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An Introduction to Tribal Ecologies in Modern India

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This special issue bring together scholars and activists working at the intersections of tribal studies and ecology, drawing primarily from the fields of sustainability studies, political ecology and anthropology. Our contribution stems from a 2022 workshop, hosted at the University of Copenhagen's Centre for Applied Ecological Thinking (CApE), which brought together academics and NGOs with varied backgrounds. Over three days, we discussed what we will here begin to call 'tribal ecologies' on contemporary India. In this introduction, we bring theoretical specificity to tribal ecologies and consider its applicability at different scales of analysis—from the local ethnographic encounters of tribal communities with the Indian state to the transnational mobilization of indigenous rights through international institutions. The goal is to carve out an emergent field of study that is equally applicable to academics and NGO practitioners working among tribal communities.

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In India, there are 705 ethnic groups recognized as Scheduled Tribes (ST), a federal criteria for determining tribal status inherited from the census practices of the colonial state. As we detail below, we use the term "tribal" to invoke this complex relationship between group identity and state recognition. While "tribal" can have many negative connotations, frequently relating back to colonial stereotypes of primitiveness, in contemporary India it is also a state-designated site of social aspiration and a moniker used by members of Scheduled Tribes to refer to themselves. The term *Adivasi*, meaning original inhabitant, is in some contexts a more empowering term used in substitution of "tribal". In other contexts, however, *Adivasi* identities are rooted in provincial histories, primarily used to

denote Scheduled Tribe communities from central and eastern India. The relevant comparative term in this case would be "Indigenous," which today is used by many Scheduled Tribe communities to claim an historical connection with first nations and other Indigenous communities across the world. The Indian state, however, refuses to recognize the concept of "Indigenous Peoples," and so it remains a deeply politicized naming practice. These overlapping but distinct naming practices are sometimes in discursive tension even within a single tribal community, where there is disagreement among competing interests.

Of course, there are many freighted intellectual antecedents for a discrete analysis of tribal ecologies in India. Studies of "traditional ecological knowledge" and "Indigenous sustainability" have long been part of global scholarly discussions of Indigenous peoples, particularly with reference to frameworks of Indigeneity that emerged alongside fields like evolutionary biology (Krech 1999). Ideas connecting Indigenous identities to nature took root during the colonial conquests of the early modern period, as comparative notions of property, legal personhood, and ethnological differentiation were constructed by measuring humans' relative proximity to projections of pristine nature (Pagden 1987). These encounters produced the ideology of Indigenous "primitiveness," a framework denoting social dependence on a nature insufficiently tamed by human intervention.

Beginning with European colonization in the sixteenth century, tribes were imagined as primordial, unchanging, and the lowest rung of social evolution (Bauman and Briggs 2003). Enlightenment projects naturalized the binary of European progress and tribal savagery, and anthropologists used evolutionist paradigms to divide up the social world based on stages of social development, from pre-state egalitarian tribes living in states of nature to state formations with complex social hierarchy (Morgan 1877). Such views privileged Western societies as both the apex of civilization and drew a contrast between modern alienation from nature and tribal synchronicity with nature. In many cases, such as in the Indian Himalayas, British colonial administrators deployed orientalist empiricism to ethnographically construct tribal society (Ludden 1993). Tribes became identified with practices of pastoralism, transhumance, nomadism or foraging lifestyles; belief systems characterized by animist cosmologies; social orders presupposed as egalitarian; and village organizations structurally identified by primitive material technologies not far removed from their natural state (Guha 1999). Some of these 'tribal' associations have shifted away from practiced lifeways

to discursive tropes, as in the case of declining pastoralism among Gaddi youth (Christopher and Phillimore 2023).

As evident in the moving goalposts of tribal identity in successive Indian census reports, the ideology of Indigenous "primitiveness" did significant epistemic violence when put into practice. However, the postcolonial Indian state doubled down on such classifications in establishing the criteria for Scheduled Tribe recognition. During the Constituent Assembly Debates (1946-49), which culminated with ratifying the Constitution, assembly members debated the features of tribal inclusion and whether tribes should be protected as primitive cultural groups living in untamed nature or assimilated into mainstream Hindu caste society. Both sides of the debate won: the Fifth/Sixth Schedules ensured tribal-autonomous territories that roughly correspond with tribal homelands and the administrative category of Scheduled Tribe (ST) nudged tribal people towards national integration in all-India schemes of positive discrimination. In both cases, however, the ideology of tribal primitiveness living in symbiotic reliance on wild nature persisted. This is evident in the subjective criteria of the Lokur Committee (1965), which frames tribes as possessing distinctly "backwards" cultural features and residing in geographically remote areas.

Modern anthropology, founded as a colonial discipline, complicated some of the negative associations of ecological primitiveness by pointing to functional aspects of Indigenous stewardship over nature, even as these studies retained an idea of Indigeneity as the "wild" temporal other of modernity (Skaria 1997; Fabian 1983). This also manifests in the work of Indian state ethnologists who adjudicate the over 2,000 extant petitions by ethnic groups for formal inclusion in the Scheduled Tribe quota. These tribal petitions can go on for decades (Mayaram 2014), instigate intra-group communalism (Kapila 2008) and foment sub-nationalist agitations (Middleton 2016). Importantly, such petitions are intimately tied to grassroots ethnopolitical movements that mobilize ideas of tribal ecology and stewardship over traditional lands. To make sense of all this, a small team of government anthropologists tour India's tribal-petitioning communities and decide their constitutional status based on a few hours of fieldwork and the essentialist framework of Indigenous primitiveness.

Parallel to these administrative processes, scientists and humanists alike have begun to invoke "Indigenous knowledge" as a way of talking about the limits of modern natural science (Kimmerer 2013; Gomez-Bera 2017). Faced with the widening

ecological crisis of anthropogenic climate change, Indigeneity now reappears as a sign of positive alterity, a way of imagining sustainable ecological relationships outside of capitalism, industrialism, and extractive modern cultures. Such accounts have opened the way for connecting Indigenous traditions across various ethnographic contexts to a wider strand of "subaltern" epistemologies for rethinking the future of ecological thought, geopolitical organization, and economic value forms (Duara 2014).

Accordingly, there are "critical subalternist ecological critiques" of colonial constructions of water as a contested commodity in Latin America, (Betancor, 2022) as well as "subaltern ecologies" reflected in the practices of *jugāṛa* (resourceful, rule-bending work-arounds) in the context of class precarity in India (Rai 2019). Among the Amazonian Yanomami, Ferguson (1998: 287-88) contrasts the systemic environmental transformations of modern states (including European expansions, epidemic-caused genocides and intensifying extractive practices) with the often more gradual and limited impact of "tribal ecologies" on the environment. When tribal ecologies rapidly change, it is often due to devastating "contact with previously isolated biotic communities" (Ferguson 1998: 88).

While the above-mentioned notions of tribal and subaltern ecology lack rigorous elaboration, Sarkar (2008: 6-7) reclassified several scholarly approaches as "subaltern ecology" and helpfully abstracted general principles. He draws an important distinction from the project of Subaltern Studies and takes to task some Eurocentric views of environmentalism for dismissing the "rich analytic traditions of subaltern ecologies which have been used to interpret and refine these Southern movements" (Sarkar 2008: 20). The general principles of "subaltern ecology" include to:

> (i) recognize the interpenetration of socio-political and non-human environmental factors in determining the state of habitats and livelihoods; (ii) draw on both (non-human) ecological and social determinants to produce salient facts; (iii) endorse heterogeneity and contextual delimitation in the choice of analytic techniques from the ecological and social sciences; (iv) view struggles over "nature" as reflecting struggles between human interests in society at large; (v) agree with ecofeminists that women play a distinctive role in most social organizations, and therefore, in struggles around them; (vi) explicitly contest the asymmetry of power relations in those struggles; and (vii) include equity, justice, and ecological sustainability

and enrichment as goals of the these struggles.

As Sarkar himself explains, applying such a rubric is fraught. Classic examples of subaltern ecological movements, like the 1973 Chipko movement in Garhwal, do not necessarily demonstrate proto-environmentalism, symbiotic tribal relationships to nature, or women's unique propinquity with nature, as was argued by some at the time (Govindrajan 2018: 184). Such protest movements may reflect less of an anti-development agenda and more of a desire for Indigenous control over development projects and extracted resources. Likewise, Gaddi oral narratives about the state monopolizing grazing grounds and commissioning large-scale hydroelectric projects may reflect less of a subaltern ecology and more of a communal anxiety about the appropriation of tribal lands, resource extraction and rapid social change (Sharma 2023).

The crucial point is that tribal ecologies are not post-material but rather intensely concerned with safeguarding traditional proprietorship over natural resources, often through the demands of state recognition. This point contradicts earlier theorizing of environmentalism as primarily a "postmaterialist" concern of the Global North (see Nordhaus and Shellenberger 2007). Scholars of Indian tribes, including in this Special Issue, are well aware of the lower socioeconomic status of Scheduled Tribes vis-a-vis general castes and how their heightened precarity infuses tribal ecologies with an urgent materialism (for a lengthy discussion of ST physical and economic deprivations, see Das et al. 2012). We share Sarkar's concern that theories of environmentalism that privilege post-materialist conceptions of individual expression, group belonging, and abstractions of the good life (which since the early 1980s have been associated with the Global North) do not track the material needs of Indian tribal ecologies. This is evident in both our scholarly approach and in the applied techniques of NGOs like Adivasi Koordination and iiINTERest, both present in this special issue.

What are Tribal Ecologies?

To situate "tribal ecologies" within this genealogy is not a straightforward task. To begin with, the modern category of "Indigeneity" largely draws from the historical experiences of native peoples in the Atlantic and Pacific worlds, specifically referencing processes of settler colonialism and native genocide (Karlsson 2003). South Asian histories fit uneasily within this lens of analysis (Guha 1999). The very terminology used to discuss Indigenous peoples in South Asia is suggestive of this

ambiguity. *Adivasi*, for instance, is a term that entered circulation in the early twentieth century to express the struggle for dignity and self-determination of tribal groups, emerging contemporaneously with Dalit struggles for similar aims (Omvedt 1988). Although its meaning of "original inhabitant" invokes comparative styles of Indigenous claim-making as "first nations," "*Adivasi*" has become primarily associated with the specific regional histories of communities in the central and eastern highlands of the Indian subcontinent, rather than an overarching descriptive terminology. Moreover, many Indigenous groups, especially in India's northeast, do not use the term to self-identify (Xaxa and Devy 2021; Moodie 2015). In another ethnographic context, for example, the Gaddis of Himachal Pradesh in the Western Himalayas have long-standing social contestation over Dalit belonging within the Scheduled Tribe quota for Gaddis; while Gaddi Rajputs and Brahmins have appropriated histories of fleeing Muslim persecution and taking refuge in the Himalayas. There is evidence that nominally non-tribal Gaddis who are designated Scheduled Caste status deploy oral histories of indigeneity and sometimes self-identify as *Adivasi* (Christopher 2022). This presents a fundamental question about the operation of caste-based differentiation *within* Scheduled Tribe communities.

Another factor is the variable social connotations of the term "tribal" across India. Undoubtedly, the colonial inheritance of the term is generally derogatory and reflects ideas of tribality across the pre- and post-Independent Indian collective imagination (Bora 2010). In some ethnographic contexts, tribal communities have sought to disidentify with the "tribal" moniker (such as replacing tribal markers of dialect and animist ritual with standard Hindi and Hinduism). For example, Kangra Gaddis, especially in cosmopolitan Dharamsala (Christopher 2020) between the 1950s-1980s, expressed a degree of communal shame about their tribal dialect and public sheep sacrifices as they further integrated into Punjabi cultural life and the caste Hinduism of the plains people. Some Gaddis completed caste emendation forms and legally changed their caste (and subsequent legal status) from Gaddi Rajput to Rajput, dropping 'Gaddi' as a strategy of regional integration and local prestige jockeying. This led one Gaddi ethnic entrepreneur to create the Kailash Association, which boasts thousands of members, to rehabilitate Gaddi pride in tribal identity. From another perspective, however, Scheduled Caste Gaddis are currently petitioning the state for inclusion in the Scheduled Tribe quota, citing systemic tribal casteism and state misrecognition (Christophe 2020a). While some high-caste Gaddis were (and are) disidentifying with the identity of tribal, low-caste

Gaddis have grassroots mobilizations to shed the stigmatizing idioms of Scheduled Caste (Still 2003) and be recognized as tribal.

This variability is within a single tribal community. Considering the tremendous diversity of tribal communities, and those communities currently petitioning for Scheduled Tribe inclusion, a spectrum of connotations about the meaning of "tribe" is evident - from liberative to stigmatizing, in some cases a rallying point of communal aspiration and in other cases a overdetermined pejorative or necessary evil. Despite this variability, the term "tribe" *is* widely used by Indigenous groups to suggest a shared history of ethnic, caste, and spatial marginalization, as well as state surveillance and criminalization (Singha 1998; Pandian 2009). Its ubiquity surely stems from the fact that Scheduled Tribe is foremost an administrative category, and that the capacity of groups to access state structures of public benefits depends on their classification as constitutionally-protected "Scheduled Tribes" (Shah 2013).

These contextual and historically contingent processes, not only among Gaddis but evident in many tribal formations across India, call into question the straightforward definition of tribes as non-caste societies (and tribal ecologies as unmoored from caste politics). This view, foundational to the work of the Tribal Intellectual Collective, may make sense in some ethnographic contexts, such as the dichotomy of non-casted tribal hill peoples and casted valley peoples in Manipur and more generally in the Northeast (Ziipao 2021: 39); and may make less sense in other contexts, considering the Rajputization of tribes, partially-integrated Dalits in the margins of tribal life, and the two-sided coin of tribal casteism and tribal multiculturalism. We argue that tribal ecology is one vantage to analyze how group composition actually unfolds at multiple scales of analysis--within tribes, at their sometimes-porous ethnic borders, and in negotiating ecological relationship to the State.

Our invocation of "tribal ecology" is not an effort to simplify or reduce these complexities of tribal identity. Rather, we see this terminology as enabling a deeper understanding of the specific ways that ideas about nature enter into processes of tribal identity formation. Our argument is twofold. First, we argue that debates about nature are one of the primary ways tribal identity is negotiated in contemporary India. Tribal ecological claims are necessarily in relationship to the ethno-logics of the Indian state and the criteria of Scheduled Tribe; such claims are not organic expressions of primordial identities forged in social isolation but rather

historically contingent and socially contextual claims that frame group identity and, in some cases, group exclusions. While tribal ecologies are not reducible to group competition for state recognition (Galanter 1984), they are necessarily expressed within such a political framework. Even without the competitive arena of state quotas, tribal ecologies would remain political in their invocation in group formation and internal differentiation.

Second, and relatedly, we argue that nature represents a terrain of politicization by which tribal communities contest state developmentalism, extractive economies, and military-paramilitary violence. Because many of India's tribal communities live in politically-sensitive areas like mining zones or militarized border landscapes, tribal claims over the alternative governance of these spaces frequently run up against powerful state and multinational actors. These contestations heighten a tribal-nature connection as claims to ecological stewardship and traditional ecological knowledge are used by tribal communities to legitimize tribal sovereignty, autonomy, and recognition. Such dynamics of tribal ecology unfold at multiple levels and with significant regional variation, structuring relations between both tribal groups and outsiders, like state bureaucrats, as well as the functioning of hierarchies internal to tribal communities themselves. For example, we see from Ladakh to Lahaul to Himachal Pradesh to Darjeeling the growing intensification of 'Scheduled Tribe Dalit' and inter-tribal contestation over the disenfranchising and delegitimizing legacies of casteism, classism and status hierarchies. Conversely, tribal ecologies can structure more egalitarian, and less acquisitive, relationships to nature, property regimes (Kapila 2022), and communal ownership of communal grazing lands (Axelby 2007) in comparison to mainstream caste society.

The Two Sides of Tribal Ecologies

To be clear, our concept of tribal ecology is not one solely relating to performative utterances or claim making *about* ecology that enable tribal groups to be constituted as subjects receiving state benefits and protections. Certainly, there is an aspect of the dynamic production of tribal identity between reservation quotas, state ethnologists and the communities themselves. But while we are neither making an argument about an "ecological primordialism" embodied in tribal knowledge and livelihood practices--as if such things persisted unchanged over time--we do insist that particular ecological relations distinguish tribal communities from other groups. This is the other side of tribal ecologies. Tribal communities, either in memory or active contemporary practice, are often grounded in origin stories,

lifeways, and sacralizing rituals that express relations to and knowledge about particular agro-ecologies. While these aspects of tribal identity continue to change through more extensive settled farming practices, wage work dependency, and urban migration, many tribes are still engaged in a reconstitution of community identity that foregrounds living with nature as an expression of human-ecological mutuality. This stands in contrast with orientations to nature that are extractive and exhaustive. Tribal communities can of course be destructive of ecological worlds (although often less rapidly and markedly than industrial state development). But in many parts of tribal India, the opposite is true--communal identity and belonging are produced through an engagement with nature as a vital extension of social life, observing a deference and reverence towards humanity-in-nature, rather than as separate ontological entities.

This identification with ecology has provided the groundwork for a diversity of tribal political movements throughout India. Indeed, ecology is one of the primary ways that tribal identity becomes explicitly *politicized*. Such movements have highlighted the long-standing symbiotic relations between tribal groups and the natural world, claiming attachments to land and territory as the basis for tribal culture and customary livelihood practices. This is even the case in contexts where tribal groups have migrated to agrarian or forest areas only in the recent past, where ecological identifications are invoked in folktales, songs, rituals, and religious practices, as well as the veneration of land associated with ancestors (Bodhi and Ziipao 2019). Such a cultural armature provides a way of framing tribal land as a source of identity formation, rather than as a commodity, or as a form of wealth that can be appropriated by the state. Many tribal movements, such as the recent *pathalgadi* movement in India's central and eastern mining belt, thus invoke these attachments to land as justifications against state-induced land acquisitions, fraudulent transfers, forcible evictions, and the monetized exchange of property through mortgaging and leasing (Xaxa 2008).

Tribal ecology has thus also shaped the field of Tribal Studies in India. As one of the founding theorists of this field, Virginius Xaxa, has explained through his efforts to "decolonise" Tribal Studies, tribal relations to nature comprise an existential condition of their living. "Tribes," Xaxa writes, "were greatly dependent on the forest for their day-to-day needs, such as food, shelter, tools, medicine and even clothing. But as long as the tribes were in control of the forest, in the sense of having unrestricted use of forest and forest produce, they had no difficulty in

meeting their needs. In turn, they preserved the forest, as this was their life-support system" (Xaxa 2008: 65). This type of analysis builds on longer-standing traditions in Indian environmental studies that have foregrounded what Ramachandra Guha once called the "third world critique" of ecological conservation. This perspective moves away from viewing nature as a site of pristine wilderness, and towards a recognition of the role of Indigenous labor and livelihood practices in shaping landscapes (Guha 1989).

Such a framework is often used when discussing tribal practices of *jhum* or shifting cultivation, which depends on cycles of slash-and-burn dry-millet agriculture that, in ideal conditions, allows for the regeneration of soil fertility. U.A. Shimray has shown, for instance, how northeastern tribal communities practicing the *jhum* cycle, "observe the tree trunk and branches that indicate soil fertility. If the bark of the tree trunk is mature, the soil is considered fit for cultivation" (Shimray 2012: 60). The Gaddis of Himachal Pradesh, who have rapidly transitioned to sedentary lifeways and are largely post-pastoral, still propagate ecological knowledge about shepherding, flock care and the use of animal byproducts through ritual practice and received common knowledge. Such agro-ecological knowledge can be passed on intergenerationally, creating what Tribal Studies scholars refer to as a kind of ecosystemic awareness embedded in the cultural worldviews of forest-dwelling tribal communities.

However, the existing developmental practices of the state, which depend on the appropriation of land and resources, pose a threat to this "environmentalism of the poor" (Martinez-Alier 2002). Indigenous/tribal systems of governance, tradition, and customary laws are viewed as hurdles for development. As tribal communities have mobilized for greater decentralized decision-making for determining the trajectory and outcome of developmental projects, their voices have often been superseded by policymakers and state bureaucrats. At the same time, economic pressures on tribal communities have also changed how these communities themselves view nature and development. Money and corruption, as well as more genuine aspirations to achieve the "good life" beyond traditional village settings, have shaped local collaboration with extractive projects (Ziipao 2020).

These dynamics require greater research for understanding how invocations of tribal ecology continue to undergo transformation and reconstitution. To that end, several articles in this special issue are written from the perspective of NGOs engaged in grassroots efforts and international legislation to protect indigenous

knowledge. The Danish NGO iiINTERest describes how tribal ecologies (as both environmental sustainability and legal protections to practice indigenous lifeways) factor into a broader approach of harnessing local epistemologies from subaltern, poor and largely rural communities, be they tribal or not. Although this often intersects with Scheduled Tribe communities, it privileges 'below the poverty line' (BPL) communities as an undifferentiated aggregate. And the German NGO Adivasi Koordination describes their efforts to protect tribal lifeways and self-determined development through international legal frameworks and forms of recognition. These efforts often invoke ethnological knowledge produced through scholarship, grassroots mobilization and state ethnology to compete for recognition in the global 'ethno-contemporary' (Middleton 19, 2016). The increasing speed and innovativeness of ethnological recombination--often invoking claims of cultural difference grounded in uniquely tribal epistemologies and ecological practices--are reflected in the perspective of iiINTERest, Adivasi Koordination and sundry kindred projects linking Indian tribal communities to international frameworks of recognition.

Tribal Representation

As part of the ongoing intellectual project of challenging western and elite dominance over academic knowledge production, this special issue provides an open-access publishing format for enabling greater public discussion of issues impacting tribal communities in India today. The mission-driven format of the journal, *JTICI*, has enabled our special issue not only to create a platform for tribal scholars, activists, and thinkers, but to fundamentally reexamine the politics of tribal "representation" within academic publishing. In this subsection, we reflect on some methodological and theoretical issues about tribal representation both in tribal studies and academia more broadly. The editors and participants in our conference chose to focus on three key areas we felt deserve to be highlighted for future work that seeks to dismantle varied hierarchies of caste, class, gender, race, and educational-access in tribal studies. These include: the immediate experiences of tribal scholars in navigating professionalization and promotion in higher education; the difficulties tribal people face engaging with (often western) academic projects; and, using this special issue as a test case, how tribal people can meaningfully participate in the review process of academic publications about the tribe to which they belong.

It is important to note from the outset that our special issue is *not* arguing for a

primordial episteme which inheres in tribal people, or provides unique or untroubled access to forms of representation and knowledge. We follow the reflexive turn that casts doubt on the idea of a single person as a carrier of a purely 'native' point of view that represents the totality of a community (Narayan 1993). Our goal in the special issue is not to find new ways to "speak" for tribal communities, but to alert readers to the deep heterogeneity and internal political complexity of modern tribal societies. This way of rendering things creates a kind of "collage" of tribal societies in-transition, thereby resisting the hangover of social evolutionary theories that rendered tribes as 'simple' social structures (i.e. pre-state egalitarianism), as well as challenging depictions of tribal social stasis amidst a transformative, and largely external, caste-based Indian society.

Tribal Methods and the Community Review Process

In contemporary India, members of tribal communities who are able to access university and graduate education continue to face many personal and professional hurdles. These run the gamut from professional bullying, exclusion, censure, and outright racism. Tribal scholars consulted for the making of this special issue expressed how academic gatekeepers often use the fact of tribal scholars' own community membership to question the objectivity of their social science and ethnographic access. One's "insider" status, or purported community "bias," is weaponized against tribal academics to suggest they are unable to act as dispassionate interpreters of tribal social worlds.

The TICI rejects this simplistic dichotomization between community-member insiders and outsiders, instead experimenting with ethnographic approaches broadly grouped together under a rubric of "engaged observation."[1] This style of ethnographic work presupposes proximity rather than distance between tribal social scientists and communities of observation. This presupposition does not

[1]'Engaged Observation is a conscious willful commitment by a subject (the researcher) to become one with another 'subject' (the researched), and be responsible for each other in the complex domain of knowledge, based on egalitarian principles. It commits against extractivism, challenges objectification, confronts a one-sided theoretical manipulation of the 'other', and moves away from freezing peoples as static entities in a dynamic reality. Engaged observation is the recognition of the subjective will-less-ness of both the observer and the observed, and the subjecthood of both the researcher and the researched in a knowledge project. Against the colonial strategy of 'participant observation', it situates itself within the decolonial framework and seeks to free itself from coloniality or the colonial gaze of social reality, and the insatiable imperial need to objectify, classify, dominate and control' (excerpt from personal interview with Bodhi SR on 23 January 2023).

naively suggest that tribal academics have unique or unmediated access to some generalized or esoteric "tribal" worldview, but rather that the act of doing ethnographic work in tribal India requires participants to recognize the epistemic ways that they are implicated in their ethnographic contexts. Tribal scholars affiliated to the TICI speak of aligning ethnographic methods in congruence with the cultural norms, values, and ethics of tribal societies, or what Martin and Mirraboopa (2003) posit as the indigenous/tribal ways of knowing (epistemology), being (ontology), and doing (methods). For decades, the dominant frame of reference for studying tribal society and their culture has been from the gaze of western and caste-centric approaches, foregrounding the universal-particular principle. In this framework, tribes were/are considered incapable of producing knowledge about their own communities, and thus treated as mere recipients of it. Hence, "tribal epistemology(s) were degraded, demeaned and marginalised, and through colonial and caste structures of knowledge and knowledge production were insidiously infantilised and inferiorised" (Bodhi and Ziipao 2019: 4).

One of the main purposes of the TICI is to make intellectual spaces available for such approaches. As such, the journal engages in a unique and experimental review process of academic manuscripts which involves members of tribal communities participating in peer review for studies for which they were themselves subjects of ethnographic engagement. To follow these standards of *JTICI*, we interviewed Dr. bodhi s.r., the National Convener of TICI, who currently teaches at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences. He provided some context for how the *JTICI* was conceived and how the review process works.

TICI as a governing body aims to promote tribal voices and adivasi discourses through publishing peer-reviewed academic content. At heart, the project interrogates mainstream theory and methods and proposes "new emancipatory knowledge" which is "driven by a sincere desire to deepen a 'perspective from within' in Tribal studies." Many of the scholars in TICI share our contention that there is no purely native perspective that inheres to a single individual, regardless of his authority or proximity to the center of tribal life. We also share the conviction that there is tremendous value in decolonizing tribal studies and highlighting the 'perspective from within'--even if such a perspective always remains partial. We are reminded of Geertz's warning against succumbing to hyper subjectivism because pure objectivity is impossible (1973, 373). Likewise, the absence of pure natives (to follow Narayan's language) does not obviate the importance of scholarship that reflects a qualified but crucial 'perspective from

within'. To that end, *JTICI* has created a support system for tribal scholars, allied researchers, and development agencies that is distinguished by its "humane theoretical and empirical knowledge based on direct engagement with the field context."

Central to this is a community review process that exceeds the standard double-blind review of other journals. Dr. bodhi s.r. explained that a community review reflects the desire for knowledge production about tribes to exceed ordinary standards of empirical argumentation and also to reflect tribal interests and be aligned with tribal sensitivities. Accordingly, if one writes about the Khasi tribe, then at least one peer reviewer should be a member of the Khasi tribe. If the reviewer decides that the article violates the standards of the tribal community, has no meaningful co-production of knowledge that includes tribal people, or endangers tribal people and their welfare, then it is rejected as an act of academic colonialism. While standard academic journals also emphasize research ethics and humane methods, the difference is that *JTICI* factors in insider considerations when deciding the sufficiency of truth claims. It rejects scholarship as rooted in objectification and empiricism to claim knowledge about something. Such techniques have furthered the oppression of tribes, whether intentional or not. The community review process is meant to remedy the balance of authoritative power to ask not only 'is the argument true in an empirical sense?' but also 'does it match tribal sensitivities and further collective tribal aspirations?'

Practically speaking, community peer review raises interesting questions about feasibility. First, who is selected as a reviewer to broadly represent the interests of the tribe? Should they be scholars? Are scholars impartial and does a PhD matter? Similarly, these questions can be fruitfully asked of standard academic peer review, where reviewers are disciplinary gatekeepers advancing specific theoretical and empirical agendas. Dr. bodhi s.r. explained that a reviewer "can be anyone from the community who can read and understand the implications that such writings have on the tribe. Community can be understood at two levels: the specific community in which one is writing about or member of any tribal community in India who is an academic in the subject domain of engagement." If men are writing about women's worlds, then the community reviewer should be a woman. The editor will consider the three reviews (two external and community) and make a final determination.

The articles in this Special Issue (except for Dr. Rathgaber's article, which is

focused on the international rights regimes and not on specific tribes) all adhere to the community review standard. We asked the authors to select a reviewer and fill out a questionnaire: Why did you select this person? What unique perspective do they bring? What potential bias do they have? In what ways are they contextually an insider and outsider? How will you work with them to do the review? Can they read and understand English? Will they give you oral or written feedback? How will you work with them to do the review? What advantages and disadvantages do you see in this review process? Answers ranged from total endorsement to concern that the reviewer studied for many years away from the tribe and, on account of their academic post, may be alienated from the tribe's orientation to and engagements with nature. More broadly, keeping deadlines for community reviewers is a recurring issue facing JTICI, as tribal people often have time-sensitive practices that will supersede writing a review of an academic article. In our experience, this process, no matter how fraught, brought much needed polyvocality to the published articles. By incorporating the edits suggested by tribal reviewers, it encouraged a stronger synthesis of insider/outsider epistemologies and reframed theoretical debates around more practical and socially-urgent considerations.

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