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Kanchan Thomasina Ekka  
*Tata Institute of Social Sciences, India*

Pheiga Amanda Giangthandunliu  
*Tata Institute of Social Sciences, India*

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Theorizing Adivasi/Tribal Feminism: Decoding Voices from Chotanagpur and the Northeast Region of India

By Kanchan Thomasina Ekka and Pheiga Amanda Giangthandunliu

Abstract

The Adivasi people, termed Scheduled Tribes in India, have a lifeworld entwined with nature, land, and resources. Their relationship with the land produces a particular form of lived experience. This interface between land and culture that shapes the body of knowledge is not written or recorded like other practices and traditions. Adivasi/Tribal women play an important role in articulating this knowledge and contributing to its formation. However, this particular lived experience, especially concerning women, has not received the recognition it deserves within the context of mainstream feminism, which has not paid attention to Adivasi/Tribal women as victims of colonial and imperialist oppression. However, the Adivasi/Tribal struggle over land rights in India is also a feminist struggle. Adivasi/Tribal feminism fails to be encapsulated by the colonial lens of the body/earth dichotomy. This paper critically analyzes narratives from the Chotanagpur (Central Plateau of India) and the Northeast region of India, capturing the Adivasi/Tribal women’s worldview and their struggles to save their territory. By exploring the oral history of women-led struggles and movements, this paper argues that the theoretical framework of Adivasi/Tribal feminism emerges organically from Adivasi/Tribal perspectives about land, paving the way for a more comprehensive understanding of their struggles and aspirations.

Keywords: Adivasi, Indigeneity, Adivasi/Tribal feminism, Land, Oral history, Adivasi/Tribal knowledge, India.

Introduction

Most of the Adivasi³ tribal communities in India share a symbiotic relationship with land and natural resources; their lifeworld involves a close interface with land, which is reflected in their identity, culture, religion, art, and traditional practices. Adivasi/Tribal women play an important role in the tribal lifeworld through their identities, knowledge, values, and struggles. Adivasi/Tribal women have been involved in the history of courageous battles fought for their tribal sovereignty and land. Tribal women’s struggles and knowledge have been neglected in mainstream feminist theories and discussions. Some key concerns of mainstream (upper caste, white, and/or Western) feminism are rape, women’s ownership of their own bodies, and sexual/domestic abuse. Mainstream feminists have not been largely concerned with religious marginalization, racial, cultural, or linguistic incursion, or injustices such as the looting of tribal lands and resources. There is a disconnect in the relationship between much of Western feminist theory and actual practice within marginalized communities, particularly among Adivasi/Tribal women. Adivasi/Tribal women around the world certainly suffer from patriarchy, gender violence, and domestic abuse, but these problems have been impacted by the invasion of the colonizer’s

1 Dr. Kanchan Thomasina Ekka is an independent researcher in Jharkhand, India. She has received her MPhil and PhD from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in Mumbai, India. Email id: ekkakanchan@gmail.com
2 Pheiga Amanda Giangthandunliu is a research scholar at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in Mumbai, India and a lecturer in the Anthropology program at the Royal Thimpu College in Bhutan. Email id: pheigamanda@gmail.com.
3 Adivasi is a Hindi word that stands for original inhabitants.
religion and values. As a result, some Adivasi/tribal women believe that they must focus on the restoration of ancestral land as their first priority, more so than gender inequity. Feminist ideologies have evolved through different waves across periods, each located within a particular historical and cultural context, but many are elitist in their orientation and do not represent tribal women’s experiences (Banerjee, 2016). Feminism acquires enormous force when diversity is embraced as a practice rather than as a superficial political position (Shanley, 1984). This essay is allied with indigenous and postcolonial feminism, which has criticized mainstream Western and white feminism for its individualistic tendencies which greatly differ from the Adivasi/Tribal philosophy of community. The time has come for Adivasi/Tribal women to be known on their own terms. Adivasi/Tribal feminism is distinct because it promotes community, the continuity of Adivasi/Tribal traditions, and recognition of land sovereignty.

This essay explores oral narratives from the diverse context of Chotanagpur (the central belt of India) and the Northeast region of India. The nuanced experiences of women told through oral histories from these locations are critically analyzed to highlight the vital connection of land with the Adivasi/Tribal women. This paper uses the lens of indigenous women’s standpoint theory to critically examine the narratives. Indigenous standpoint theory argues that the Western feminist paradigm prioritizes gender in isolation and fails to challenge the body/earth dichotomy, which is based on the notion that humans are above nonhumans (Moreton-Robinson, 2013). Indigenous lived experience foregrounds the interaction of living and non-living elements through human connection with the land (Moreton-Robinson, 2013). Therefore, this paper asserts the importance of theorizing indigenous feminism within the context of the socially located knowledge of the Adivasi/Tribal lifeworld and relationship with land.

Indigenous Feminism

Indigenous women’s issues remain under-theorized within contemporary feminism. The geographical concentration of feminist epistemologies within the Global North has led to the non-recognition of women’s perspectives and feminist thoughts from the Global South (Connel, 2005). This decolonization of feminist theories and methodologies to make inclusive inroads into gender studies from non-Western and non-white standpoints became visible when scholars from the Global South began critiquing the essentialist positions of white feminists. Some argued that Western feminism did not consider the cultural variations in women’s position and ignored the role of colonialism in fostering patriarchy. Thus, Western feminists assumed the global as the local (Mohanty, 2013). It has been a challenge for indigenous women to find allies within the feminist movement as Western white feminists tend to only discuss abuses against white women. Within the feminist movement in the Euro-Western world, white women have been unable to see or acknowledge indigenous women’s unique realities and voices and the intricate collective relations that determine their realities. Thus, indigenous feminism developed out of a necessity to define the complexities that arise from indigenous women’s identity and experience at the intersection of race, ethnicity, and gender. Moreton-Robinson (2013) sums this up with the following statement:

Indigenous women’s individual experiences will differ due to intersecting oppressions produced under social, political, historical and material conditions that they share consciously or unconsciously. These conditions and the sets of complex relations that discursively shape indigenous women in their everyday lives are also complicated by their respective cultural, sexual, racialised, abled and class differences. (p. 332)
The lived experiences of native women scholars grounded in social hierarchies and indigenous patriarchies led them to reflect deeper upon the assumptions of indigenous egalitarianism. Yet many hesitated to align themselves with feminism for fear of social disruption as indigenous women felt more secure in the protection and identity of communalism and native culture when oppressed by colonizing forces. Women were accused of misunderstanding their own roles when they fought for gender equality within their tribes. Moreover, it was feared that feminism was a product of white colonial imperialism and any acculturation into such an ideology would lead to a loss of indigenous identity for women (Mithlo, 2009). Culture thus became a contentious point within native feminist struggles. Some scholars believed in locating indigenous feminist identity within the cultural assertion of indigenous sovereignty, staunchly privileging culture over feminist assertions and emphasizing the importance of ancestral wisdom and knowledge (Trask, 1996; Ramirez, 2007).

Conversely, with their lived experiences of internal oppression and violence, many indigenous women felt trapped by their own culture. These women were frustrated whenever culture was used as a pretext to suppress women’s justice claims that contested male privileges. They found that either the patriarchal aspects of their own culture remained deeply entrenched, or neighboring or colonizing cultures were adopted in order to uphold patriarchal domination. The most prominent example is female genital mutilation continuously practiced in some African tribes (IWGIA, 2005). Some indigenous feminists believed that the transition from pre-colonial to colonial influence diluted the egalitarian fabric of indigenous statehood (Mithlo, 2009; Trask, 1996). In contrast, others argued that patriarchy within traditional social organizations already existed as a normative customary legal jurisprudence and culture before colonization (Castillo, 2010). In countries like India, legal activists and feminists contested the arguments posed by Adivasi/Tribal men leaders and dominant bureaucracies, who stated that granting women rights of property ownership and inheritance would lead to the appropriation of Adivasi/Tribal lands by outsiders through marriage with Adivasi/Tribal women (Kishwer, 2008). Such cases questioned the legitimacy of customary jurisprudence and dominant state laws regarding the upholding of gender equality, leading to a demand not only for cultural transformation but also for legal reform. The call from native feminists, therefore, to resurrect pre-colonialist and pre-patriarchal ideals, a “prospective vision for a more humane and gender egalitarian future exemplary of being ‘Indigenous’” (Castillo, 2010), reflects native women’s contestation of both white colonial supremacy and the existing gender inequalities within indigenous patriarchies.

Further, feminist theories and action are still nascent regarding the concerns and rights of indigenous women. There is, therefore, a need to capture, theorize, and engage with the contemporary realities and marginalities of the lives of indigenous women (Banerjee, 2016). Indigenous women do theorize their own lives, but they theorize differently. Indigenous women do not rely solely on Western tools and worldview epistemologies as methods of interpretation; they reject paradigms that ask them to disassociate themselves from their experiences in order to claim such skills and knowledge. Adivasi/Tribal discourse theorizes their reality within their perspective, and continuously attempts to decolonize the image of Adivasi/Tribal reality in colonial texts of missionary or anthropological writings (Archuleta, 2006). For Adivasi/Tribal communities, their knowledge is tied to their territory and land, i.e., their understanding of the world (living and non-living objects). There is an urgent need to theorize tribal feminism as an integral exercise of decolonization.
Tribal Narratives: The Local Context

There is no single definition or acceptance for the term Indigenous, which is why it is used in various ways. Though it has been accepted by the United Nations and other international organizations, the concept of indigeneity in India has been contested. However, the constitutionally recognized “Scheduled Tribes” are considered the indigenous community of India. According to the 2011 census, the tribal population in India constitutes 8.2% of the total population of India. The term “tribe” is also contested in India (Ziipao, 2015). Rooted in the colonial construct, tribe refers to a specific group of people who physically and geographically reside in isolation. Tribes are spread across the country, with a high concentration in the Northeastern region, known as the Frontier Tribals and the Non-Frontier Tribals in the Central region (Ziipao, 2015). In the central belt of India, mainly the Chotanagpur region, they are known as Adivasi (first dwellers of the forest). In the Northeast region, the term tribal is widely accepted (socially and politically). Xaxa (2005) observes that “more attention has been paid to tribal identification than tribe definition. However, the issue was that neither they were articulated clearly nor enforced consistently” (p. 1364). Though the terms tribe and tribal have evolutionist connotations, they are legal terms that provide constitutional recognition and safeguards (Behera, 2019).

Since indigenous women are a varied community, any native feminist theory must be grounded in how indigenous people see the world. Native women have a variety of relationships with their distinct settler nation states in addition to their various tribal backgrounds. These women’s self-identification differs by tribe, region, and country of origin (Ramirez, 2002). These women are identified as “First Nations,” “Aboriginal,” “Native American,” or “American Indian.” In only a few parts of the world, they call themselves Indigenous. Many other indigenous women identify themselves as tribal and refuse to use any of the above terms. This paper employs the term Adivasi/Tribal in regard to indigenous feminisms. But regardless of the terms used, it is important to understand that heterogeneity is critical to understanding the overall experiences of tribal women. This paper looks at two popular Adivasi/Tribal narratives from the Oraons of Chotanagpur and the Zeliangrong-Nagas of the Northeast region to understand the Adivasi/Tribal women’s movement and collective agency in the fight for justice and territory.

Oraons of Chotanagpur

In Chotanagpur, India, the original inhabitants, the Adivasis, consist of the Santhal, Ho, Kharia, Munda, and Oraon. These tribes reside in the five states of Chotanagpur (i.e., much of Jharkhand state) as well as in adjacent parts of Chhattisgarh, Odisha, West Bengal, and Bihar of India. The Oraons are the fourth largest Adivasi community. Anthropological studies and oral narratives show the migration of the Oraon tribe (of the Dravidian linguistic family) from three places: South and South-east India, Gujarat, and Harappa to Rohtas (Tirkey, 2013). In most tribal studies or in the government census, the word Oraon is used for this tribe. Within the Oraon Adivasi community, they prefer the name Kurukhar, and their language is called Kurukh. Still, there is much ambiguity in the name as it differs throughout the country. In Orissa, they prefer to be called Kisan and the language is Kisani due to their chief occupation of agriculture (Tirkey, 2013). In the same state, Oraon is called Oram. The name also differs across the country due to histories and realities, but these Adivasi groups share the same Oraon identity and cultural lifeworld. This paper, too, uses the word Oraon to name this community.
Jani Shikar: Victorious Oraon of Rohtasgarh

The historical tale of valor and resistance of the women of Rohtasgarh led to the concept of *jani shikar*, which translates to women hunters. The festival of Jani Shikar is celebrated once in twelve years by Oraon women to commemorate their victory against their enemies in the Rohtasgarh fort known as the Oraon Kingdom. The fort is located on the upper course of River Sone in the Rohtas district of Bihar, India.

Rohtas was an important town en route to Bengal India, and due to its strategic location, it caught the attention of invaders. There were many attempts to capture Rohtasgarh, ruled by the Oraon (Toppo, 2018). However, there is no clarity regarding who attacked the fort; it could have been the kingdom of Magadha or other tribes like Cheros. Some sources state that Muslims attacked it (Lakra, 2020). It is said that the invaders took the help of a spy to invade the Oraon fort successfully. Some scholars reveal that the spy was a milkwoman named Lundari (Roy, 1985; Lakra, 2020). Lundari advised the invaders to return in the morning after *Sarhul* when the menfolk would be in deep slumber after their night-long festivity. Relying on her information, they planned to launch a sudden invasion during the festival. When a few Oraon women left the fort to prepare for the celebrations, they saw invaders marching towards the fort. These women hurriedly went back and informed the men about the attack, but all the menfolk were intoxicated and asleep due to the heavy consumption of *hariya* (rice beer). So, the womenfolk dressed in men’s attire and advanced towards the enemy under the leadership of Oraon Princess Sinagi Dai and her friends Champai and Kaili Dai (Bhagat, 2013). They fought tooth and nail to save their fort and kingdom. The enemy attacked twice and were defeated each time. After two defeats, the invaders interrogated the spy for misleading them. She then told them the secret of the Oraons’ success; to check the certainty of the information, the enemy soldiers decided to observe the Oraon troops from the other side of the River Sone. The weary and tired champions came near the bank; they sat down comfortably and cleaned their faces, and drank water (Baghat, 2013). They used both hands to splash and drink water, which was perceived as a masculine gesture. The soldiers were taken aback by this and planned a third attack on the fort, and this time they defeated the brave champions and conquered the fort.

Since then, in observation of Jani Shikar, women dress in men’s attire and indulge in a hunting drive. Jani Shikar, like other societal rituals, has, however, changed with the passage of time. Today, Jani Shikar is more than just extravagant feasts and hunting expeditions; it has evolved into an occasion for organizing demonstrations to combat alcohol abuse and addiction through women’s initiatives. Ajay Skaria (1997) claims that these activities such as hunting, gathering wild food, manufacturing alcoholic brews, and even consuming it in private and public spaces were sinful for the non-tribe women, yet were privileges for tribal women. To sum up, the Jani Shikar tradition encourages women to hunt, rejecting the cultural notion that men have the sole right to do so. The celebration of Jani Shikar reminds us of the erased and forgotten bravery of Adivasi women in the past and women’s struggles and resistance for *Jal Jungal Jameen* in contemporary times.

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4 Spring festival celebrated by Oraons at the end of March or beginning of April.
5 This change to Jani Shikar was observed by the authors during field research in 2019.
6 Hindi phrase meaning water, forest, land.
The Zeliangrong-Nagas of the Northeast Region

In the Northeast region of India, which encompasses eight states including Assam, Manipur, Nagaland, and Arunachal Pradesh, there is remarkable diversity with numerous indigenous populations belonging to various ethnic groups (Shimray, 2006). Among the dominant groups in the area are the Nagas, consisting of 36 recognized tribes spread across these states, many of which are designated as Scheduled Tribes by the Government of India (Tohring, 2010). The term Adivasi, often interchangeable with “indigenous,” is widely used throughout India. However, particularly in the Northeast region, the terms “indigenous” or “tribal” are more widely accepted (Khan, 2022). One of the prominent cognate tribes within the Naga community is the Zeliangrong. This group, recognized by the government, comprises the Zeme, Liangmai, Rongmei/Kabui, and the Inpui tribes. The Zeliangrong tribes inhabit the hill and valley districts of Manipur, as well as regions in the state of Assam (specifically the North Cachar district) and Nagaland. Geographically, the Rongmei are primarily settled in Manipur, while the Zeme and Liangmai are predominantly found in Assam and Nagaland, respectively. Linguistically, they belong to the Tibeto-Burman family within the Sino-Tibetan language phylum.

Rani Gadinliu and the Freedom Movement of the Zeliangrong-Nagas

Rani Gadinliu emerged as a young leader who spearheaded an armed rebellion against British dominance in the early 1930s. At the tender age of 17, she was sentenced to life in prison by the British and was eventually released after India gained independence in 1947. During a visit to Shillong jail in 1937, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru bestowed upon her the title of Rani, acknowledging her as the “queen” of her people.

Born in 1915 in the Nungkao villages of the Taosem subdivision in Manipur’s Tamenglong district, Rani Gadinliu belonged to the Rongmei/Kabui tribe, which is part of the Zeliangrong cognate tribes. Growing up, she received no formal education and was nurtured in the Zeliangrong traditional system called Luchu (girl’s dormitory), where young girls were imparted with indigenous knowledge and skills. At the age of 13, she joined the Heraka movement under the guidance of Jadonang. This socio-religious reform movement in the 1920s aimed to preserve the culture and identity of the Zelaingrong people and oppose British colonial authority. After the British executed Jadonang as a political criminal, Rani Gaidinliu carried forward the Heraka movement. She passionately persuaded the Zeliangrong people to resist British rule through various means. Rani Gaidinliu led disobedience against British laws by organizing mass refusals to pay household taxes and forming a militarized movement to drive out the British from Zeliangrong territory. Under her leadership, the political and religious movement gained momentum and severely disrupted the British administration. Hundreds of young men and women joined her in the pursuit of living as free Naga people. However, her activities caught the attention of the colonial power, leading to her arrest in an extensive military operation in 1923 at Pulwa village in the Peren district of Nagaland.

Rani Gaidinliu’s life and politics have sparked controversy among Naga Christians due to her combination of religious reform through Heraka and her resistance to her people’s conversion to Christianity. Nonetheless, scholarly analysis of her life has revealed her as a social and religious reformer (Longkumer, 2010; Niumai, 2018) with a core aspiration of liberating the territories of the Zeliangrong tribes. Even after her release from prison, she continued to revive the culture and traditions of the Zeliangrong community. Rani Gaidinliu passed away in 1993 and has been recognized as a visionary leader, reformer, and guerrilla warrior who bravely fought against British colonization in the Northeast region (Barla, 2015). She was posthumously honored with the Padma...
Bhushan, India’s third-highest civilian award. Every year, her birth anniversary is commemorated in various parts of the Northeastern states. Her life and contributions to the political movement against the British are gaining wider acclaim across different segments of Indian society.

**Connecting Land and Lives: Challenging the Body/Earth Dichotomy**

The mainstream feminist conceptualization of gender highlights gender discrimination, inequality, and differences between men and women. However, Adivasi/Tribal feminism has different feminist notions as they knit tribal philosophies of land together with cultural constructions of gender and gender relations. Adivasi/Tribal feminism considers the roles of men and women within the context of the land (place) rather than distancing the genders from each other. Most importantly, Adivasi/Tribal feminist consciousness persuades both genders to rethink dominant notions of gender inequality, nationalism, and sovereignty, which all contribute to violence against tribal women (Ramirez, 2002). Thus, any theories that aim for the emancipation of Adivasi/Tribal women need to rely on concrete experiences of land sovereignty. The Adivasi/Tribal connection with the land is the crux of their existence, and thus it informs their academic theorization and knowledge production. Adivasi/Tribal feminism, therefore, cannot be framed outside of the notion of the land to which they belong, and which is key to their everyday culture and traditions. The ideal definition of feminism, according to Crenshaw’s (1991) intersectionality theory, is a comprehensive and inclusive worldview that encompasses all points where identity and marginality intersect, including caste, class, color, gender expression, sexual orientation, and disability, among others. As a result, most human battles against repressive systems are also feminist battles because oppression affects people worldwide in different and multi-layered ways (Crenshaw, 1991). Applying this reasoning to the tribal narratives discussed earlier, we can see that the tribal struggles over land rights in India are also feminist struggles.

The Jani Shikar festival serves as a reminder of the Adivasi/Tribal women’s historical bravery, which has been erased and forgotten, and also of the current fights and resistance of women for Jal Jungal Jameen. As tribal journalist and activist Dayamani Barla says,

> The 1960s might have marked the rise of feminism in sociological discourse. Still, the hinterlands of Jharkhand witnessed the upsurge of feminine power about five hundred years ago, when Oraon women weathered an onslaught of the Mughal military might. This celebration is a symbolic form of resistance against any visible and invisible forms of patriarchy inside and outside the community. (cited in Dey, 2017)

Barla presents a different perspective of women as strong and powerful. In this context, Jani Shikar tilts the hegemonic idea that only men can be brave warriors and smart hunters. Tribal women redefined the hegemonic gender roles five hundred years ago through the narration of Jani Shikar.

The narratives of the leadership of Rani Gaidinliu that led the Zeliangrong community in a movement against the British is crucial for the territorial integrity of the tribals. Her goal to preserve the culture and identity of her people is rooted in the understanding of the connection between the land and the people. Her fight was not for personal gain but for protecting and promoting the communitarian spirit, which is less valued in Western feminism with its focus on individualism. Drawing from the historical narratives, we argue that the Adivasi/Tribal women’s movement and initiative are consonant with the interest of the tribal people. They do not seek to disrupt the existing social harmony. Their sentiment and love of their land and their people drive their struggles.
For the Adivasi/Tribal community, land is an all-encompassing concept. The ontology of land must also be seen from the standpoint of decolonization. The Adivasi/Tribal worldview contradicts the Western dichotomy of body/earth (humans vs. nature) because land is intertwined with their lifeworld and cannot be separated. The idea of land constitutes all the human and nonhuman elements such as water, forest, animals, minerals and the air (Bodhi & Ziipao, 2019). Land to the Adivasi/Tribal communities is a way to know and relate with the world and each other. The human and nature divide, therefore, is not adequate to capture the nuanced relationship of the indigenous communities with their land. The Adivasi/Tribal worldview is built around how they perceive themselves in relation to their land. Hence, one needs to move away from perceiving land simply as property and possession in order to better understand the essence of Adivasi/Tribal worldviews. Tribes do not perceive land solely from a utilitarian lens but rather consider it as core to their existence, the very foundation of their cosmology. Land provides them with refuge, resources, and occupation. Hence, the close-knitted relationship with the land calls for ethnicizing land by drawing its sociocultural meaning and values rather than abstracting it as a mere physical possession (Tadu, 2017). In this case, land is the very substance of the feminist cause and struggles.

Further, Moreton-Robinson (2013) argues that the indigenous conception of land is a “way of knowing, of experiencing and relating to the world and with others. The notion of land in a much broader sense determines how one makes sense of the world.” Adivasi/Tribal women’s social location and connection with the land legitimize their positions as knowledge producers. Their way of making sense of the world is evident from their skills such as music, dance, song, weaving, storytelling, and preserving food, which are all substantial components of the total sum of tribal knowledge. Therefore, Adivasi/Tribal feminism cannot be perceived outside of the notion of land, which is a challenge to the Western dichotomy of body vs. earth.

Conclusion: The Beginning of a New Paradigm

Adivasi/Tribal communities’ lifeworld and experiences are produced through their connection with the land they inhabit. Each group is part of its immediate environment and is intertwined with jal, jangal, and jameen (water, forest, and land), and animals, spirits, and ancestors which are the foundation of their existence, the home of their dead, and the source of their science and technology, religion, culture, and governing structure. These factors are all entwined and contained within a distinct, bound lifeworld. The valor, courage, wisdom, and values exhibited by women from these regions are the results of an interconnection with the land and its people. Analyzing feminist discourses from the Adivasi/Tribal region without understanding the epistemic and ontological relation with the land is an incomplete endeavor. Feminist approaches to Adivasi/Tribal discourse have to incorporate the concept of land to unpack the idea of gender and gender relations to address the concerns and issues of women. Adivasi/Tribal women use writing to theorize their experience, but they do not solely rely on Western tools, world views, or epistemologies as methods of interpretation. Adivasi/Tribal women’s rhetorical practices produce knowledge referred to as “theory in the flesh,” a concept that grounds the struggle for knowledge in women’s bodies (Archuleta, 2006, p. 110). The process of theorizing Adivasi/Tribal feminism is to be undertaken through the lens of decolonization to eschew a universalizing version of feminism propagated by the West and the upper caste of the Indian community. Adivasi/Tribal feminism must be conceptualized from the Adivasi/Tribal women’s perspectives and rooted in respect, interdependence, responsibility, dialogue, and engagement with Adivasi/Tribal women’s rights and claims.
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