to whom finally some justice was being done. The AGMS was however criticised, including by the Communist party, for accepting to be offered 'alternative' rather than 'alienated' land, and thereby supposedly not only giving in to 'land-grabbers' interests' but also betraying *adivasis'* deeper sentimental bond to their 'ancestral land'.

Such criticism ignored the fact that most landless *adivasis* in Kerala belong to historically nomadic communities that, unlike 'upper-caste' (as they call themselves) land-owning *adivasi* communities such as the Kurichiyas, have no conception of a particular piece of 'ancestral land' actually belonging to them. Well into the 20th century, communities such as the Paniya, the largest *adivasi* community in Kerala, and the Adiya, to which C K Janu belongs, were bonded laborers working the land of upper-caste (usually Nair) landlords. It can well be argued that by not clinging to the trope of 'ancestral land', the AGMS was in fact standing up for the interests of the most impoverished *adivasis*.

When it became clear in 2003 that the government was not making serious efforts to implement the agreement that was signed in 2001, the AGMS decided to take action. The usual land occupations in Kerala organised by *adivasi* workers in the 1990s targeted government-owned plantations that were collapsing in the wake of the agricultural crisis. But in 2003, in response to the widespread criticism that had been launched against them for agreeing to have the government allot 'alternative' rather than 'ancestral' land, the AGMS leadership decided to occupy a piece of (industrially depleted) forest land in the Muthanga wildlife sanctuary. This was allegedly an *adivasi* 'homeland' where various 'temples of *adivasis*' had been discovered. Since it was a protected nature area, occupying it was also more likely to attract attention from the national government and media, and help by-pass the obstructions posed by local interests and politicians unwilling to implement the agreement.



*Dalit* activists were crucial in upholding the occupancy – they contributed money, helped transport people to Muthanga, propagated the struggle to the media, and lived at the Muthanga occupation themselves. Nevertheless, following the Indian state's strict legal distinction of 'Scheduled Castes' (SC) and 'Scheduled Tribes', the AGMS chose to represent itself in an imaginary of pure *'adivasi'* identity. For instance, CK Janu and Geethanandan, second leader of the AGMS and in fact from an SC community, interpreted the journey to Muthanga as 'thousands of refugees going to their ancestral lands... convers[ing] with the spirits of the mountains with ease, as though they got back their freedom that they lost centuries ago'. Moreover, though the majority of the participants in the Muthanga struggle were from Paniya and Adiya communities – traditionally agricultural labourers – the AGMS chose a bow and arrow, used only by a few better-off *adivasi* communities in Kerala, and a tree, symbolising *adivasis'* special bond to nature, as the symbols forming their flag.

The discourse struck a chord and the AGMS received support both from national and international civil society groups. For a while this prevented the government from evicting the activists from Muthanga. In the course of the weeks during which the activists occupied Muthanga, those opposing the occupation however found a way to undermine the movement precisely by 'exposing' the movement as not in fact one of 'real *adivasis*'. An environmental group led by local notables wrote a 'spot investigation report' in which they claimed that 'it must be pointed out that 'Ms CK Janu is not representing the real *adivasi* cause'. They observed that other *adivasi* groups living near the occupation had complained they felt threatened by the movement and reported that the activists had started ploughing rather than 'nurturing' the land as evidence of them not being 'real *adivasis*'.

As it started to be noticed that not all of the people present at Muthanga were local *adivasis*, rumours began circulating that the movement had been infiltrated by 'foreign' groups like the Tamil Tigers or the People's War Group. The imagery of *'adivasi'* authenticity used by AGMS to mobilise wider support began to crumble and demonstrations against the occupation were staged by political parties. Eventually the government felt legitimised to send in a massive police force that brutally suppressed the occupation, leaving two people dead.

Though the AGMS initially received support via a romanticised image of *adivasi* identity, there was a delicate balance to this game, which eventually turned against itself, legitimising the violent repression of the movement. It is difficult to extract any conclusions about the relevance of deconstruction versus strategic essentialism from this case – there is a real dilemma. Yet, my fieldwork in Kerala also opened up questions that might lead beyond the dilemma.

#### A way forward?

Deconstructivist scholarship has countered the reification of *adivasi* identity and created space for more flexible political interpretations. Had the influence of this scholarship been stronger on the media in Kerala at the time of Muthanga, perhaps



Deconstructivist scholarship has countered the reification of *adivasi* identity and created space for more flexible political interpretations. Had the influence of this scholarship been stronger on the media in Kerala at the time of Muthanga, perhaps arguments about whether or not the activists there were 'real *adivasis*' could have been exposed as nonsensical from the start.

Instead, merely a vulgar version of deconstructionism reached the mainstream media, where it worked to undermine the legitimacy of the AGMS precisely by showing that it was not led by 'real *adivasis*'. Why then, despite the seeming inevitability of such perverse logic, is *'adivasisness'* still such a popular discourse in subaltern movements today?

Considering that many AGMS activists used to engage in Communist politics – CK Janu for instance belonged to the agricultural labourers' union of the CPI(M), and Geethanandan led a Marxist-Leninist faction – we might ask, more specifically, why activists shifted from socialism to indigenism, not just in Kerala but in fact all over the world in the last quarter of the 20th century. Under what conditions do activists tend to reinforce rather than reject the stereotypical images directed at them? Rather than discrediting contemporary *adivasi* leaders, such questions would help to understand the limitations on political mobilisation in a 'neoliberal' age, as well as formulate a critique of the romanticised imaginary that 'civil society' demands of subaltern representation.

Scholars working within the strategic essentialist paradigm are more inclined to place themselves in the position of *adivasi* activists and represent, rather than criticise, their concerns to a wider audience. Here, however, it is surprising that they gave so little voice to the alternative articulations of *adivasi* identity that were equally present in the AGMS. Strategic essentialists seem to have become overly essentialist in ignoring the involvement of *dalit* activists, the explicit alliances made with *dalit* groups, the claims of the AGMS of representing the 'poor', their demands for 'the right to live' and for employment, and indeed the fact that most AGMS leaders have a Communist background (see Steur 2009). Instead scholars tended to focus primarily on what was 'new' about the AGMS and what emphasised its purely *'adivasi'* character.

This sets this approach on a collision course with deconstructivist scholarship. Considering the dangers of strategic essentialism turning against itself, it also seems to stray away from the primary goal of supporting *adivasi* movements and representing their politics as close to the 'emic' as possible. Surely the more 'modern', class-based and anti-caste forms of *adivasi* politics also deserve scholarly representation.

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Above left:  
Election campaign poster of C K Janu, leader of the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha. Photograph by Luisa Steur, 2006.

Above right:  
*Adivasis* at a land occupation in Northern Kerala. Photograph by Luisa Steur, 2006.