



Tribal Intellectual
Collective
India

LECTURES ON
TRIBAL STUDIES IN INDIA
PRE AND POST XAXA

A
DECOLONIAL-HISTORICAL
APPROACH

bodhi s.r



Lectures on
Tribal Studies in India
Pre and Post Xaxa
A Decolonial-Historical Approach

by

bodhi s.r.



Dedicated
to the
Tribal Intellectual Collective India

Tribal Studies in India: Pre and Post Xaxa
A Decolonial-Historical Approach

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Each chapter within this book unfolds as a meticulously crafted series of lectures tailored for specific academic audiences, presented in a transcript format that prioritizes accessibility over the traditional intricacies of academic prose. Despite this approach, deliberate efforts have been made to engage in critical discussions around key concepts forming the foundational framework.

The book commences with an introduction, aiming to provide the reader with a glimpse into the multitude of discussions and debates among scholars positioning themselves within the Post-Xaxa framework in Tribal Studies. While the subsequent three chapters offer a more comprehensive view of the theoretical and methodological propositions within this framework, the introduction touches upon broad yet critical themes related to Tribes. These include the concept of modernity, the problematization of methodological frameworks, the realities of Tribes in British India, the theoretical contestation over historiography, the argument for a Perspective from Within, the problem of mainstream approaches in studying Tribes, and other critical issues related to ontology and epistemology.

The three chapters in the book are essentially lectures delivered between 2021 to 2024. For the theoretical content of each, I extend my sincere gratitude to the Tribal Intellectual Collective India and my esteemed colleagues at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences for their invaluable contributions. Their insights have not only enriched the content but have also added profound depth to the ongoing conversations.

In the inaugural chapter, ‘Tribal Studies in India: Pre and Post Xaxa,’ I owe a debt of thanks to Raile Rocky Ziipao, Shailesh Darokar, and Bipin Jojo. Their thought-provoking questions compelled me to

reassess my perspectives, sparking a reevaluation of various issues that have found a meaningful place in the overall framework.

Moving to the second chapter, ‘The Decolonial-Historical Approach: Historicizing Epistemological Debates and Reframing Methodology in Post Xaxa Tribal Studies,’ I express my gratitude to my esteemed colleagues Alex Akhup, Raile Rocky Ziipao, and Ruby Hembrom. Their ongoing reflections and insightful feedback have been instrumental in refining the textual fabric.

The final chapter, ‘The Decolonial-Historical Approach: Its Methodological Contours,’ owes its depth to the collaborative efforts of Alex Akhup, Biswaranjan Tripura, K.V. Nagesh, and Raile Rocky Ziipao. Through endless discussions, they have played a pivotal role in navigating the intricate landscape of methodology.

A special note of appreciation goes to the Director of New Vehicle Publications for not only embracing my work but also for providing invaluable editorial support.

In crafting these chapters, I submit with humility that my motivation lies in the pursuit of truth—a personal journey intertwined with a commitment to benefit Tribal scholars, particularly those affiliated with the Tribal Intellectual Collective India. While my primary concern orbits around these circles, acknowledging the potential readership beyond, I trust that the nuanced context of my writing will be considered in interpreting the text.

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In my exploration of academic literature on Tribes, I have encountered various propositions delineating pathways and approaches in Tribal Studies. Among these, the framework of Professor Virginius Xaxa emerges prominently due to its distinctive theoretical and methodological perspectives, aligning closely with my own thinking.

Xaxa's framework comprises unique theoretical propositions that facilitate the nuanced capture of intricate data, potentially overlooked by other theoretical frameworks. His notable contributions lie in the critical examination and re-theorization of prevalent concepts, arguments, and frameworks within Tribal Studies that were pervasive until his writings.

Key papers where Xaxa fundamentally reframed debates, both methodologically and theoretically, include:

1. Transformation of Tribes in India – Terms of Discourse (June 1999)
2. Tribes as Indigenous People of India (December 1999)
3. Politics of Language, Religion, and Identity: Tribes in India (2005)

Xaxa's theoretical framework is further elucidated in his book 'State, Society, and Tribes: Issues in Post-Colonial India' and other seminal articles, including The Concept of Indigenous Peoples in India (published in The Concept of Indigenous Peoples in Asia- A Resource Book, IWGIA Document No.123').

Engaging with the works of Indian writers critical to Tribal Studies, such as Jaganath Pathy, Andre Beteille, Verrier Elwin, and others, Xaxa offered a thought-provoking critique. His articles Tribes as Indigenous People of India (1999) and The Concept of Indigenous

Peoples in India (2008) [1] revisited debates surrounding different concepts used to explain Tribal reality, emphasizing the impact of various historio-political processes on Tribes.

As Xaxa redefines the discourse on Tribes, I will delve into each of these concepts in chapter one. However, in this introduction, I will attempt to locate my three lectures, by providing the reader a glimpse of the theoretical debates taking place among Tribal intellectuals, so as to lay a context in which each of the chapters could be read. I will firstly think through the concept of modernity, and its imprints on indigenous Tribal peoples. Following which, I will throw some light on the debates concerning methodological framework, the politics of lived and structural realities of Tribes in British India, the contestation over historiography, the argument for a Perspective from Within, the problematics of mainstream approaches in studying Tribes, and finally touch upon some ontological-epistemological concerns and challenges in Tribal Studies.

On the Framework and Concept of Modernity

In the Indian context, debates about modernity typically revolve around the structure and dynamics of caste society. Critical theorists like Gopal Guru [2] define modernity as the erosion of caste identity, the emergence of the individual, and the "rise of egalitarian values and subsequent empowerment of depressed societies." Conversely, for G. Aloysius (2005),[3] modernity in caste society aligns with the rising demand for social rationality and egalitarianism by the mass-subaltern.

For non-caste societies, particularly Tribal societies, modernity is often perceived as a forceful imposition of an external framework that categorizes peoples and communities within a 'civilized-uncivilized' paradigm. This interplay between caste and non-caste societies in India results in the application of the caste society's conception of the 'modern' to non-caste societies, leading to

the identification of Tribes as pre-modern, backward Hindu, forest dwellers, or primitive.

In Western discourse, discussions about modernity concerning 'Tribes' center around geography, coloniality, and discourse. Taylor (1993) argues that the production of a modern subject is framed around the colonizer as the 'modern.' This positioning forms the core of the colonizing process, where the 'West' defines what is modern and scripts the 'pre-moderns' to keep them in place, a process described by Rana Kabanni (1998) as “devise and rule.” [4]

In the complex dynamics of state-tribe relations in India, the empirical landscape that envelops the Indian Nation State and permeates non-caste Tribal realities is structured to subjugate and marginalize those designated as 'Tribes'. In this paradigm, the modern is synonymous with caste society, and it is they who shape the narrative, depicting non-caste societies as pre-modern or backward. The foundational structure of the Indian nation-state is deeply rooted in caste society, and the locus of power within the state is predominantly controlled by it. Tribal societies, by and large, hold minimal agency within this power structure. While exceptions exist, the overarching trend suggests that power is concentrated not in the hands of Tribes but within caste society. This ontological scripting unfolds based on five key theoretical premises:

(i) **Negative Connotation of Diversity:** Diversity and the existence of distinct societies are negatively connoted, perpetuating the notion that non-caste Tribal societies are somehow inferior.

(ii) **Demeaning and Disrespecting Epistemologies:** Multiple and diverse epistemologies, inherent to Tribal societies, are often demeaned and disrespected, undermining the richness of their knowledge systems.

(iii) **Inferior Status of Tribal Theory:** Theories originating from a tribal location are relegated to an inferior status, contributing to the

marginalization of Tribal perspectives within academic and intellectual discourse.

(iv) **Physical Exclusion from Knowledge Production:** The 'tribal' self is systematically excluded from active participation in knowledge production, further reinforcing a hierarchical structure that limits the contributions of Tribal communities.

(v) **Ridiculing of Tribal Capabilities:** The conscious ridiculing of the 'Tribe' as incapable of producing scientific, universal, and efficacious knowledge serves to perpetuate stereotypes and undermine the intellectual potential of Tribal communities.

These theoretical premises collectively shape the narrative that reinforces the power asymmetry between caste and Tribal societies, perpetuating a structure that hinders the recognition and agency of Tribes within the broader socio-political landscape.

Thinking through the Post-Xaxa Methodological Framework

The prevailing methods employed in the study of Tribal communities are often parochial, relying heavily on theoretical inputs from academics whose formulations are deeply rooted in a colonial socio-anthropological perspective. This perspective aligns with a unilineal evolutionary framework, with scholars like Beteille (1986) attempting a historical approach but remaining entangled in the comparative method.

In contrast, Virginius Xaxa introduces a distinct historical approach, as articulated in his article 'Transformation of Tribes in India: Terms of Discourse' (1999). Xaxa's approach delineates six key processes:

(i) Clarity about Frame of Reference

(ii) Study Communities in Their Own Right

(iii) Historicize and Unravel 'Identity' Categories

(iv) Identify the Current Ontological Status of Identity Categories

(v) Draw out the Line of Inquiry Rooted in the Organic Context

(vi) Identify the Location of Both Researcher and Researched

According to Xaxa, the issues of framework, history, context, category, and the researcher's location are fundamental in producing knowledge that is rational, humane, decolonial, and insightful.

In my own empirical studies across diverse contexts in the country, I have adopted Xaxa's Historical Approach. With each new study, I strive to innovate and extend some of his methodological propositions. One critical issue in Tribal Studies that I draw from Xaxa's arguments is the dominant frame of reference, often formulated around theoretical frameworks like the 'tribe-caste continuum,' 'peasantization of tribe,' or the 'class stratified and class differentiated reality' that gave rise to 'class across society.' Xaxa's historical approach challenges these premises by advocating the study of social processes from within indigenous Tribal communities.

For Xaxa, knowledge is not derived through comparisons but through an in-depth examination of social realities within communities, embracing their point of view. This perspective prioritizes studying lived experiences, embodied processes, social dialogues, and context-based practices within Tribal communities, superseding the deductive application of a universal framework.

Thinking Through some Complex Issues Concerning Tribal Communities in British India

When employing Xaxa's historical approach to study processes 'in itself,' two distinct realities emerge, shedding light on the concrete social conditions during British India. The first involves the

socio-political realities of those inhabiting the (British) Provinces, while the second encompasses the realities of those residing in the partially excluded areas, excluded areas, Tribal frontier tracts, and princely States.

In the pre-1947 period, concerning Tribes, five systems of governance existed: (i) provinces, (ii) partially excluded areas, (iii) excluded areas, (iv) Tribal frontier tracts, and (v) the States. At the time of Indian independence, there were 17 provinces and approximately 565 princely States.

Post-1947, when the idea of 'India' was constructed, the Indian State predominantly constituted itself around the realities of the Provinces. Consequently, the social realities we recognize today are primarily those of the provinces. The independence movements against the British were rooted in the reality of the Provinces, shaping the mainstream narrative.

Conversely, the social realities of the States, Partially Excluded, Excluded, and Tribal Frontier Tracts were and are, to a great extent, invisible. Their narratives either became subsumed under the overarching narratives of the Provinces or were marked as isolationist, and in some cases, even secessionist.

In contemporary times, the Province-based narrative from the past continues to dominate the present as the only 'mainstream' narrative. Other narratives, including those of the States, Partially Excluded, Excluded, and Tribal Frontier Tracts, occupy a marginal space. Even if they occasionally break through into the social imagination of the mainstream, they never extend beyond a certain point and specific time period.

From the perspective of some Tribal communities, this dominant mainstream Province-centric narrative is hegemonic, pushing other, mostly Tribal narratives, to the periphery. Tribes and their realities, both social and political, were physically subsumed and

semi-assimilated into the larger mainstream narrative of the Provinces, a phenomenon applicable to most societies and communities classified as 'Tribes' in the Indian Constitution.

Thinking through Colonial Historiography and other ways of Engaging and Writing about History

From a historical standpoint, knowledge, even about the present, is shaped by past events, constructions, and interpretations. Depending on the approach to engaging and interpreting the past, distinct historiographies emerge. In my exploration of Tribal history and archives, I have identified five historiographies: (i) Colonial historiography, (ii) Nationalist historiography, (iii) Regional historiography, (iv) Subaltern historiography, and (v) Lived historiography.

I argue that Xaxa's approach falls within Lived historiography. In my quest for a deeper understanding of Xaxa's approach, I have conceptualized the idea of Dialogical Historiography. A detailed exposition of this complex method is provided in Chapter 3. At this juncture, I aim to highlight that Dialogical Historiography, while asserting its distinctiveness, acknowledges the role and value of other historiographies in the construction and interpretation of past events related to Tribal peoples.

However, for a brief insight into this debate, I will outline two major differences between Dialogical Historiography and other historiographies, among many. The first difference concerns premises, where Dialogical Historiography is situated within a Diversity-Dialogue premise, while other historiographies are fundamentally grounded on the Universal-Particular premise. The second difference pertains to epistemology, with the Universal-Particular framework grounded in colonial epistemology, while the Diversity-Dialogue framework is rooted within decolonial epistemology.

From these propositions, we can conclude that while other historiographies may embody some colonial elements by focusing on universality, Dialogical Historiography consciously rejects these colonial perspectives and emphasizes the lived and multiverse nature of reality. Highlighting and labeling these differences is crucial as it allows for the identification and differentiation of Dialogical Historiography from other historiographies in fundamental ways.

Finally, I want to emphasize that the "Historical" component in the Decolonial-Historical approach itself has evolved from my exploration and contemplation of various historiographies and their engagement with the Tribal past.

Some Reflections on Perspectives from Within

The centrality of perspective within the Post Xaxa Methodological framework is pivotal, as it delineates a way of cognizing, perceiving, and theorizing. Through numerous studies, I have conceived the idea of 'perspectives from within,' acknowledging the multiplicity of ways in which a given context can be perceived at any given moment.

This conceptualization draws theoretical inspiration from Xaxa's argument in "Transformation of Tribes in India: Terms of Discourse" (1999). Xaxa contends that relatedness across societies is not born from a loss of identity but emerges from a sound understanding of diverse realities. This interaction is framed as an inter-epistemic dialogue, challenging the traditional one-way discourse from the dominant to the dominated, powerful to powerless, mainstream to periphery, and 'visibles' to 'invisibles'.

The Decolonial-Historical approach positions itself in the study of empirical reality 'from within,' unraveling processes as experienced by peoples and cultures. It emphasizes the engagement of the researcher/subject within the context of study, departing from the objectifying observer stance. This positioning is what I term as a

'perspective from within,' where the context is not an object but a dynamic, subjectivity-laden reality with its own social boundaries.

Grounded in this 'perspective from within,' engagement with Tribal societies prompts attention to diverse narratives and intersecting lines of inquiry often overlooked by other approaches. This perspective has contributed to a clearer understanding of the methodological framework of the Decolonial-Historical approach.

It's crucial to differentiate the 'Perspective from Within' arising from critical Tribal scholarship from the Insider-Outsider framework often argued by scholars from dominant societies in sociology and anthropology. The Insider-Outsider debate, rooted in colonial thinking, reflects a colonial gaze that treats living subjects as 'objects' of study, a process termed extractivism by decolonial scholars.

As a scholar from the Tribal community, I consciously avoid falling into the trap of the insider-outsider framework, which perpetuates the colonial power dynamic. The Perspective from Within, in my view, transcends ethnic lines and fosters an inclusive environment in progressive academia. Tribal scholarship, and any progressive scholarship, should adopt decolonial ways of seeing, encapsulated in the Perspective from Within, moving beyond the limitations set by the colonial Insider-Outsider framework.

Regarding the formulation of the Perspective from Within, detailed discussions occur in chapters one and three. However, it's important to note that the Perspective from Within is not just a different approach but is also structured differently compared to the insider-outsider framework. Moreover, it requires a conscious and humane effort from the researcher/subject to occupy the other's point of view, acknowledging the subject as a truth seeker rather than a mere object in pursuit of deeper insights.

Some Thoughts on 'Mainstream' Approaches to Study Tribes in India

The necessity to problematize approaches to the study of Tribes stems from the realization that mainstream and established methods often fall short in capturing the intricacies of Tribal societies. Xaxa's article, Tribes as Indigenous People of India (1999), critically examines prevalent frameworks such as (i) class stratified articulations, (ii) peasantization of Tribes, (iii) Tribe as backward Hindus within a Tribe-Caste continuum, (iv) Tribes as smaller traditions, and (v) Tribes in coexistence. He convincingly argues that these formulations do not align with how Tribes themselves perceive and experience their reality.

Tribes, over time, have developed their own set of categories, complicating the analysis of societies framed as "Tribes." Administrative practices, ethnographic studies, and anthropological endeavors, backed by the State, have entrenched a conceptual vocabulary that makes it challenging to think beyond these established frames. Xaxa astutely posits that terms like Tribe, Indigenous, and Adivasis fail to accurately represent the diverse communities identified by the Indian State as Tribes. The imposition of an overarching category introduces theoretico-methodological discrepancies, blurring the intricate tapestry of ethnic identities and social conditions within India.

Xaxa's insight resonates with the complexity of India's social landscape, characterized by a multitude of ethnic identities and a rich diversity of social conditions. Even if one resorts to using terms like 'Indigenous' or 'Adivasi,' Xaxa acknowledges the inherent problems in these categories. Nonetheless, he recognizes their value, especially in the assertion of certain communities scheduled as Tribes, emphasizing their historical occupation of the land.

Emphasizing the fluidity of identity categories, Xaxa calls for an engagement with identity as a dynamic, evolving concept rather than a static entity. He advocates for contextual reliance as the foundational source of theory, discouraging the use of a priori theories when studying a specific context. This methodological shift becomes crucial in unraveling the truth or, at the very least, gaining closer insights into the conditions of Tribal contexts.

The problematization of the 'Tribe' category and the nuanced identification of the nature of a Tribal context becomes instrumental in discerning the Decolonial-Historical approach. This approach, as underscored by Xaxa, offers an alternative interpretation and viewpoint to events considered 'given' in Pre-Xaxa Tribal Studies, fostering a more contextually sensitive and holistic understanding of Tribal realities.

Reflections on Ontological Epistemological Concerns

In Post Xaxa Tribal Scholarship, particularly among critical Tribal scholars, a significant methodological consideration revolves around ontology and epistemology. This debate gains prominence from Xaxa's 1992 article, Oroans: Religion, Customs, and Environment, where he endeavors to uncover the foundational components of organic intellectualism in indigenous Tribal communities by drawing out Oroan epistemology. Unraveling the ontology and epistemology of a community becomes imperative in any attempt at knowledge production, especially when dealing with the complex challenges posed by an ethnos spread across regions and state boundaries within intersecting diverse social contexts. The Oroan community, undergoing disintegration and fragmentation of their *weltanschauung*, grapples with new contradictions in their reality.

Despite these challenges, organic attempts to reflect on their world from their embedded ontology and epistemology are underway. This critical theoretical engagement highlights that what was once

considered mainstream knowledge about Tribes was merely a perspective dominated by those who wielded the epistemic power to frame discourses. Within the perspective of these dominant discourses lie numerous historical and social lived realities that remain invisible to the researcher.

The concept of ontological and epistemological embeddedness holds significant value for any genuine researcher striving to comprehend a research context. It brings the researcher closer to the truth of the condition and provides a deeper insight into the culture and lived realities of the people under study. The unraveling of data rooted in such a perspective unveils realities often hidden and invisible in other approaches in Tribal Studies. Thus, in the Decolonial-Historical approach, a compelling case is made for greater attention to be paid to ontological and epistemological embodiment for those seeking to understand Tribal realities.

Conclusion

Each chapter in this book delves as deep as the current discussions on the subject have progressed. Although new formulations are being proposed, some ideas, as they are yet to take a proper theoretical shape, have been left out. Nevertheless, the ideas presented in this book are innovative, acknowledging the possibility that they might be challenging to digest. The attempt, however, is not to negate or denounce existing theories and frameworks, but rather to introduce new ways of seeing and articulate theoretical formulations arising from organic Tribal intellectualism.

End Notes

[1] The Concept of Indigenous Peoples in India, 2008. pp. 223-240.

[2] From a personal discussion with him in July, 2015. Also, the arguments can be found in Guru Gopal (Ed) (2005) Atrophy in Dalit

Politics. Dalit Intellectual Collective, Intervention 1. Mumbai: Vikas Adhyayam Kendra.

[3] From his book 'Periyar on Buddhism'. p.4.

[4] 'Devise and Rule' is a conception by Rana Kabbani, (1988), in her book 'Europe's Myth of Orient'. London Pandora. This concept is also noted by Peter J Taylor in his foreword: A Debate on the Significance of 1492 pp.ix from the book 1492, The Debate on Colonialism Eurocentrism and History. Taylor,P,J (1993). Full circle, or new meaning for the global? In the Challenge for Geography (R.J.Johnston, ed). Oxford: Blackwell.

[5] "An important issue in the study of Tribes today is how we understand the relationship between Tribe and civilization. I would like to make a distinction between two approaches which I will describe as the 'evolutionary' and the 'historical'. The evolutionary approach takes a long-range view of the passage of time and stresses the succession of social formations. Evolutionists no doubt recognize the presence of survivals. But these are regarded as anachronisms, which they probably are, on a sufficiently extended time scale. The historical approach limits itself to a particular framework of space and time and stresses the coexistence of different social formations within that framework. What is regarded as an anachronism in the evolutionary perspective may appear as a necessary component in the historical framework." Andre Beteille (1986) The Concept of Tribe with Special Reference to India. European Journal of Sociology. Vol 27. Issue 02, November 1986, pp. 297-318.

Tribal Studies in India: Pre and Post Xaxa

Introduction

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 hegemon 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 Caste 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 ‘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 single-handedly 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. Vidhyarathi, 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 Virginius 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 centered 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 enrich 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 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 *unilinear 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 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 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.

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 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).

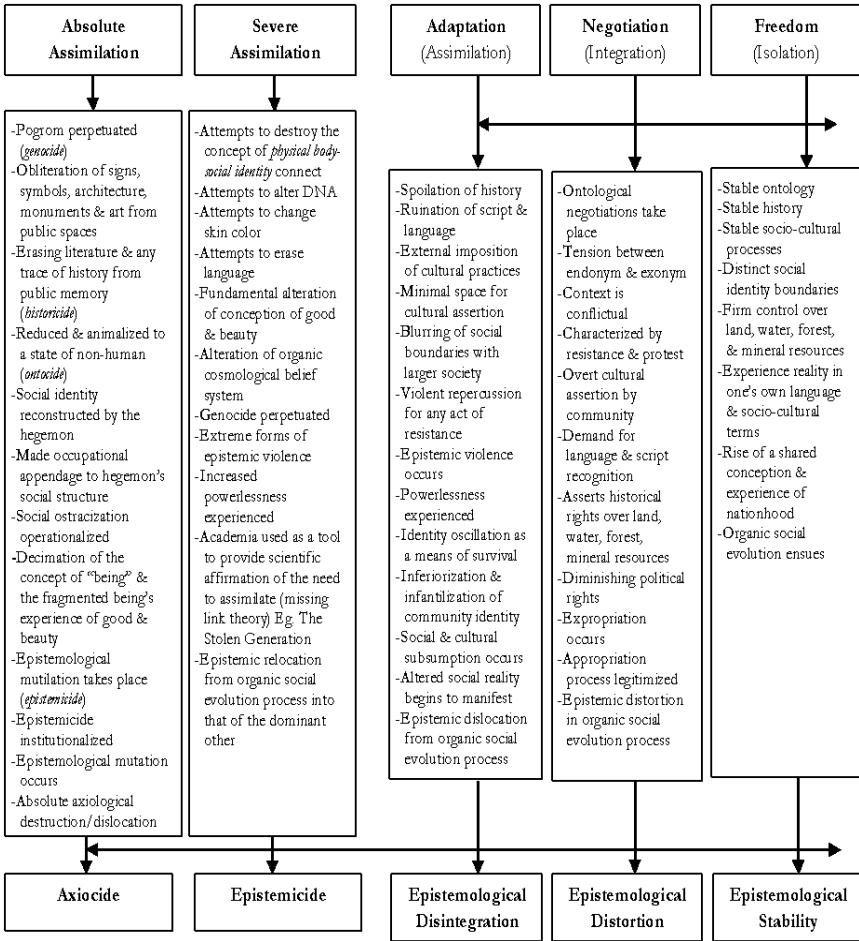
This same framework, viewed from a Post-Xaxa lens, stands in direct contrast to the points-of-view held by Tribal communities who see assimilation as a survivalist strategy of ‘adaptation’, integration as a compelled politico-historical necessity of ‘negotiation’, and isolation as a desired socio-political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

In the conceptual map below, 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 Assimilation-Integration-Isolation Spectrum - A Post-Xaxa Perspective



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 begin 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 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 overlaid 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.

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 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.

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 lecture 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.

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.

Endnotes

[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.

[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

[3] I have attempted to spell out the minute methodological processes of Xaxa's approach in the book titled "Epistemologies of the Peripheralized-A Decolonial-Historical Approach". The ideas in this text was presented in a lecture and the same forms the third chapter in this book.

[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 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. However on 2024, there is a stalemate.

[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 with 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.

[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>

[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.

[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.

[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>

[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 see 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 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."

[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'.

The Decolonial-Historical Approach: Historicizing Epistemological Debates and Reframing Research Methodology in Post-Xaxa Tribal Studies

Introduction

Debates in India concerning different approaches to research, generally revolve around four epistemic positions. When viewed from a Tribal perspective, or when one positions oneself in a particular line of inquiry that is grounded in the lived realities of Tribes in India the epistemic positions increase. Now, this is not to claim that other approaches are non-existent, such as those arising out of women's experience, the experience of those with disabilities, etc, but only to point out the particular frame that somewhat directly impinges on Tribal scholarship. This is especially so for those scholars who locate their inquiry from a Tribal point-of-view. My interest in this paper is to draw out the debates in ways that clarifies the Tribal position. While it would have been apt to engage with other epistemic locations, I will restrict myself only to tease out theoretical content falling within the scope of this paper.

To begin with, it is important to spell out the four approaches that this paper concerns itself with. These are - the colonial approach, the Postcolonial, the Decolonial-Historical and the Axio-Historical approaches. While the colonial framework remains the most dominant, many scholars who identify themselves with postcolonialism or the postcolonial struggle, are challenging the epistemic premise and framework that arose during the period of colonialism and that lingers on nonchalantly to this very day. To this somewhat acrimonious methodological contestation between the colonial and the postcolonial positions, was added the epistemic frame arising out of the Tribal experience in India, and closely connected to the Tribes, is the approach to knowledge that stems

from the Dalit experience. Briefly, the debate can be described as follows.

Postcolonial, as an epistemic movement, challenged the frame of colonialism and colonial historiography around the twin notions of politics and ethics, calling colonialism and its knowledge enterprise both an imperial-political and an unethical project. Tribes agreed with the postcolonial position, but inserted epistemology into the frame, arguing that the frame of reference formulated by postcolonial, while emancipatory in nature, is not the only framework available to engage with knowledge. We have our own organic *weltanschauung*, that when contrasted with both Colonial and Postcolonial is posited and framed as the Decolonial-Historical Approach. This particular approach, arising out of the Tribal experience of colonialism, are constituted by 'categories of epistemic struggle' such as political, ethical and epistemological, all grounded in a 'waves of colonialism' context.

Dalits, I have observed, agree with both the Postcolonial approach and the Decolonial-Historical approach, but realized that when the fundamentals of a knowledge enterprise is seen from such a perspective, they have suffered an 'axiocide', as compared to Tribes who have merely gone through different nature, intensity and waves of 'epistemicide'. In the increased genocidal milieu of mortal battles and epistemic wars between contradictory forces in Indian history over 2000 years, Dalits found themselves ostracized and dehumanized, and have, in the process, suffered a complete erasure of their organic frame of reference. Following which, in their historical attempt to resurrect and produce a new frame of reference, birthed from their own lived experience, they saw their epistemic struggle not only as a political, ethical and epistemological project, but also as a critical axiological engagement. In this engagement the component of aesthetics occupies central space and is positioned as the most fundamental element in their new premise for the production of a politically progressive, healing and emancipatory knowledge. Thus, to the radical elements of politics, ethics, and

epistemology, was fused and added the critical idea of aesthetics. With these four methodological elements; politics, ethics, epistemology and aesthetics, bounded together as a frame, the Axio-Historical Approach to knowledge production was born.

But what is the argument that Tribes make to foreground the question of epistemology in its frame of reference, over and above the twin postcolonial concepts of politics and ethics. Why is the Tribal struggle not restricted to politics and ethics and instead encapsulates epistemology into its framework? Can postcolonial provide answers to the Tribal question? What are its limitations and on what exact point is Tribal scholarship in agreement or disagreement with postcolonial scholarship?

The answer to this lies in a critical theoretical engagement with two processes. The first, concerns an engagement with a few, somewhat subtle concepts - 'waves of colonialism', 'decoloniality', 'epistemological decolonization' and 'contextualization'. The second, concerns the problematization of an ontological structure often referred within academia as the Universal-Particular framework. Detailing of the above two processes is done in an article titled 'The Decolonial-Historical Approach' published by the Tribal Intellectual Collective India. However, for the purpose of this paper, an attempt is made to spell out the theoretical nitty gritty of propositions put forth in the above paper.

It is but obvious that Tribes have their own organic framework, however, the nature of this frame is such that it must take into consideration the multiverse nature of Tribal epistemologies. There is no single Tribal epistemology, instead there are tribal epistemologies. This is an important issue because it is on this specific premise that the Universal-Particular framework theoretically crumbles and is challenged on both ontological efficacy and methodological application when viewed from a Tribal perspective.

The Decolonial-Historical Approach

Before briefly touching upon each of the categories that constitute the Decolonial-Historical approach I must admit that it is a humongous and difficult task to attempt to capture the essence of the Tribal reality in only a few concepts. More so when the aim of such an exercise is to unravel and comprehend the methodological dimensions of the said reality for the purpose of research. Nonetheless, seeking as I do to uncover these subterranean realities for the sake of crafting out a distinct Tribal epistemic framework, I shall discuss the same to the best of my abilities.

As noted, some of the categories that make the Decolonial-Historical approach includes the ideas of (1) waves of colonialism, (2) decoloniality, (3) epistemological decolonization and (4) contextualization. Now in connection with the first idea conceived as 'waves of colonialism', I have used the concept of colonialism consciously instead of colonization, and thus the formulation 'waves of colonialism' rather than 'waves of colonization'. By 'waves of colonialism' my reference is to the process of colonization and also the accompanying relentless process of the 'colonization by discourse' or *epistocracy*. Colonialism, it may be argued, is preceded by the process of colonization, but while colonization would have come and gone, yet colonialism remains steadfast till such time that its framework holds firm as the dominant epistemic frame for Tribes. This colonialism, although imbued with some form of past or present colonization, enters the tribal reality wave after wave, brought about by different colonial forces that hope to impose themselves on a particular Tribal population. This perpetuation through forceful imposition of the colonial framework on the Tribal community operates much more in the realm of rules, regulation, language and discourse. This is different from waves of colonization which refers to the process of physical subjugation and colonization of land, people and place.

As Tribes we embody an experience in which a sort of epistemological alienation has occurred. We cannot represent ourselves in our own epistemic framework other than in and through the knowledge that has been produced about us by the colonizer. Meaning, we cannot represent our world as our own, in our own language, in our own history and in our own narrative. Knowledge produced about Tribes, and not by Tribes, is the epistemic mirror in which we perceive, interpret and experience our reality.

The ontological unpredictability of the past, the epistemological instability of the present and the axiological uncertainty of the future is what defines our realities. Least of the knowledge which is born out of our organic socio-cultural experience is used by us to reflect about our own concrete condition and represent ourselves in and to the world. All epistemological frameworks are mediated by the epistemology of the colonizer, and curated in such ways that suits and perpetuates the colonizers vested interests.

It is from such a concrete condition that coloniality manifests. Coloniality is used to point to the cognitive dissonance arising out of the embodiment of colonial epistemology, whilst still embedded in one's own community epistemology. Like the concept mentality, coloniality is used in this context to describe a way of cognizing, re-cognizing, and thinking that is fundamentally rooted in a colonial gaze of the world, or, to put it more cogently, fundamentally grounded in the epistemological premise of the colonizer. A conscious attempt to challenge coloniality, or this particular way of perceiving and thinking about the world is decoloniality. Thus decoloniality, which is the second concept within the Decolonial-Historical approach, is a critical component in the framework with vast implications for epistemology, research and theory. It may be pointed out that part of the goal of any decolonial project is the problematization of colonial epistemology and the production of theory that keeps the mentality of a Tribal community within the cultural bounds of its own history, language and identity.

In this sense, decolonial theory for Tribes is a psychological and historical necessity, because as Tribes attempt to safeguard their well-being, remain socially cohesive and withstand the onslaught of waves of colonialism, it becomes one of the only means to keep agency alive. An agency that will help them adapt to the forces of colonialism and also strengthen their negotiating capacity as a social unit against the colonial other in historio-political time and space.

You will observe that laced throughout the text is the concept of epistemology. There is a special reason for this - it constitutes the third concept in the Decolonial-Historical approach. In my attempt to demystify the colonization process, it seems to me that, as Tribes, what we experience in India is much more epistemological in nature rather than brute physical domination that is generally identified with colonization. It is in this context that in order to clearly point out the said condition, the concept of epistemological decolonization is used to spell out the actual process at hand. By epistemological decolonization, I am referring to the methodological and discursive aspects of colonization, and thus, as an act of decolonization, what is sought in the Decolonial-Historical approach is not a struggle against physical domination by the colonial other on us, but a freedom from the epistemic framework and the methodological process that is perpetuated by the colonialist throughout our social-world.

Many Tribes have gone through waves of colonialism. Being low in numbers and having less power to confront both historical colonization and past and present forms of colonialism, Tribes have had to adapt to various forces of vested interests that persistently impinges on geopolitical spaces and social life. Remnants of these colonial-isms reverberate through our living-world and still defines and even overwhelms our past and present being. In epistemological decolonization, our focus is not a sudden rejection of these colonial-isms or in other words, remnants of colonial episteme, but a persistent act of consciousness about the effects that such processes have had on us. We cannot hate or condemn our past, a past that was

constructed in a colonial centric milieu in which we had very less power to resist, but we can remain awake to our own epistemic location and theoretical gaze as we engage with the knowledge process.

Finally, let me discuss the concept of Contextualization, which, at least in this paper, is identified as the last category that constitutes the Decolonial-Historical approach. But before detailing Contextualization, I will provide a working definition of the word *context*. When I use the word, *context*, am referring to a number of simultaneous and interacting processes, that is defined as (i) a dynamic confluence of time, space, place, persons, (ii) fluid and interacting, (iii) organic and structured, (iv) experienced in the here and now, (v) historically embedded, and (vi) containing within itself an embodied epistemology. I wish to argue that every context embodies an epistemology, a context epistemology, that propels the production of knowledge, also the ways in which knowledge is structured, and how peoples come to know and experience their reality. This context epistemology also constitutes multiple intersecting realities within itself, and in relation to others. It has a socio-geographical boundary, but this boundary is not rigid and static, instead it remains opens or closes based on concrete historical conditions and socio-political events that a Tribal community finds itself in. Now, in the light of waves of colonialism, we have received many theoretical 'givens', that have framed how we as Tribal peoples experience our social world. Important to assert, that part of the process of contextualization is the destabilization and alteration of these 'givens'. In this sense, contextualization is critical, for it allows the simultaneous rejection of the 'givens', whilst also propelling the novel reproduction of new ways of thinking and seeing. This is easily achieved in contextualization through the subjection of each of the 'givens' to the test of context. What is then produced as knowledge, is an episteme that is fundamentally altered by what the context thinks is valuable and critical in and for itself.

It is important to assert at this point that in any process of knowledge production, as Tribes, we should not accept any 'given' as received, and instead every 'given', no matter how non-threatening and innocent, must be subjected to the test of our context. Knowledge produced in this way will emancipate and not subjugate, and through the process of contextualization we become producers, and not recipients of knowledge. Stating this obvious fact in the context of Tribal realities is long overdue.

Now turning to the practice of Contextualization, much more from a methodological perspective, I wish to argue that Contextualization is fundamentally different from the dominant colonial approach to research that is grounded on the process of objectify, classify, categorize and compare. Instead, Contextualization is a conscious attempt that demands the usage of multiple interconnected methods from the researcher. Some of these methods are engaged observation, historical deconstruction, conceptual delineation, narrative unraveling, and rational reconstruction of intersecting realities through the identification of lines of inquiry embedded in subjects. In a context, it is not objects, but lines of inquiry embedded in subjects that needs to be inquired into and comprehended. Every context gives rise to its own theory; a context-based theory, not a single universal theory applicable across time and space. A context is characterized by an assemblage, a multiplicity of intersecting and codependent realities emerging out of the existence of necessary conditions that forms the basis for the interdependent co-arising of other layers of realities. From this perspective, it may also be noted that social life itself, within every context, is a stream of many conditionalities. Contextualization engages with these co-dependent conditionalities, with all its complexities embodied, and the knowledge produced from such a method is multiple and always in process.

From a Contextualization perspective, it is also important to make one critical observation about the nature of knowledge, especially in

the context of the social. Knowledge about the social, by its very nature is valuable and meaningful but restricted and bounded, it cannot be universalized, there are limits to any truth claims made about any social by it. But why so? This is because in Contextualization there is no single universal truth to be found, only multiple narratives to be unraveled, and thus, in actuality, there is no certainty in theoretical propositions made about the social, only provisional best explanations about it.

It is also important to note, as a concluding remark on the subject, that contextualization also embeds one critical element in the knowledge production process, it brings into the forefront the social location of the researcher. It does not deny, negate or invisibilise location in the knowledge enterprise. It values location and actually sees location as critical for the production of meaningful knowledge.

Some Concluding Remarks

(1) Some of you reading this article might be confused by the way I have framed the text, and probably ask why are there so many frames being brought in for critical scrutiny in the beginning of my paper, that to in a text that is merely 3000 words. This is a valid question, however, from my point of view, more than this article being an act of epistemological disobedience, my sole intention is to merely express an ontological doubt on the subject at hand.

To begin with, the reason I use Postcolonial and Axio-Historical as part of my analysis of research approaches is because on one hand, I want to show how the Tribal position is beyond Postcolonial attempts to understand Tribal reality; and on the other hand, the need to discuss the Axio-Historical approach is to show how the Tribal experience is much lesser in ontological depth than the experience of Dalits. The Tribal experience in India is by all measure empirically superseded by the experience of Dalits in terms of the historical impact of forms of colonialism. This is to argue that while the

postcolonial framework falls short and cannot completely capture Tribal reality, yet the Tribal framework itself is somewhat confined and is unable to capture the experience of Dalits in ways that that Dalits themselves can do.

Therefore, I wish to argue that as tribes we cannot make any claims of universality for our framework. While restricted by concrete empirical conditions, our frames, arising out of our lived experience is definitively the closest that can capture and explain our reality. An important point to note here is how such an analysis simultaneously unravels the multiverse nature of knowledge and the contextual nature of methodology and frames of reference.

(2) Are the four concepts named as constituting the Decolonial-Historical approach the only categories that constitute it? The answer, at least from my end is No! The Decolonial-Historical approach to research encapsulates many more concepts, and it is critical to note that each of these concepts are born and produced by the context itself. The context speaks to every researcher about what particular concepts suit it best, and this is not restricted to a particular domain of study, but spans across varied social realms. Every research that approaches a particular study from the Decolonial-Historical perspective is bound to encounter different concrete conditions in context, and from each contextual conditions, different ways of seeing and doing research is birthed. There are many more concepts that I wish to discuss in this paper, especially the practice of Dialogical Historiography, but for the purpose of this article and the restrictions that it bears on me, I have tried only to discuss the broader framework of the approach that will allow other Tribal scholars to also make meaning of.

The Decolonial-Historical Approach in Social Research: Its Methodological Contours

Briefly

In the methodological propositions asserted below, I attempt an explication of an approach in social research which I call the Decolonial-Historical Approach. The approach is located within the Post-Xaxa paradigm and was developed while studying Indigenous People's Political Systems. It is constituted by six co-dependent and interconnected concepts - decoloniality, epistemological decolonization, contextualization, engaged observation, equanimity-compassion, and dialogical historiography. A full-length explication of the same is available in the PostScript of a short book I wrote on the subject titled “Epistemology of the Peripheralized: A Decolonial-Historical Approach” published by the New Vehicle Publications in 2020.

Below are the key elements that constitute the decolonial-historical approach within a Post-Xaxa paradigm:

Decoloniality

Key to the Decolonial-Historical Approach in social research is the perspective and intent of a researcher. How one sees a 'reality' is critical to any knowledge enterprise. In the decolonial-historical approach, this perspective is framed around a concept called decoloniality. Decoloniality is a way of thinking and looking at social reality, and in that sense, a point-of-view. 'Intent' is embedded in such a point-of-view.

When one studies colonialism in retrospect, one realizes that its key historical project was to forcefully extent a particular way; a colonial way of looking at the world across all 'other' colonized realities. This

way of looking stems from the colonizer's own sociality or social-reality.

Social reality, one may argue, is constituted by diverse reality(s). Each of these diverse reality(s) has embedded within itself a frame-of-reference often spoken about in terms of the universal-particular framework. Every social reality has its own 'particular' interconnected to its own 'universal' within its frame-of-reference. This frame-of-reference is embodied within the social reality of the colonizer; like it is for every other diverse reality.

From a research point of view, when a single colonial entity began to impose itself through colonization on other diverse realities, it also imposed and extended its embedded 'universal-particular' to other realities. In the process of colonization, the colonizer began to subjugate other diverse realities and subsumed them under its own frame-of-reference. Through this process, the colonized became the new 'particular' of the colonizer, and had to begin operating within the set rules of the colonizers 'universal'.

These processes produced a colonial difference in which the colonizer's 'universal' was reproduced and perceived as superior, while the colonized, who are the 'new particulars' in the colonial frame-of-reference, were classified as 'the inferior' within the 'universal' of the colonizer.

Over a period of time, this process was insidiously perpetuated to the point where colonialism began classifying the new subjugated colonized 'particular' as 'inferior being', while the dominant colonizer was reproduced as the 'superior being'. Across various geographies, colonialism manifested this 'colonial difference' in diabolical ways. In some contexts, it marked this difference (in people's 'bodies') as being between 'people with human souls' and 'people with animal souls'. In another context, it was between 'full-humans and half-humans'. In some other contexts it was between, 'pure-bodies and

polluted-bodies', and yet in other contexts, the difference was marked as being between 'civilized-beings' and 'primitive-beings'. It is this manipulation of social reality that led to a state where the 'universal' of the colonizer became the 'universal' for all other diverse colonized/subjugated identities, who by this time had to submit, venerate, emulate forcefully, and imitate the ways of the colonizer in order to survive the colonial onslaught.

At the same time a rigid structure of double social inequality was also being perpetuated and embodied in the colonial project to place the worthy superior 'particular' over and above the now condemned and stigmatized inferior 'particular'. In other words, the colonial 'particular' was positioned as superior to the colonized 'particular', thus extending the colonial difference not only between the colonizer's frame-of-reference over the colonized's frame-of-reference, but taking this difference to the point of marking the 'personhood or self' of the colonizer as being superior to the 'personhood or self' of the colonized.

Manifesting from these classificatory processes was a critical phenomenon concerning the condition and status of the subjectivity of the colonizer. The colonizer, throughout the period of colonization, did not lose their 'subjecthood', and the structures that produce and affirmed their subjectivities experienced minimal epistemological disruption. But as for the colonized, their subjectivity was negated, their social structure epistemologically mutilated, and their 'subjecthood' denied, leading to the fundamental alteration of their 'being' into mere 'objects' of the colonizer. Thus, while the colonizer remained a 'subject', the colonized became an 'object'. This objectification of the colonized did not stop here, another important concomitant life process began to layer itself into the lives of the colonized 'object'; they insidiously began to experience alienation from their own organic methodology, having to adopt the now 'superior' methodology of the colonizer. This process occurred across

the colonized world and can be referred to as 'methodological alienation'.

All these processes gave rise to what is called 'coloniality'; a way of thinking, a gaze, a way of perceiving the world in which this colonial difference became an established premise of 'knowledge', accepted and consumed as normative by both the colonizer and the colonized.

The knowledge produced around this framework established coloniality as a 'given'. It is important to assert that, the project of colonialism was not merely a project of wealth accumulation by threat, force, and violence, but also a project of rule by knowledge; an *epistocracy*. It is within this understanding that the concept of decoloniality is positioned.

In the decolonial-historical approach, the notion of decoloniality challenges this coloniality, this colonial mentality, this colonial gaze, but not only this, it also does something fundamental, it attempts to replace the very premise of the 'universal-particular' that is firmly under the grip of the colonialist with another frame-of-reference called 'diversity-coexistence'.

From a 'decolonial gaze' the world is diverse and each of these dynamic diversity(s) are, at a more fundamental level, in a state of negotiated co-existence. Any act of pulverizing, eradicating and homogenizing these multiplicities, (that were imperative for colonialism to succeed), amounted to violence; genocide, epistemicide and *axiocide*. (Genocide – the total obliteration of the physical body of the other. Epistemicide – the extermination of knowledge systems and culture of the other. *Axiocide* – the annihilation of the structure of 'good' and 'beauty' of the 'other', the destruction/distortion of the value attached to it, and the attempt to completely erase any history of genocide and epistemicide from public memory).

Epistemological Decolonization

From this decolonial point of view, one can approach the subject of study through a process I call epistemological decolonization. Before proceeding, it is important however to touch upon the subject of colonial epistemology in order to be able to further the understanding of the concept of epistemological decolonization.

Within colonialism, the idea of coloniality began to get consolidated into a distinct epistemology – the colonial epistemology. This took place incrementally over a period of time. It was this colonial epistemology that constituted the basis of the colonial gaze. With colonialism spreading across the world, this epistemology penetrated and perpetuated itself throughout the geographies of the colonized.

Through this epistemology, the colonizer began to produce a structured social reality in ways that fit their image of the world and in means that serve their purpose and convenience. The act of decolonization in this context is an attempt to deconstruct the process of colonial reproduction and its concomitant constructs through colonized societies.

But it does not end there, for decolonization is also an axiological resistance to colonial epistemology. It is from such an act of epistemological disobedience that the notion of epistemological decolonization stems from. It is necessary to assert this point in order to bring to bear the thrust and focus on epistemology in the decolonization project. One's engagement with the production of knowledge from a decolonial gaze is not merely a theoretical confrontation with colonization per se, but a rejection of an epistemology that appropriates and subjugates diverse entities into a single unilinear universal-particular frame-of-reference.

In this sense, epistemological decolonization is restrained from reducing colonization to a single historical event. Instead, it sees colonization as an epistemology that is violently layered into the lives

of people through 'waves of colonialism' and multiple intersecting colonial mentalities. In this case, Epistemological decolonization is posited to unravel and face up to such a conception of colonization.

Contextualization

Having clarified the point-of-view and the approach within the overarching frame of epistemology, it now becomes necessary to clarify how one could conceive one's research 'subject'. What constitutes these realities to be studied, and how do these realities lend themselves to the research process.

One can approach this conceptualization from a process called contextualization; an attempt to ground the 'self' around the 'context'. Within the decolonial-historical approach the 'context' is to be understood as a 'dynamic confluence of time, space, place, persons', 'fluid and interacting', 'organic and structured', 'experienced in the here and now', and 'containing within itself an embodied epistemology'.

Every context embodies an epistemology- a context epistemology; that propels the production of knowledge, also the ways in which knowledge is structured, the usefulness and necessity of knowledge, the rules of validity or non-validity of knowledge, and how its constitutive elements come to know and experience their realities.

Context epistemology also constitutes multiple intersecting realities within itself and in relation to others. It has a boundary, but the boundary is not rigid and static, it opens and closes based on concrete historical conditions and socio-political events.

It is by embodying such a conception of context, that one may approach the process of contextualization. The act of contextualization within the decolonial-historical approach is a conscious effort that demands the engagement, deconstruction, delineation, unraveling, and reassembling of these intersecting

realities through the identification of 'lines of enquiry' rather than the 'object of inquiry'. There is no 'object' to inquire, only multiple lines of intersecting inquiries to be unraveled and comprehended in context.

This gives rise to its own theory, but not a single universal theory, instead it produces an assemblage, a multiplicity of interdependent intersecting theories. The process of contextualization engages with this multiplicity, with all its complexities, and unravels a particular line or more lines of inquiry in the context.

The knowledge produced through contextualization is multiple and in process, and it cannot be reduced to a single universal truth. This is how contextualization conceives knowledge. As far as the knowledge producer engaging in knowledge production is concerned, contextualization is somewhat restrained to any 'truth-claim' by any person about having understood the totality of a particular social reality. The knowledge producer has at most unraveled one aspect of the social reality, not the total reality.

This limitation set on the knowledge producer about 'truth-claiming' and the characterization of knowledge as a continuity of intersecting narratives, demands the recognition of two fundamental processes in knowledge production (i) that the knowledge producer should openly choose and state one's line of inquiry in the knowledge enterprise and (ii) that any social knowledge produced is only one among the many.

In contextualization there is no single Truth to be found, only multiple narratives to be unraveled. The role of the knowledge producer is to articulate these narratives and to restrain from making universal 'truth-claims' that fixes reality(s) in time and space as if socio-structural realities and people's socio-historical experiences are static objects or unmoving entities.

Engaged Observation

Having clarified the subject of study within the decolonial-historical approach, and how one perceives the same, it is necessary that a deeper discussion be made about the process of engagement with this 'context' within the process of contextualization. One of the methods of contextualization, I propose to call engaged observation.

This way of engagement is partly a rejection of what is often spoken about in the (colonial) social sciences as 'participant observation'. The attempt in engaged observation is not merely to be a visible or invisible participant in the observation of the context, but to become so engaged in the context that one becomes the context itself.

How does one do that, one might ask? To answer this question, one has to unravel the idea called ethnography and its method called 'participant observation'. The idea of 'participant observation' has its roots in colonialism. The way in which a 'participant' observer produces knowledge in ethnography is to make clear distinctions between the subject (researcher) and the object (data). The subject begins by objectifying the data, then classifies the same, followed by categorization and finally produces knowledge by comparison.

Such a process, that is objectification - classification - categorization - comparison, formed part of a method in which colonialism framed the production of colonial knowledge. The idea of objectification and classification was actually fundamental to the colonial project. Colonialism needed to engage in such ways as it allowed them to produce the colonial difference that marked them (the colonizer) as superior and the other (colonized) as inferior. This was important for the colonizer because it is through this strategic methodological intervention that the colonizer was able to then encapsulate, dominate and control the colonized 'object'.

Once the colonizer took upon himself or herself the universal position of the knowledge producer, the colonized 'object' is

subjugated to an inferior being, who can then be reconstructed and reproduced in the colonizer's new project of rule. It is through this process of inferiorizing and infantilizing the colonized 'other' that the colonizer began manufacturing and perpetuating the notion of being historically and morally superior, and thus responsible to 'civilize' and 'rule' the inferior 'subject'. It is this same intentionality that went on to inform the framework of colonial research.

In colonial research the researcher occupies the location and gaze of the colonizer, and the research subject (peoples and cultures) is reduced to an 'object' of inquiry that needs to be defined, classified, compared, and theoretically taken control of; as in claim ontological epistemological authority over the 'object'.

Throughout the process, the researcher uses his/her observation, mostly 'cognitive bounded' reflexivity to collect 'data' and piece together a theory around and about the data/object. This is then compared to other data/theory in the process of analyzing and writing, to produce what colonialism considers social scientific knowledge.

In direct contrast to participant observation, the practice of engaged observation goes much beyond, by first attempting to merge the subject and the object in ways that the researcher is no more engaging only from cognitive-centered reflexivity but can begin to 'feel' the subjective reality of the 'object'. Here the context of the study subsumes both the subject and object to become 'subject-object' and thus turning the colonized 'object' into a decolonized 'subject'. The conceptual distinction between the two remains, but now as mere entities that in practice have become one in context, with both subjectivities recognized and affirmed, and altering the research relationship between the researcher and researched in fundamental ways from 'subject' and the 'object' to 'subject-object' to 'subject-subject'.

Engaged observation also asserts that all social knowledge is situated and the ability to occupy a location or a point-of-view is key to any knowledge enterprise. This position on knowledge challenges the way colonizers conceive knowledge.

For colonialism, social knowledge is not situated, and the notion of objectivity, by the usage of a 'scientific' method, is its means to claim subject expertise over a knowledge domain. This is how a colonizer makes claims about his/her superior ability to produce true, unbiased certain/scientific knowledge about the 'other'. And how so? because this knowledge produced by the colonizer was made from an unsituated, objective, and unbiased 'Gods eye view', which in other words, is the point-of-view that includes and overarches all other points-of-views without being part of the view itself.

In this (colonial) way of producing knowledge, the 'object' of inquiry is a silent subject, devoid of any subjecthood, without a voice, without being able to speak for itself, and nothing more than data for the theorization, theoretical production and meaning-making project that affirms and neatly fits into the world of the colonizer-researcher.

Equanimity-Compassion

The next question that arises in the social research process is what state of mind should the 'self' be in while practicing 'engaged observation' in the context. Also, when does one know that one's subjecthood is now entangled with the subjectivities of the context? To discuss these processes, it is important to understand the concept of equanimity.

The idea of equanimity goes much beyond (cognitive) reflexivity. It enters the domain of what can be called 'ecologies of sensation'. The 'self' in a social research context is a 'sensation'; a feeling plus thinking being. It cannot be reduced only to a thinking being. It is when one can feel the sensation of the context; the people and all other beings that constitute it (thus the word ecology), that a

researcher engaged in a knowledge enterprise can begin to get a deeper insight and understanding of the subjectivities of the identified context.

The context in and by itself is a 'subject' and not a mere 'object' that is to be objectified and interrogated. While this sounds easy enough, it however demands something much more than just equanimity and 'ecology of sensation', it demands 'compassion', as in equanimity-compassion on the part of the researcher.

The concept equanimity is often spoken about as closely link to compassion, not in the metaphysical but in the methodological sense. Human beings are capable of one more act over and above 'sympathy' and 'empathy', which is the ability to feel and experience compassion. It is not that compassion does not require empathy, it does, but it demands much more than just the cognitive aspects of empathy, it requires the emotive possibilities of empathy to be embraced wholeheartedly.

The idea of compassion constitutes both 'cognitive empathy' and 'emotive empathy'. Cognitive empathy, which is often championed in the social sciences, is often spoken of in the research process as a critical capacity of the researcher. However, while cognitive empathy requires a great degree of sensitivity arrived at through critical reflexivity between self and the other/external reality, the state of emotive empathy has to be cultivated as part of a conscious research practice of 'turning the gaze within' or 'into the self', while operating in the external reality. Looking within to look without is part of this cultivation process.

The equanimity-compassion continuum within the decolonial-historical approach replaces what is often asserted in the interpretative schools of social science as the reflexivity-empathy spectrum which stresses more on the cognitive aspects of the research engagement.

Equanimity, however, is different, because while reflexivity; often referred to as the human capacity over and above reactivity and responsivity that a researcher possesses while engaging in inquiry, the idea of equanimity on the other hand refers to the capability of the researcher to observe oneself while observing and engaging with the subject of study.

Further, while empathy loosely refers to a capacity that human beings have to cognitively understand the concrete condition of the 'other', the idea of compassion refers to a non-judgmental affect that is possible for a researcher to experience the 'other' much beyond empathy.

These two simultaneous processes of equanimity-compassion go beyond the ability of a researcher to produce knowledge not merely as a 'subject' observing and trying to understand a concrete condition, but as one with an organic and partly authentic experience of the context itself.

Two points however are important to note here about the equanimity-compassion continuum. First, when one hears such a conception for the first time, one might immediately feel a cognitive repulsion to the proposition. There could be many reasons for this, one of which could be that 'research' as a means of knowledge production has been so dominated and subsumed by Western/Colonial/Occidental rules that any conception out of this framework is immediately negated and ridiculed. This however is what the decolonial project attempts to historically rupture and theoretically unveil; the limitations of the western colonial knowledge enterprise and the problematics of a conception in which the mind is the base of existence – 'I think therefore I exist'.

Secondly; the reason that equanimity-compassion is posited as a stance in research is that it is possible for every serious researcher, no matter what social background, to study any context without having

to be trapped in the colonial construct popularly posited as the 'insider/outsider' debate. This binary construct is nothing but a manifestation of the colonizers' angst. All that the equanimity-compassion stance seeks in the research process from the researcher is that the researcher humbly accepts one's location and consciously attempts to occupy the point-of-view of the living, pulsating 'researched subject' in the process of knowledge acquisition and production.

The above argument, however, is not to take away from the fact that even western social science research is now beginning to engage with these complex processes seriously. Some of the new methods like auto-ethnography, critical ethnography, critical discourse analysis, affective and critical histories, and the likes have been proposed to study varied domains such as society, culture, technology, and biodiversity.

Dialogical Historiography

Another method that is interconnected with all the above five processes concerns the direct engagement with the 'history of the context', inclusive of the method of writing history, and the ways in which theoretical production becomes part of the knowledge enterprise. This method of engagement with history, I call dialogical historiography.

To understand dialogical historiography, we first need to contrast it with colonial historiography. Fundamental to colonial historiography is to posit the writing of history within a universal-particular framework.

Two claims are made by colonial historiography (i) that the history written is universal; as in applicable across time and space, and (ii) the approach to writing is objective; as in being unbiased and neutral.

Dialogical historiography rejects these claims and makes no such assertion, either about being objective or about producing universal knowledge. The only claim that dialogical historiography makes is that historical knowledge is situated and is neither objective nor neutral. The question it posits is less about what history is written, and much more about who writes the history.

There are many differences between 'colonial historiography' and dialogical historiography, but one and the most fundamental concerns the frame-of-reference of both. The frame-of-reference of dialogical historiography is 'diversity-coexistence' as compared to the 'universal-particular' framework of colonial historiography.

This fundamental shift from 'universal-particular' to 'diversity-coexistence' frame-of-reference is the defining characteristic of dialogical historiography. A whole new paradigm of historiography now arises, giving rise to a new frame-of-reference grounded on a new premise. The premise of this new paradigm is called 'diversity-dialogue'.

The notion of dialogue within this framework stems from the idea of coexistence. Dialogue is akin to coexistence and knowledge from this perspective is conceived more as a means of dialogue rather than an attempt at truth-assertion.

Dialogical historiography simply affirms the notion of 'points-of-view' and 'non-judgementality' rather than the delusionary colonial claims of 'objectivity' and 'neutrality'. An important point to note here is that this idea of 'points-of-view' and 'non-judgementality' does not negate criticality, instead, it embraces criticality openly.

Criticality here is conceived as 'a conscious decision taken to locate oneself within a critical gaze, which is the dialectical opposite of the doxological, the commonsensical, the traditional, the unperceptive, and the undiscerning gaze'.

This is what marks dialogical historiography as different. It stresses upon the dialogical nature of knowledge. Dialogue as knowledge, or dialogical knowledge is an act of engaging, conversing, and reciprocity, rather than defining, constructing, and controlling.

This knowledge intends not to impose or forcefully construct the other, rather it attempts to converse with the other. This inter-epistemic dialogue speaks simultaneously to its own context (the researcher) and also to other dynamic contexts (the researched) in a rational, dignified and self-respecting manner. It conceives the relationship between the researcher and the researched as co-producers of knowledge, both engaging in the co-production of knowledge, as against the colonial-centric relationship of constructing and manipulating the 'other', in order to fit the 'researched' into the theory and world of the 'researcher'.

Such knowledge and ways of engagement, the decolonial-historical approach asserts, are to resist the colonial historiographical attempt to appropriate, inform, construct, manipulate, claim expertise, dominate and control, and to propel, in its stead, the liberatory dialogical historiographical mindset of engaging, conversing, co-producing, healing, empowering and emancipating.

In the decolonial-historical approach, it is important to assert that knowledge is healing, empowering, emancipatory, and that social research is not merely a project of power, but a project of truth(s), but while the researcher is, in many ways, a soldier of knowledge, ultimately the researcher is the battlefield too!



This book is a part of the Methodologies in Social Research Series by the Tribal Intellectual Collective India. It comprises of three lectures delivered to academic audiences over a period of four years (2021-2024) on the subject of 'Tribal Studies in India: Pre and Post Xaxa'. The first lecture problematizes varied epistemic positions in Tribal Studies and discusses the theoretical content of the Post-Xaxa framework. The second and third chapters explicates the epistemic issues that have emerged in Post-Xaxa Tribal Studies, and details the methodological components within the framework in relation to research. Primarily intended for readers with a background in Tribal scholarship, it also serves as a valuable resource for academics in Tribal Studies as well as general readers with an interest on Tribal peoples and their worldviews.

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