

# Articulating Difference: Self, Identity and Representation

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## Abstract

The Adivasis are often presented as they exist in a timeless, historical space, untouched and unperturbed by complex changes in society, politics and culture though the reality is the other way round. The self-esteem and the identity of the Adivasis are not just distraught and distorted by the non-Adivasi writers but is a fraught with misconceptions. In such a scenario, the writings of the Adivasi writers on Adivasi become more significant with all due respect since it reflects the insiders' perspective. The paper therefore examines the voices and concerns of the Adivasi through Adivasi writings and attempts to substantiate assertively on how and why any non-Adivasi writers could not escape from representing the Adivasi without distortion. It further explores that the non-Adivasi writer, an outsider is more than fascinated to write more of the fetish, exotic and criminalization of the Adivasi on one hand and on the other hand stereotyping them rather understanding the Adivasi life. It also focuses on and discusses the broader concerns of the Adivasi life and experience that ensure the subject happens to occur from the locational similarity.

**Keywords:** Adivasi, Articulation, Identity, Self, Representation

## Introduction

This paper focuses on various Adivasi voices and concerns through the Adivasi writings by Adivasi writers. The paper has attempted to distinguish and discuss the texts according to not only the subject position of the writers, but the political questions that emerge from their position and also the strategies of representation that are very closely connected to more recent concerns in the lived experience. As we have attempted to understand through the writings of Adivasi by non-Adivasi writers representing the Adivasi is fraught with problems and in such instances of representation, it necessarily causes alienation of the figure of the Adivasi. The Adivasis are often presented as they exist in a timeless, historical space, untouched and unperturbed by complex changes in society, politics and culture though the reality is the other way round. The self-esteem and the identity of the Adivasis are not just distraught and distorted by the non-Adivasi writers but is a fraught with misconceptions. There is the problem of fetish and exoticization on the one hand, and the issue of criminalization on the other hand. Therefore, how does one begin to deal with such extreme kinds of frameworks for understanding the Adivasi life? How does experience find itself encoded in the different literary and non-literary strategies employed in the production of these texts? What intervention does the Adivasi voice make in the overarching politics of representation? In other words, what happens when the author and her subject emerge from a locational similarity? These questions are pertinent as representations are mediated through the

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process of production, social, political and historical movements and mobilization, contingent strategies and negotiations of the everyday, shifts in existing groups of readership, access in terms of education, literacy and privileges of caste, class, gender, among many other such factors.

Virginius Xaxa, for instance has responded to some of these questions. He dealt with tribal issues in post-colonial India with these perceptives:

Differences have been the hallmark of Indian society. The differences emerged as the result of various long and complex historical processes. The marks of differences have been diverse and varied, but the major ones have been located primarily around those of caste, language, religion, and region. To these principal marks of difference, the new one of tribe was added during the colonial period, the use of a generic term to describe tribal peoples was not in existence. (Xaxa, p. 1)

The central concern of Xaxa's argument is based on claims of identitarian differences. A discussion of the Adivasi identity is not possible without looking closely at the governmental category 'tribal' and the nature of the relationship between the former and the latter. The colonial process of classification and categorisation introduced certain terminologies to describe certain realities in this country. Such a process of description may have been a way for the colonizer to understand certain differences in their own terms. Such an argument can easily steer in to the direction of a nationalist sensibility, where one disputes the ill-fit between the supposed original realities of the land and the impositions of a 'foreign' law. This paper will try not to fall into such theoretical fallacies. For one, there is a need to understand that colonial categorizations brought in a certain kind of understanding to the Adivasi identity. It however does not mean that Adivasis did not have an identity prior to this. What becomes the work of this paper is to understand how these two identities have interacted with each other and what is it that the category 'tribal' has transformed in terms of identitarian claims. This is also a question of language; a new language is introduced to negotiate with a new form of state. Therefore, the ways of articulating certain claims of identity have also changed due to new language interventions. And it is this articulation that is a major point of research for this paper.

One of the things that has happened with colonial intervention is that the amorphous relation between "tribes" and "non-tribes" were lifted and a more rigorous and non-porous boundary was imposed. According to Xaxa, "colonial administrators used the term tribe to describe people who were heterogenous in physical and linguistic traits, demographic, size, ecological, conditions of living, regions inhabited, stages of social formations, and levels of acculturation and development. The need for such a category was necessitated by a concern to subsume the enormous diversity into neat and meaningful categories for both classificatory purposes and administrative convenience" (p. 2).

So, the need for the colonial administration to make such classifications is quite clear, which also means that a certain kind of tribal identity is the result of such configurations. However, it also becomes very easy then to assume that such tribal identities are mere colonial constructions. But a more complicated understanding would allow one to also see that these categories do not remain the same. They assume different forms in time and space and in social, political and cultural contexts. And there is a need to look at the meanings in each of these formal changes and why and how they take place at all. Xaxa for instance refers to how pre-colonial

descriptions of certain groups of people as *dasas*, *daityas*, *rakshasas* and *nishadas* have been easily appropriated within the colonial terminology of “tribal”. What such appropriation enabled was the expansion of the meaning of the term tribal in terms of bestiality and primitiveness.

What is interesting to know that it wasn't in fact an initial British enterprise to have a distinct category called 'tribal'. In fact, in its early years the colonial government would not find any difference between 'tribes' and 'castes'. The difference was in fact seen more in terms of ethnicities. Xaxa argues that different governmental policies were designed for tribal and non-tribal groups of the population. Different structures of administration were set up for the two groups. Laws for instance did not apply in the same way to tribals and non-tribals. The differences in laws were based on the nature of the perception that the colonial government of these two groups (p. 2).

As we know the underlying logic behind any kind of census is to acquire and deploy knowledge about the population for purposes of governance. So was the case with the colonial census.

Accordingly, a certain group of people was categorized as a tribe when the census began to be undertaken in the late nineteenth century, though the criteria used were far from unambiguous. After 1901, however, a somewhat clearer criterion began to be used. Tribes were identified and described as those groups that practised animism; later the phrase tribal religion was used in its place. The use of this criterion was continued in subsequent census enumerations, but some other dimensions were also added. Thus, the 1921 census report described them as hill and forest tribes, and in 1931, when Hutton was the Census Commissioner; tribes were also referred to as primitive tribes. Through the adoption of descriptions such as hill and forest tribes and primitive and backward tribes, the elements of geographic isolation and primitive living conditions were added to the distinctions between tribes and non-tribes. (p. 3)

While such classificatory factors were important, what would become the most significant determining aspect was that of religion. Hence, the 'tribes' became people who did not follow any of the major religions—Hinduism, Islam, Christianity—that were followed in India. Caste categories were implemented on people who were practising Hinduism. And amongst the rest, the animists were categorised as tribals. What would follow is the drawing out of a list of Scheduled Tribes. Later on, in the post-independence period, when many policies introduced by the colonial government would be adopted, a similar list would be included in the Indian Constitution.

Post-independence India continues to witness various kinds of arguments on what would be the determining factors for the category of Scheduled Tribe. Provincial governments put forth criterion such as “physical characteristics, linguistic affiliation, cultural contact, occupation, and ecological considerations...living in inaccessible places, speaking a tribal dialect, practising animism and engaging in primitive occupations” (p. 3).

While Xaxa discusses the genealogy of the term “tribal”, he also argues the deficiencies of the term. According to him, the term and the category are incapable of understanding the actual realities in society, explaining the discomfort that scholars usually have with the use of the term.

He also talks about the issues that have historically come up with regard to “land, forest, administration, reservation, language, and religion.” Tribes have also gone through a great deal of changes, especially in relation to the factors of caste, peasant and social differentiation. He closely looks at the problem of Sanskritization within tribal communities and what it has meant for tribal identities. He also critiques the use and processing of the governmental terms and the ways in which tribes have also transformed into castes.

Xaxa also looks at why, in recent times, the term Adivasi or indigenous people have been preferred over that of tribal. At the same time, he is aware of the nature of problems that have been cited in the use of category indigenous people. He has looked at the history of the different claims to the Adivasi, tribal or indigenous identity through the ‘shifts in values and ideology.’ The constitution itself reflects the emergent democratic attitudes towards equality, especially in various realms of the public sphere. “The conferment of citizenship rights on all irrespective of caste, class, religion, or race has been the culminating point of the equality” (p. 10). This has meant that communities now have legitimately conferred rights to lay claim on things based on the discourse of equality, yet the problem remains that in our country people are equal merely in a rhetorical sense. As an actuality, people are still aspiring towards equality: hence the reservation system. State policies have however, not always responded adequately to the demands of tribal communities. Xaxa discusses the different aspects of tribal movements and meanings of their demands. Xaxa’s work also deals with:

the issue of tribal identity in the context of culture, particularly language and religion. It discusses the state policy and state administrative practice towards tribes with respect to their languages and religions, and shows how these (the constitutional provision of protection notwithstanding) have affected the distinct identity of tribal people. The response of tribal people to state policy and state administrative practice has been explored in terms of the increasing demand for recognition of their distinct languages and religions. (p. 11)

Xaxa’s work is one of theory. It is also one that unravels voices claiming distinctness. This work particularizes the nature of these claims; as claims also of disabilities within broader structures of social, cultural and political practices.

This paper also discusses in D.B. Naik’s *The Art and Literature of Banjara Lambanis (A Socio-Cultural Study)*. Naik’s work is an exemplary piece of research in folklore studies. In an attempt to understand the disciplinary and methodological determinations of folklore studies what should become clear is the role of folklore studies in establishing the specific cultural ‘traits’ of the Banjara Lambanis; specific in their cultures of oral traditions and atypical archival methods of preservation. The West’s interest in folklore studies remains a matter of suspicion. Such interests, one fear may not be without Orientalist affinities. Naik’s work is different in that it has been produced by an ‘embedded’ author. Naik is an educated member of the Banjara. According to him, “there is a dire necessity of studying the literary, anthropological, psychological and linguistic aspects of a certain community like that of Banjara Lambanis, so far neglected by the sociologists, anthropologists and folklorists... Finding the field of study vast and complicated, I have to limit myself only to three aspects of folk culture” (Naik, p. ix).

In fact, Naik's work informs the legacy of the folk studies which ceases to exist in documenting mnemonic cultures and experiences of the Adivasi life. Such a work does not draw any attention by subscribing methodology and political inclinations towards the socio-political conditions of the community, but would act as a mode of profiling and restricting them as a piece of object to be illustrated in academia. However, intrinsically, as an individual writer he cannot be held responsible for the limitations of such works.

Satyendra Nath Mondal's *History and Culture of the Bodos* is another significant narrative from within the Adivasi community. Writings such as Mondal's take up issues of history, culture and society of particular Adivasi groups and allow us to discern the extant differences between different tribal populations. It "chronicles the identities and interrelations of the different ethnic groups, their ancient history and the different branches arising from the fragmentation of the greater Indo Mongoloid Bodos and presents a lot of hitherto unknown information relating to the overall position of ethnic groups since the pre Vedic age" (Mondal, p. i). Mondal's representation of the Adivasi life is in concurrence to changing times from the historical perspective that would indeed determine the lives of the Adivasis with a distinct identity.

One of the foremost exercises of such a historical text has not only helped to understand the ways in which each Adivasi population is different from the other, but also documented the chronicles and a tremendous unknown information of the Bodos, the way they have shown the commonality among the ethnic groups and the nature and purposes of the history, which serves for the existing culture, politics and sociality of modern contexts. Dr. Barendranath Brahma's Introduction to the book envisages, "Now that a history of the almost forgotten Bodos has been compiled it will hopefully pave the way among the present generation of Bodos for a heightened awareness and interest in their community. The developed communities of the present times are but descendants of the mixed races of those primitive people" (p. ii). Bodos through such a historical work ascertain the modern subject and aim towards self-determination by understanding and transforming the relationship between the Adivasis and the non-Adivasis.

An important and seminal piece of work that informs this work of research is Bhangya Bhukya's *Subjugated Nomads: The Lambadas under the Rule of the Nizams*. This book looks at the nature of the transformations that the Lambada community of the Hyderabad state underwent during the rule of the Nizams in the colonial period. It historicizes two hundred years of the Nizam's rule through the beginnings of the eighteenth century to the early years of independent India. According to Bhukya, the origins of the Lambada community can be traced to their early occupation and livelihood as caravan traders. The governmental mechanisms of the colonial state would interfere in to the nomadic ways of the Lambada community. As a result, the latter would be compelled to settle down as peasants in wastelands and forest tracts. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, the Lambadas transformed into an agricultural community. State intervention would still not stop. The Lambada agricultural methods would soon be seen as a threat to ecological conservation, an issue that has been a dominant aspect in the discourses of tribal identity. They would be arbitrarily evicted in the name of forest conservation. Subsequently, Lambada life would be rife with issues of money-lending and extortion. Exploitative zamindars posed an additional problem over claims to land and taxes. Soon Lambadas would turn to bonded labour and dacoity for their survival. As a result, state discourse would brand the community as

“criminal tribes”. Long years of harassment resulted in the Lambada revolt, a significant precursor to the Telangana armed struggle.

Adivasi communities such as the Lambadas have also displayed an immense sense of self-determination and self-criticality in undergoing a protracted process of self-reform. Since the late 1920s, leaders have emerged from the community who have had a significant role to play in rearticulating Lambada history, culture and sociality.

The book focus will be on the effects of colonial political rationality on the Lambada community, and its sense of self-identity, as reflected in the historical texts and the oral culture of the community. The Lambada community’s oral tradition has been passed through generations in the form of stories, proverbs and songs. These are called *sakies*, *shaval*, and *geeths* respectively. Bhukya’s distinct methodology has been to look at the memories and traditions embedded in these oral practices to chart out their specific history; a history that resists stereotypes of colonial classification and rationality. He argues:

Indeed, oral history is a tool that not only provides the historian with a means to overcome the deficiency of material but also offers important insights in to the lived history. Particularly in countries like India, where a large number of communities were denied both literacy and textual history, oral histories are a primary source to explore to construct their social history. Alessandro Portelli says that oral sources are a necessary condition for a history of the non-hegemonic classes; they are less necessary for the history of the ruling classes who have had control over writing and leave behind much more abundant written records. The Lambadas, as a subaltern group in Indian history; lack such written records; therefore, oral sources provide an important means to understand and construct their history and thought. (p. 20)

Any method that chooses to deal with oral history is not only stepping into a broader and more complex region of history, but is also a process that resists dominant practices of history writing and archiving, where the written text has an authoritative primacy over the spoken word. Memories of individuals and communities reside in non-formal sites and these sites need to be excavated to define time and spaces in ways that mainstream histories are incapable of comprehending.

Bhukya’s book looks extensively at the transformations the Lambada community underwent and how:

these processes acted in the cultural life of the Lambadas. Their social and religious culture was rooted firmly in their material culture. They shared some elements of their religious culture with the Hindu, Sikh and Muslim society. This became more apparent from the nineteenth century when there was greater interaction between the Lambadas and the mainstream, as they were dislodged from their nomadic lifestyle and began settling down as peasant subjects. At the same time, the political rationality deployed by the colonial establishment pushed them towards self-reform. In response to these developments, religious leaders emerged from within the community and preached non-violent and vegetarian values in order to alter their militant culture. This form of cultural assertion was gradually converted into community identity politics by the educated Lambadas from the

early decades of the twentieth century. The educated Lambada leaders also sought to reform the community besides mobilising it around economic and political causes. Their ambition was for Lambadas to occupy a higher position within the caste-Hindu society, often as Rajputs (Kshatriya Varna), through articulating and rearticulating their oral narratives. The ethnographic and census politics of the colonial state also encouraged the Lambadas to advance such a claim. In this way, the Lambadas articulated a new consciousness and identity and emerged as a distinct social and political entity within the postcolonial polity. (p. 26)

Bhukya's work is exceptionally nuanced and contemporary in the way it has the critical ability to understand the various relationships, through the negotiations of which the Lambada community now stands as a politically determined community with a significant role to play in the struggle for the Telangana state formation. The book also looks at the ways in which certain sections within the Lambada community now articulate in a language that is highly Hinduised and Brahminised and why this kind of appropriation has taken place in spite of the larger consciousness that it is the structural limitations of the caste Hinduism that has historically been the cause for their social, political and cultural disabilities.

## Conclusion

Historically, Adivasi communities have identified themselves as distinct from other communities. However, the emergence of the term "tribal" has led to the clubbing together of multiple communities into a single category. Though the demands and dispositions of these various tribal groups may be vastly different, they have been obliged to search for similarities and common measures for self-empowerment. The shared sense of denigration they have been subjected to helps in generating this sense of affiliation. These uneasy coalitions, which are forged in the context of the greater hegemonic Other, are instrumental in creating new identities of the Adivasi in contemporary India. This can only be done by striking a balance between the cultural specificity of particular tribes and the commonality of experience they have shared over time.

The voices and expressions of Adivasi writers provide the fulcrum for this balance. These writings are based on empirical, lived experience, representing the everyday life of the *Adivasi* which has been for long shrouded in darkness. These writers make a constant effort to reclaim the cultural and linguistic history of their particular communities, and thereby establishing the singularity of their own identity.

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