Tribal Studies in India: Pre and Post-Xaxa

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This paper was presented to Research Scholars in the Methodology Webinar of the Center for Ambedkar Studies, NBCT, Mumbai. It engages with the latest debate in Tribal Studies concerning the Pre and Post-Xaxa framework taking place among members of the Tribal Intellectual Collective India. This talk's substantive ideas and theoretical content are sourced from the Introduction to the book "The Problematics of Tribal Integration - Voices from India's Alternative Centers," which I co-edited with Bipin Jojo. The Shared Mirror published the book in collaboration with the *Tribal Intellectual Collective India* in 2019. Improvements to the earlier text have been made to provide a clearer understanding of the theoretical propositions discussed.

Briefly...

The idea that I will attempt to engage with – the Pre and Post-Xaxa framework in Tribal Studies, may I state at the very outset, is only beginning to be debated and formulated by the members of the Tribal Intellectual Collective India. Nothing is settled yet, and the propositions I will make are only in the process of gaining substantive theoretical content.

My specific reference to the Pre Xaxa framework in the arguments I will assert, only connotes a set of ideas and theoretical perspectives within Tribal Studies in India that dominated the epistemic landscape from as early as the late 1800s till the mid-1990s, that is, till the time Virginius Xaxa began to write on the subject.

It is essential for each of you to know that Virginius Xaxa continues to write till today, and his latest article published in 'The Seminar' (March 2022) engages with the very complex idea of 'India's Tribal Situation and Self-Determination.' In this

context, my reference to Post Xaxa, in the sense that I will employ, does not mean 'after all the writings' of Xaxa. The theoretical position I am asserting as Post-Xaxa only refers to academic arguments he posited spanning the period between 1992 and 2016. It is from these articles that I draw upon to reflect and formulate a Post-Xaxa framework that, as a collected body of work, fundamentally altered, from my point-of-view, how academics from Tribal society began to understand and locate themselves within the available analytical frames of Tribal Studies in India. Please note that my usage of the concept of 'Post' in Post-Xaxa is not referenced to the person but to his ideas articulated in a series of academic publications within the above-stated time.

As I proceed in my explication of the subject, you will observe and realize that this proposition – Pre and Post Xaxa, is vast and complex and requires some serious thinking and analysis, traversing across varied disciplines and subject domains. A theoretical endeavor, such as the one I am attempting to do today, is somewhat constricted and does not suffice because of the limitation that such a time-bound presentation sets on the speaker. Nevertheless, what I will try to do in the time given is to first lay out the immediate context in which Tribal scholars are problematizing Tribal Studies today. Then I will provide an overview of the academic debates concerning the theoretical shift from Pre-Xaxa to Post-Xaxa. Finally, I will discuss one concrete Tribal condition and show you how some of us in Tribal Studies are beginning to use the Post-Xaxa framework to analyze social reality in general and Tribal reality in particular.

Locating the Context and Stating the Frame

When one picks up any book concerning Tribes written by the hegemon, if you care to read between the lines, one would see, laced through every category, every theory and every reference, a perspective that inferiorized tribal knowledge, rejects and invisibilize tribal epistemologies and indirectly (consciously or unconsciously) affirms Western and Caste worldviews.

Thus when somewhat distinct epistemic communities that are historically and structurally perceived and confined to the category 'tribe' by hegemonic forces reflect on social theories or even on possibilities of formulating a point-of-view about Tribal realities, they have often been faulted for supposedly bringing more 'stories' and 'emotions' rather than 'facts' and 'logic' in theoretical engagement. In academia, this is often cited as the reason for tribes' inability to secure any theoretical advancement of their epistemological cause.

My attempt in this presentation today is to problematize this narrative and provide an intellectual response to such deep-rooted paternalistic conceptions prevailing across varied discursive traditions. I believe it is imperative for Tribal peoples at this juncture in history to raise this debate to a valid place of both moral and historical discourse, not only for reasons that are political, but for the theoretical and methodological usefulness that such academic engagements can unravel and further.

Historically, from the 18th century to contemporary times, theory and theoretical frameworks concerning Tribes in India are dominated by propositions that stem from a methodological intersection between Western and Caste epistemologies, each of these theoretical positions formulated by the hegemons from within these locations. In both these epistemologies, the idea of 'universalization' and 'homogenization' is the sine qua non. Such ideas have had both methodological and ethical implications on Tribal realities, manifesting in views where 'Tribes' are conceived as diffident forest dwellers, savages/primitive, and uncivilized/backward. These theoretical insinuations have had lethal ramifications on Tribes, fragmenting their *weltanschauung* or worldview.

The political and social legitimacy for such hegemonic views is provided by the all-encompassing normalization of homogenizing tendencies, historically and rationally authorized by the acceptance of Western and dominant Caste 'universals' as the mainstream, and the generalization of propositions from such locations as the norm. All of these conceptions are couched in the theoretical niceties of concepts such as 'post-coloniality', 'modernity', 'development', 'good governance', 'civility', and 'civilization'.

It is important to note that these dominant epistemological frameworks emerging from such locations have bounded 'Tribes' under rigid (colonial) frames. The theories emerging from these frames conceive Tribes as passive recipients of knowledge produced by these dominant societies, while 'Tribes' themselves are seen as incapable of producing or partaking in knowledge production that Western and dominant Caste epistemology counts as verifiable-reliable, objective-neutral, and meaningful-useful.

Interestingly, when the same context is viewed from a Tribal perspective, the picture looks somewhat different. For Tribes, such epistemic positions have little to do with intellectual abilities and theoretico-methodological depth but rather with a crude form of epistemological fanaticism that seeks to dilute and neutralize non-

Western and non-Caste worldviews. Such attempts are simply to realize a single homogenized social condition born in the image of these dominant groups about the social world. Unfortunately, in a world where epistocracy dominate, it seems near impossible to alter the rules of this methodological game that these dominant groups have ingeniously invented to circumscribe the Tribes within their worldviews and maintain their dominance and control over them.

Nonetheless, while these processes are layered into the social realities of Tribes across the globe, India, which is this presentation's geographical-empirical space of attention, is an interesting case to disentangle complex social dynamics and intricate political processes. Characterized by a great degree of diversity, while soaked in a subterranean history that speaks of waves of colonialism(s), the Tribes have been excluded from most knowledge production processes. This exclusion is less to do with the 'free-for-all' production of 'useful' information about 'tribes', but rather with the demeaning and negation of Tribes' episteme itself. This has resulted in exclusivist positions that portray Tribal societies as backward, unnecessarily different and restraining national development by needlessly claiming, asserting, and reproducing their distinct 'pre-modern' identities and culture in a Western-dominated Caste-centric 'modern' world. Such views have provided the perfect axiological premise for seeking to extinguish Tribal knowledges and ultimately subsume or sacrifice them on the altar of the dominant's 'universal.'[1]

It is thus important to recognize that most 'knowledge' about Tribes that pervades academia and other spaces of knowledge that are marked as 'scientific' and thus reliable were but acts of colonialism/coloniality masquerading as scientific/modernity. At its core, they were only an external object-centric gaze performed by Western or Castes elites who perceived themselves as located in positions that count as 'universal'. The fact of the matter, however, is that each of these dominant groups produced such knowledges only to serve and inform their own societies; either Western societies or Caste Indian society(s), respectively. Indigenous Tribal peoples in this context, by default, were used only as mirror images by these dominant societies to reflect and understand their own concrete social conditions.

Important for all of us to recognize that it is in such a problematic context that

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1   Cited in Tribal and Adivasi Studies – Perspectives from Within", Volume 3, Social Work in India, edited by bodhi s. r. (2016) pp. 83–84. Kolkata: Adivaani.

'knowledge' in Tribal Studies is being produced. This pertains to the existing frameworks of knowledge production, viz. Tribes, and the methodological structure in which knowledge is recognized and allowed to be produced.

Tribal Studies: Pre and Post Xaxa

From the 1980s till the late 1990s, Tribal Studies was going through an interregnum crisis; the old refusing to disappear and the new struggling to be born. No progress in theory building that one could count as fundamental had been made in the said subject domain. Most "knowledge" that was produced were nothing more than a rehashing of old irrelevant anthropological ideas premised on methods that were as equally degrading as the ideas themselves. Other academics who engaged with the Tribal question did produce some interesting ideas, but within theoretical frameworks that provided neither a superior insight into the concrete Tribal social condition nor advanced in any way the Tribal epistemological cause.

It is during this time of crisis that a minor historio-epistemic rupture took place, the contours of which are now beginning to unravel. The social theorist responsible for partially rupturing the old Tribal studies and thus putting a break to the relentless and almost irrelevant production of the 'earlier' social theory regarding Tribes is Virginius Xaxa. In a number of seminal articles that he wrote on the Tribes, he singlehandedly problematized the theoretical propositions of academics who have been writing on the subject. Theorists who have written extensively on Tribes like Verrier Elwin, G. S. Ghurye, N. K. Bose, D. D. Kosambi, L. P. Vidhyarithi, B. K. Roy Burman, Jaganath Pathy, Andre Beteille, S. C. Sinha, A. R. Desai, K. S. Singh, Ghanshyam Shah, S. C. Dube, N. Sengupta, A. Vanaik and others were revisited. What transpired in these series of academic conversations brought to the fore five fundamental issues in Tribal theorizing; (i) the way 'colonization' and 'colonialism' is conceptualized, (ii) the approach and framing of 'modernity', (iii) the guiding principles and framework of 'Governance', (iv) the way 'Development' was conceived and envisioned, and (v) the problematic of 'epistemology' and 'methodology' in knowledge production.

Many Tribal scholars now view Virginus Xaxa as the foremost theoretician within the subject domain of Tribal Studies. His work has redefined the theoretico-methodological landscape of Tribal Studies in India, so much so that a clear, distinct paradigm shift can now be delineated around the writings before Xaxa and after Xaxa. While the details of this framework are yet to attain a cohesive body of

knowledge propositions, the methodological contours of his ideas are beginning to cohere.

Xaxa's arguments are constituted by some distinct theoretical propositions that allow the capturing of very subtle and intricate realities that many theorists before him in Tribal Studies seem to have missed. His theorization centred on problematizing some oft-repeated concepts and frameworks that were, till his writing, taken and accepted as 'Given' by academics in Tribal studies.

To begin with, an attempt is made to draw out the conceptual contours of the overarching theoretical position Pre-Xaxa, and then I will proceed towards a more substantive discussion of the Post-Xaxa arguments. The Pre-Xaxa framework can be identified as being theoretically entrenched and constituted by propositions and categories such as:

1. The concept of *post-colonialism* and the experience of an all-pervasive post-colonial reality in India. Few theorists, however, use neo-colonial, while a few others use the semi-colonial framework. Nevertheless, the dominant frame-of-reference used to conceive Tribes in India remains post-colonial, both from the chronological lens of 'post the colonial' represented by Tribes as 'backward/undeveloped' peoples and from the perspective of cultural after-effects of postcolonial hybridity represented by the category 'subaltern'. Among academics using the neo-colonial framework, they see the Tribes in two ways. One, as marginalized peoples whose lives are manipulated by intensified imperialism and Western-dominated capitalist penetration in accordance with the desire of globalization. Two, as infant/simple beings who are liable to be exploited by more advanced/complex societies and whose embodied rights as semi-citizens, are most likely to be short-changed by local elites who hold the reign of State power. And among academics using the semi-colonial framework, they see tribes as 'remnants of nations', semi-peasant, and part-laboring classes. Many of the writings emerging from these frameworks did enriched Tribal studies with informative text, empirical data, archival material and transcriptions of already existing oral community narratives, etc., but needless to say, they were not able to break through into new, more fundamental frontiers of knowledge domains, viz., Tribes.

2. A *singular unilinear conception/narrative of Indian modernity* stemming from the social evolution of caste society. Here caste society is seen as the greater all-embracing tradition. In contrast, Tribes are seen as minor traditions that will, in due course

of time, get accidentally subsumed or will willingly merge into Caste society. Within this frame, Tribes were either seen as 'outside of' but trapped in a historical anachronistic accident with caste society or as part of a natural evolution of Tribe into Caste in a normative and 'Given' theory of the Tribe-Caste continuum. In this particular conception of modernity, the only way that Tribes can truly become 'modern' is to partake, 'be absorbed', and evolve from within the system and structures of Caste society, and not out of it.

3. The idea of *isolation-integration-assimilation* (I-I-A) as the guiding frame-of-reference to foreground State-Tribe relationship. This premise was accepted as the most viable lens to view and comprehend the concrete tribal conditions among administrators of the State and academics across disciplines. Principles that guide engagements between State and Tribe were sourced from this framework. A reference to this frame often entails positioning good governance on limited yet constitutionally sanctioned forms of asymmetrical federalism to the Tribes through various legal instruments such as the Inner Line Permit (Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation Act 1873), the Sixth Schedule, the Fifth Schedule, Total Protection (the case of the Sentinelese in North Sentinel island), Hill Councils and other legal mechanisms. These mechanisms within the I-I-A framework were at times seen as a major compromise made by the Indian state to fully include and somewhat resolve the historical contradiction between State and Tribes. It is also critical to note that this view has arisen from the organic conditions of Caste society and is bluntly posited in ways that self-serve the Caste-dominated Nation State. The way each of these three concepts; isolation, integration, and assimilation was understood by academics and administrators alike was that the notion of (Tribal) 'isolation' is detrimental to (Caste) Nation State's socio-cultural existence, the idea of 'integration' is somewhat necessary for its socio-political development, and the practice of 'assimilation' is the most desired outcome for its politico-historical perpetuation.

4. A *unilinear conception of development* in which only the (caste) State has the legitimate authority to define the frame, the means, and the development process. The power to define a Tribal destiny thus lay in the hands of Caste society. This was conceived somewhat as a historical accident of Caste-State formation, but nonetheless, legally legitimate and politically imperative for the greater good and overall development of the majority (dominant) society.

5. Most epistemological structures and methodological frameworks were fundamentally premised on either an upfront *unilineal evolutionary approach* or a

subtle evolutionary approach couched in a historical language. The former is grounded in 19ᵗʰ century evolutionism[2], and the latter on a historical approach that still embodies an objectification-classification-comparative analytic in intent, perspective, and theory building.

All of the above theoretical positions constituted the Pre-Xaxa terms of discourse and frame of reference of how Tribes were studied, knowledge about them produced, and relationships with them constructed.

It is these entrenched epistemic positions that Xaxa problematized in a series of articles; (i) Oroan: Religion, Customs and Environment, 1992 (ii) Transformation of Tribes in India – Terms of Discourse, 1999 (iii) Tribes as Indigenous People of India, 1999 (iv) Tribes in India, 2004 (v) Politics of Language, Religion and Identity: Tribes in India published in 2005, (vi) The Concept of Indigenous Peoples in India, 2008 (vii) Tribes and Citizenship: Making sense of Citizenship Rights, 2008 (viii) Tribal Movements: Rethinking in a Comparative Perspective, 2008 (ix) The Global Indigenous Peoples Movement: Its Stirrings in India, 2016, and others. From several propositions asserted by Xaxa in these articles, a new framework began to emerge, the constitutive concepts and theoretical positions of which are briefly discussed below:

1. The idea of *waves of colonialism* that are persistently layered into the realities of Tribal societies. The 'waves of colonialism' framework does not reject but is not embedded in either the post-colonial, neo-colonial or semi-colonial frames of reference in its attempt to understand colonial subtleties and decolonial historicity. While it accepts that both the colonial and the postcolonial have

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2 "The unilineal evolutionary perspective of the late nineteenth century revolves around several related themes. First, it was generally supposed that all societies evolved through the same stages and were progressing toward civilization. Victorian society represented civilization in its highest currently extant form but would be surpassed by future societies. Second, the whole perspective was rooted in the comparative method. In the nineteenth century the term comparative method referred to the belief that contemporary "primitive" cultures were like "living fossils," similar to early stages of current advanced cultures. As such, they were clues to cultural evolutionary development. One could study the evolutionary history of Western society by examining contemporary primitive societies. The validity of the comparative method rested on an acceptance of the concept of psychic unity. Simple and complex societies were comparable because human minds were believed to develop along the same lines. If the human mind worked the same way in all cultures, then it was assumed that unrelated societies would develop in a parallel fashion. Beliefs in the comparative method, psychic unity, parallel evolution, and progress were woven together to support the unilineal view of social evolution." *Anthropological Theory: An Introductory History* by R. Jon McGee and Richard L. Warms (Fourth Edition) 1955, p.10

penetrated their views and values in the everyday life of Tribes in India, thereby infecting the Tribal lifeworld with coloniality and postcoloniality, it sees Tribes as peripheralized societies pushed to the periphery by waves of colonialisms that imposes its infrastructure, both politico-historical and epistocratic on Tribal peoples and uses power to produce social realities in its image of the world. In this context, the fundamental question posed by the Post-Xaxa theory is simply this! Can social reality be gauged from the lens of peoples and communities forced to the periphery by waves of colonialisms, and if such a gaze is meaningful as part of a political and ethical project as attempted by postcolonialism, how would that world look like, and what would its frame and terms of reference be. However, the 'waves of colonialism' argument does not end there, and this is not its only vision. At its very core, the 'waves of colonialism' framework goes much beyond postcolonialism by rooting itself not merely as a political and ethical project but seeks to battle its way into the domains of epistemology and aesthetics, making the 'waves of colonialism' framework a political, ethical, epistemological and aesthetical project.

2. The theoretical position concerning *alternative paths to modernity* experienced by societies inclusive of the 'Tribes', as against a singular path to modernity as defined and experienced by the Collective West and within it the larger dominant Caste society. Tribes in Xaxa's perspective could be conceived as non-caste societies, each on their own unique path to modernity. This 'alternative paths to modernity' framework rejects the idea that Tribes are an objectified decadent past of the hegemon, who, by their sheer political dominance, have the epistemic power to conceive, define and anoint themselves as modern while peripheralizing the Tribal 'other' to the fringe of antiquity. This rejection also embodies the denunciation of any elitist historiography that peripheralizes the Tribes to the museum for the ontological mirroring and the theoretical spectacle of the so-called 'modern' hegemon.

3. The defining principles of governance between State and Tribe shifted from the framework of *isolation*, *integration*, and *assimilation* towards *adaptation-negotiation-freedom*. Post-Xaxa, governance was conceived much more from the perspective of Tribes, where Tribal communities move back and forth across a governance spectrum between lesser degrees of epistemological freedom and greater degrees of politico-epistemological freedom. This shift in frames of reference in the State-Tribe relationship brought to bear another concept called *engaged governance*. The idea of engaged governance is framed on Tribal people's active involvement

rather than on one imposed and defined by the Collective West and the Caste centric State on Tribes. Engaged governance is where Tribal peoples are perceived not only as equals but as capable of self-governance without being anti State. The engaged governance framework is premised on mutual respect, effective safeguards, shared responsibility, peace, non-intrusive relationships, and equitable partnerships in the development process.

4. The current development paradigm was seen as disempowering, arising from the intersections between the Collective West and Caste society, and is in many ways a denial of agency to the (non-caste) Tribal societies. What is needed is *sustainable holistic development with equity* stemming from within Tribal communities. Tribes, Post-Xaxa, are on their own quest for development and change. To assume that Tribes resist development and change is a false premise, and the notion that tribes are anti-development is a constructed myth of the dominant societies.

5. In the realms of knowledge production, an approach that is fundamentally grounded on a methodology that simultaneously takes into consideration both the *historical and the decolonial gaze in knowledge building.*[3] This approach problematizes the varied practices and manifestations of colonialism, the historical process of epistemic dislocation, and the lived experience of ontological degradation that are layered into people's social world through waves of colonial peripheralization. It also challenges the homogenization of diverse epistemology(s) and the infantilization of different heterogenous ways of seeing, knowing, and engaging in the world. The Post-Xaxa approach accepts *epistemologies* (plural) rather than a single epistemology (singular) in ways of knowing and interpreting social reality. It challenges the sociology of absence and the epistemic blindness of dominating Western and Caste societies about the fundamental nature of the pulsating Tribal epistemologies in the production of reliable and verifiable knowledge about the social world in language and terms born out of their own organic life conditions.

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3   I have attempted to spell out the minute methodological processes of Xaxa's approach in the book titled "Epistemologies of the Peripheralised- A Decolonial-Historical Approach" to spell out this methodology. The book is published by the New Vehicle in collaboration with the Tribal Intellectual Collective India. Another discussion about the topic can be accessed from http://www.ticijournals.org/the-decolonial-historical-approach-in-social-research-its-methodological-contours/

Post-Xaxa Theorising: From Assimilation-Integration-Isolation to Adaptation-Negotiation-Freedom Framework

Historically, the subsumption of Tribes into the Indian state is a subject that is not only varied but also politically complex. Each Tribe in the country has a different story to tell. While those from Central India speak of adaptation to new political structures dominated by *dikus,[4]* others in the North East speak of challenging political dominance of 'non-tribal' society and, for a few more across other States, of subtly oscillating between or surrendering to the political will of the larger caste societies. The theoretico-historical view of *isolation, integration,* and *assimilation* emanating from the views of Caste administrators and anthropologists, which were taken as "Given" and that laid the ground rules of debates pertaining to Tribal societies to this very day, is not as innocuous as it seems.

Post-Xaxa, this premise of isolation, integration, and assimilation of indigenous Tribes is being reconstructed and reformulated as *freedom,[5] negotiation,[6]* and *adaptation[7]* respectively by Tribes themselves. In other words, what is conceived as 'isolation' by Caste society/theorists is perceived as 'freedom' (much more in the

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4   The central Indian/peninsular Indian tribe term for the non-tribal. This is not merely vocabulary or semantic, but a concept driving Adivasi Identity and solidarity. Almost every tribal language has a word for the non-tribal, the outsider, the other, the exploiter.

5   Take the case of the Sentinelese inhabiting the Sentinel Island of the Andaman and Nicobar group of islands. Although one may point to International pressure as a reason for the Indian State to designate the island as total restriction (protection), one could view this as empirical evidence for the argument of 'freedom' from the perspective of tribes. Another case to explicate this condition is the Dzongu region in Sikkim. An area designated as a protected reserve that is inhabited by the Lepcha community, notwithstanding the fact that the place is now coming under intense pressure from State and International Agencies for the construction of big dams.

6   The case of the Nagas in Nagaland is probably the most unique case to begin to comprehend the idea of Integration. The Nagas see this process as a struggle to negotiate their space within the Indian State. At the time of this presentation, the long and tedious negotiations between the Naga m movements of the Nagas and the Indian State were coming to some sort of conclusion. Other than the 'contentious' issue of a separate flag, five solutions were proposed and 'probably' agreed upon.

7   A number of tribal communities can be found across the length and breadth of the country in which land, language, and religio-cultural practices are now indistinguishable to the larger dominant community. Can this qualify as assimilation, where there is loss of language, loss of historical claim over land, blurred religio-cultural boundaries with dominant groups? Some of the tribes in Maharashtra, Tripura and Assam are a good example. Exceptions in Assam are the Kachari groups that persist with their struggle for autonomy in the domains of governance, language and cultural practices. Further, their struggle for land rights is still a continuous process that at times often erupts in upheavals.

epistemological rather than the political sense) by Tribal society. What is posited as 'integration' is understood as a constant process of 'negotiating' by a Tribe with the 'Powers that Be' within an accepted Constitutional frame, and what is conceived as 'assimilation' is perceived by Tribes as their ways, means and methods of 'adaptation' to a power-play by dominant societies, imposed on them in their various realms of social life.

It is important to note that the earlier 'Isolation-Integration-Assimilation' (I-I-A) framework accepted by mainstream academics and administrators alike not only hides more than reveals, but it also does not provide any superior insight into the numerous and minute complex processes taking place around the notion of either assimilation, integration or isolation. The I-I-A framework itself is merely a one-sided perspective of the larger Caste society about indigenous Tribal society(s).

This same framework, viewed from a Post-Xaxa lens, stands in direct contrast to the points-of-view held by Tribal communities who see assimilation as a survivalist strategy of 'adaptation', integration as a compelled politico-historical necessity of 'negotiation', and isolation as a desired socio-political goal of attaining 'epistemological freedom'.[8]

A caveat must be inserted here before a more profound analysis is attempted on the subject. Most Tribal communities have a proclivity towards attaining greater degrees of epistemological 'freedom', even in the most oppressive conditions. However, it is essential to state here, more as a caution to any scholarly inquiry rather than the stating of a theoretical position, that relatively, it is difficult for Tribal community(s) whose cultural practices have blurred tremendously and are becoming indistinguishable from those of the larger dominant culture to negotiate greater degrees of epistemological freedom. This is so because the prerequisite to seeking any movement towards epistemological 'freedom' requires that the Tribal community must first have and exhibit some distinctive socio-cultural traits which are historically constituted, socially shared in practice, and politically articulated in power relations within and with other communities.

As posited above, this new frame of reference has emerged Post-Xaxa and is referred to as the *Adaptation-Negotiation-Freedom Spectrum*.[9]

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8   The case of the Lushai/Mizo community of Mizoram is an excellent case of epistemological freedom.

9   Please refer to the book "The Problematics of Tribal Integration: Voices from India's Alternative Centres" edited by bodhi s.r and Bipin Jojo, published by the Shared Mirror in 2019. http://www.ticijournals.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/The-Problematics-of-Tribal-IntegrationVoices-from-Indias-Alternative-Centers.pdf

The Assimilation-Integration-Isolation Spectrum - A Post-Xaxa Perspective

Absolute Assimilation	Severe Assimilation	Adaptation (Assimilation)	Negotiation (Integration)	Freedom (Isolation)
-**P**ogrom perpetuated (*genocide*) -**O**bliteration of signs, symbols, architecture, monuments & art from public spaces -**E**rasing literature & any trace of history from public memory (*historicide*) -**R**educed & animalized to a state of non-human (*ontocide*) -**S**ocial identity reconstructed by the hegemon -**M**ade occupational appendage to hegemon's social structure -**S**ocial ostracization operationalized -**D**ecimation of the concept of "being" & the fragmented being's experience of good & beauty -**E**pistemological mutilation takes place (*epistemicide*) -**E**pistemicide institutionalized -**E**pistemological mutation occurs -**A**bsolute axiological destruction/dislocation	-**A**ttempts to destroy the concept of *physical body-social identity* connect -**A**ttempts to alter DNA -**A**ttempts to change skin color -**A**ttempts to erase language -**F**undamental alteration of conception of good & beauty -**A**lteration of organic cosmological belief system -**G**enocide perpetuated -**E**xtreme forms of epistemic violence -**I**ncreased powerlessness experienced -**A**cademia used as a tool to provide scientific affirmation of the need to assimilate (missing link theory) Eg. The Stolen Generation -**E**pistemic relocation from organic social evolution process into that of the dominant other	-**S**poilation of history -**R**uination of script & language -**E**xternal imposition of cultural practices -**M**inimal space for cultural assertion -**B**lurring of social boundaries with larger society -**V**iolent repercussion for any act of resistance -**E**pistemic violence occurs -**P**owerlessness experienced -**I**dentity oscillation as a means of survival -**I**nferiorization & infantilization of community identity -**S**ocial & cultural subsumption occurs -**A**ltered social reality begins to manifest -**E**pistemic dislocation from organic social evolution process	-**O**ntological negotiations take place -**T**ension between endonym & exonym -**C**ontext is conflictual -**C**haracterized by resistance & protest -**O**vert cultural assertion by community -**D**emand for language & script recognition -**A**sserts historical rights over land, water, forest, mineral resources -**D**iminishing political rights -**E**xpropriation occurs -**A**ppropriation process legitimized -**E**pistemic distortion in organic social evolution process	-**S**table ontology -**S**table history -**S**table socio-cultural processes -**D**istinct social identity boundaries -**F**irm control over land, water, forest, & mineral resources -**E**xperience reality in one's own language & socio-cultural terms -**R**ise of a shared conception & experience of nationhood -**O**rganic social evolution ensues
Axiocide	Epistemicide	Epistemological Disintegration	Epistemological Distortion	Epistemological Stability

In the conceptual map above, an attempt is made to unravel the critical features of assimilation, integration, isolation, from a Post-Xaxa point-of-view, conceived and formulated around an alternative premise of 'adaptation-negotiation-freedom'. Below is a brief discussion of the details of this proposition.

The practice of 'Assimilation' (exonym) from a Tribal perspective is actually **Adaptation** (endonym); a way in which the Tribal community(s) tries to 'adapt' to dominant communities' attempt to assimilate/subsume them. Within this concrete social condition, it is observed that indigenous Tribal peoples tend to oscillate their identities as a survival strategy against the socio-political onslaught on them by the dominant groups. Nonetheless, even in this state of psycho-political pressure and silencing, the Tribal person/community knows who they are as an identity and will

do what is necessary to keep their narrative alive as a socio-cultural entity. The nature of this form of 'adaptation', which is spoken about as 'assimilation' by the mainstream, is characterized by some unique features experienced by the Tribe(s). These are the spoliation of their history, the ruination of their script and language, the experience of an external imposition of cultural practices on their social world, the blurring of social boundaries between them and the larger dominant community, a covert sense of inferiorization of their community identity, the experiencing of powerlessness and minimal space for endogenous cultural practice. They experience their social world being subsumed within the world of the larger dominant society, and any attempt to resist this assimilation is met with violence. The Tribe(s) are dislocated from their own organic social evolutionary process, and also begins to experience an altered social reality. It is however important to note here that till such time that more severe forms of assimilation ensue, no matter how blurred the socio-cultural boundaries of a Tribal community are from those of the oppressing community, the Tribal community will always attempt, in their own ways, to keep their community narrative alive; away from the gaze of the dominant groups, whilst also adapting to the culture and cultural practices of the dominant. In such a context, one may argue that when faced with these forms of assimilative practices that equate to epistemic violence, the Tribe goes through what can be called *Epistemological Disintegration*.

Some distance away from 'adaptation' (assimilation), in which indigenous Tribal communities experience 'epistemological disintegration', as noted above, one enters the socio-contextual but extremely fluid space of **'Negotiation'**, where a Tribal community's system is subjected to tremendous external pressure[10] by a larger dominant society, but still has the power to negotiate[11] their social space. However, in this state, the Tribe's status and place in the structure of the dominant group is still in a state of flux. In this fluid space of 'negotiation', one observes several processes taking place, the key being the experience by the Tribe of their *Epistemological Distortion*. Some of the characteristics of this *Epistemological Distortion,* as observed in India, reveal a fierce and tense ontological negotiation between the exonym constructed by the dominant group and the endonym born out of the

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10 These systemic processes, ushered by the dominant community, are in all probability to either force the indigenous Tribal community to fit into the cultural norms or to force them to submit to new cultural practices of the dominant group.

11 We see a fluid back and forth movement between adaptation on one end and freedom on the other with capacities for negotiation with the powers that be based on given contexts that are themselves dependent on ethnicity, population, religion, geography, history, etc.

Tribe's lived experience. Here the dominant group enforces its identity construct on the Tribal community, which is resisted and countered by them, asserting their own community identity in the process. In this back-and-forth negotiation process, the context is conflictual but does give rise to spaces of dialogue. However, the political situation is often characterized by conflict, resistance, and protest by the Tribes against the use of force by the dominant group to politically insinuate or practically implement their agenda. The Tribal community in this concrete condition generally uses cultural celebration as a means to assert their identity, and this is often overt. There are also other forms of assertion, such as the usage of Tribal language and script and an overt political declaration of historical rights over land, water, and forest. Notwithstanding the same, there are diminishing political spaces and rights of the Tribe, and the process of expropriation of community resources (minerals, land, water, forest, etc) by the dominant group takes place. Most of these processes are often carried out in the name of development or political necessity under the rubric of the 'state', which provides both the legal sanction and the political legitimacy for such appropriation.

Important to note that these processes can be observed being overplayed in daily socio-cultural activities of the Tribal peoples, such as their scripts and language, their historical claims to land ownership, their religious practices, traditional clothing, people's names, food habits, and almost certainly history writing. While the demands from the oppressing community to the Tribal community to alter at the fundamental levels are often enforced, the transformation in the concrete conditions of the Tribal community is generally incremental. It takes years for the Tribes to let go of their own organic cultural practices and to begin to adopt the cultural practices and worldviews of the oppressing community.

Further, while being in a state of 'negotiation', a Tribal community can also begin to experience degrees of freedom when they are able to more overtly negotiate with the dominant group in the realms of power, institutions, and state. In such situations, they can also openly assert their cultural distinctiveness in the public domain and express more freely the community's socio-cultural practices. However, the Tribal community does experience a distortion in its organic social evolutionary process, since there is tremendous pressure asserted by the dominant community to force its own social evolution on the Tribe.

However, as one edge closer to 'freedom' on the adaptation-negotiation-freedom spectrum, one enters the spheres of more equitable negotiations between the Tribal community and the dominant groups or institutions. Exchanges taking place at

such locations within the continuum are generally political, pertaining to ownership and control of institutions, structures, and systems of governance. These processes are sometimes characterized by backward and forward movements for greater demand of autonomy and self-determination along the continuum and exhibit social upheavals and militant struggles[12] by the Tribe to achieve the same, causing violence and loss of life. This is an unfortunate situation but a concrete condition of the Tribes, at least in India.

This political condition of **'Freedom'** or isolation viewed from the lens of the dominant is characterized by organic politico-historical elements such as stable community ontology, stable history, stable experience of socio-cultural processes, and the demarcation of distinct social identity boundaries. There is also a firm sense of community control over land, water, forest, mineral resources, etc. The Tribal community in this socio-historical space experiences social reality in their own language and in their own socio-cultural terms. There is also an organic rise of a shared sense of nationhood or of being a nation. In this concrete condition of 'freedom', Tribes experience *Epistemological Stability* and experience a forward movement of history within their own organic social evolutionary process accompanied comparatively by a greater degree of social cohesiveness as a community. This 'freedom', however, is experienced either as epistemological or as political.

Some thoughts on the Twin Concepts of Epistemicide and Axiocide

In order to help clarify the full range of experience that Tribal peoples are or could be subjected to, I consider it imperative to discuss briefly two theoretico-political positions related to the polemics of 'assimilation'. These are based on my observations from empirical evidence collected from across the globe and are not sourced from contemporary Tribal realities in India.

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12 One needs to qualify such upheavals and militant struggles emerging from Tribal contexts. There are some militant struggles that are posited as a struggle for freedom from an imposing (other) State nation such as those we witness taking place among the Nagas in North East India. The other militant struggle witnessed are those that begins to emerge as a last resort of a community to resist assimilation, such as those we see taking place among the Bodos in Assam and the indigenous peoples of Tripura. However, while the same principle applies to tribal movements emerging in Chhotanagpur and Bastar, yet because they are sometimes blurred by ultra-left class movements, I cannot pinpoint whether such movements are seeking greater degrees of freedom for their ethnic community or participating in the larger class struggle to resist expropriation.

I posit that there are two extreme forms of assimilation that can be argued to have occurred in human history. One form is what I call 'Severe Assimilation' and the other is 'Absolute Assimilation'. Most of the debates in the first form of assimilation are grounded around a concept called "epistemicide".[13] In my understanding, the characteristics of this form of **Severe Assimilation/Epistemicide** constitute attempts by the dominant community to destroy the 'physical body-social identity' connect of the person, followed by a forceful attempt to alter the physical genetic structure (*DNA)* of the individual of the (Tribal) community. Within the practice of severe assimilation, there are also socio-structural experiments carried out by the dominant community to alter the skin color of (Tribal) peoples, erase their language and script, fundamentally alter the (Tribal) community's conception of the good (ethics) and beauty (aesthetics), and fragment the cosmological structure of their belief system. In these conditions, the (Tribal) community and its members begin to experience extreme forms of epistemic violence, genocide, powerlessness and are fundamentally relocated from their own organic social evolutionary process to that of the dominant other. Empirical evidence of this form of assimilation being perpetuated on Tribes is observed in Australia and North America. The case of the 'Stolen Generations'[14] in Australia is an apt example of this form of severe assimilation, and as regards North America what happened was that the:

> Native children in Canada were sent to residential schools at an age designed to systematically destroy their language and memories of home… these forms of discipline were supported by paternalistic and racist policies and legislation; they

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13 Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) in his book 'Epistemologies of the South, Justice Against Epistemicide' discusses his conception of epistemicide as follows: "The energy that propels diatopical hermeneutics comes from a destabilizing image that I designate epistemicide, the murder of knowledge. Unequal exchanges among cultures have always implied the death of the knowledge of the subordinated culture, hence the death of the social groups that possessed it. In the most extreme cases, such as that of European expansion, epistemicide was one of the conditions of genocide" Boventura De Sousa Santos (2014) Chapter: 2 Another Angelus Novus: Beyond the Modern Game of Roots and Options – A Future for the Past. London: Routledge. Also see for a very unique historical unraveling of the concept of epistemicide - Grosfoguel Ramon (2013). The Structure of Knowledge in Westernised Universities, Epistemic Racism/Sexism and the Four Genocides/Epistemicides of the Long 16th Century. Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge. Vol.11, Issue 1, Article 8. pp.73-90., and Grosfoguel Ramon (2009). A Decolonial Approach to Political Economy. Epistemologies of Transformation: The Latin American Decolonial Option and its Ramifications. Department of Culture and Identity. Roskilde University.

14 See   https://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/politics/stolen-generations/a-guide-to-australias-stolen-generations and the documentary https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5PKXELTiXNE&t=27s

were accepted by white communities as necessary conditions which had to be met if indigenous people wanted to become citizens (of their own lands). These forms of discipline affected people physically, emotionally, linguistically, and culturally. They were designed to destroy every last remnant of alternative ways of knowing and living, to obliterate collective identities and memories and to impose a new order.[15]

The second form of assimilation, more extreme than the former, is what I identify as 'Absolute Assimilation'. Here a very complex, genocidal process of assimilation that is fundamental in nature is perpetuated. I propose to designate such a process by the category 'axiocide'. While epistemicide refers to the 'murder of knowledge'[16] or the 'extermination of a knowledge system,'[17] the term *Axiocide* refers to a far more extreme concrete condition. The practice is characterized by the obliteration of signs, symbols, architecture, monuments, and art of the assimilated peoples and the erasing of any remnant or semblance of literature and history from public memory. The severely assimilated peoples in this context are reduced and animalized to a state of non-human, and once such a state is achieved, their social identity is fundamentally reconstructed by the dominant in their image of the world and are concomitantly constructed as a mere occupational appendage in the social structure of the same. These practices are then followed by the social ostracization of the community and a complete banishment to designated spaces outside of the physical reach and presence of the dominant group.

Axiocide also entails the decimation of the concept of 'being' and the complete annihilation of the internal self-concept of 'beauty' (aesthetics) and 'good' (ethics) at the individual levels but manifested across the oppressed (Tribal/indigenous) group as a social entity. It is to be noted that axiocide is not only the 'extermination of knowledge' but the near complete 'extermination of every possible trace of a living-thinking being itself', reducing the being to a state of a non-human.

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15 Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999). Decolonizing Methodologies Research and Indigenous Peoples. London: Zed Books.pp.69.

16 Op.cit

17 This idea has been taken from a lecture by Ramon Grosfoguel available in https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-x68bK-4rN4&t=20s retrieved on 12 April 2019. Also read Ramon Grosfoguel (2013) where he discusses the four genocides/epistemicides of the long 16th century. That is the extermination of the knowledge of African, Indigenous, Muslim and Jews and Woman's knowledge in his article "The Structure of Knowledge in Westernised Universities, Epistemic Racism/Sexism and the Four Geneocides/Epistemicides of the Long 16th Century. Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge. Vol.11, Issue 1, Article 8. pp.73-90."

I also contend that axiocide is more extreme than epistemicide, and the nature of such an **Absolute Assimilation/Axiocide** constitutes the operationalization of political strategies that leads to epistemological mutilation or epistemicide, the institutionalization of such an epistemicide, and the forceful production of a new non-being through the process of epistemological-mutation[18]. Axiocide also requires the operationalization and realization of a complete epistemicide, where the members of the oppressed community are not permitted to read, learn and reflect; where there is violent repercussions and complete intolerance to the production of any 'art'[19] or any externalized conceptual framework that facilitates the mirroring of self, and where the ostracized peoples are not allowed to know themselves in their own terms, other than on the terms laid out for them by the oppressing community. It is these features that characterize the absolute destruction of axiology, captured in this line of argument by the category *axiocide*.

However, about the polemics of assimilation, viz. direct relation to the contemporary Tribal realities in India, I do not have empirical evidence to show that these two forms of extreme assimilation that I have expounded above have occurred to those scheduled as Tribes. And as regards my attempt to explicate the concept of axiocide, I wish to state that it is simply a thought experiment based on empirical observations and analysis of the problematic of current forms of assimilative practices and strategies from varied contextual realities across the world.

Some Concluding Remarks

It is important to note that the Post-Xaxa framework is only starting to be formulated and articulated in Tribal Studies. What I have discussed in this presentation today is only based on internal discussions among the members of the Tribal Intellectual Collective India. However, before I conclude, there are three things I want to point out:

One, I do hope that this endeavor to situate a Post-Xaxa perspective in existing social theory within Tribal Studies does not end up propagating colonial stereotypes.

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18 Edward Said in his book Orientalism uses the concept 'Epistemological Mutation' to refer to the alteration of 'consciousness of our time'. Orientalism, (2003) Preface. p.xvi. I use the concept to refer to a fundamental alteration of the being itself and the reproduction of a 'new being' in the image, form and content of the colonialist.

19 The concept 'art' is used to refer to a mirror that reflects the beauty and good, allowing the person to see self, know self and appreciate self as reflected in the 'art' form. Used in this sense the concept 'theory' is also an 'art'.

Two, I have observed that in any theoretical engagement that posits alternative ways-of-seeing and thinking on existing 'done and dusted' theoretical truths, one always risks the imperative of seeming unnecessary radical. Needless to say, the immediate response from the hegemon would be to shun the arguments and to mark the theoretical content as a piece of reactionary writing.

Three, there is a critical consciousness arising among indigenous Tribal scholars of the need to reprove objectification and, as far as possible, to resist being turned into mere 'objects of inquiry' in somebody else's truth formulation. In the Post-Xaxa period, when the frames of reference are beginning to alter fundamentally, many Tribal academics believe that the time to restore to their 'self' the agency to reflect organically on their own experience has arrived, notwithstanding the ontological repercussion and theoretical backlash that such a project entails.

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